

Rabbi Melanie Aron

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One Law for the Stranger and the Citizen Alike

Earlier this week I was at a two-day conference on Racism and Anti-Semitism held at Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles. Welcoming us, one of their rabbis told a story, to which we later returned. He had had the opportunity to hear from two women about their immediate responses to the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. One woman was Jewish and the other African American. The women admitted that upon hearing this devastating news on their first reaction was very parallel: “I hope the assassin wasn’t Jewish.” “I hope the assassin wasn’t Black.”

Though the media has become more conscious of this issue, there remains a tendency to identify people in the news, particularly bad news, with their minority identification, especially if the crime relates to an existing stereotype. Thus the image of Black men as criminals, or Jews as conniving, is reinforced. At our conference the group joked that they had never seen the identification “Presbyterian Landlord” or “Episcopal Shoplifter,” though some of those must surely be in the news as well.

At the end of this week’s Torah portion, as Melissa explained, there is an unusual story about the son of an Egyptian father and Israelite mother who breaks the law and is punished. The commentators are critical about the way the story is introduced.

Isn't it really about the sin of using the tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God? Shouldn't that be the salient point raised from the beginning? And what about God's response? Why not just have the law for this case? Why a restatement of the general principles of proportionality in punishment and equal justice?

I think it is interesting that the text, in speaking to humans, gives us those details that the community is interested in—in fact the Midrash turns this story into quite a soap opera. The man's father is called the Egyptian man, the same words in Hebrew for the taskmaster that Moses killed at the beginning of his career. Could this be that man's son? The famous Torah commentator Rashi suggests that was the case. And the midrash further asks: It says he was coming from somewhere. Where was he coming from? From court. We are approaching the time when the tribes are to be arranged in the camp. Each tribe had its special place, and within each tribe, the clan and family. This man had stepped forward to claim a place with the tribe of Dan, the tribe of his mother, but he was denied, as identity in those days was in accordance with your father's houses. That is why he went to court, and when he lost his case, that is why he lost faith in the God of the Israelites.

This back story makes the conflict more understandable, but what about God's response. It is interesting to note that God does not deal with persons in the rules promulgated at this point: "Anyone who blasphemes," the text says, "stranger or citizen."

God goes on to insist that similarly, "There shall be one standard for stranger and citizen alike." Thus from a story that seems to imply bias or at least a lack of

fairness as understood in modern times, we have a legal standard opposed to partiality.

There is a human tendency to see people through the lens of our associations with their gender, or race, or ethnicity—and we see that played out repeatedly in our society, whether at Starbucks or in tense police altercations. In a flash and even without realizing it, we make assumptions and snap judgments. But divine justice demands a higher standard—one law of proportionality and justice.

Me'am Lo'ez, a famous Sephardic Jewish commentary on the Torah, concludes its study of this *parashah* as follows: “God continues: ‘In My eyes there is not difference between an Israelites and a *ger* (stranger). I am God Your Lord. I am the God of all of you equally. I have mercy on all of you.’ We pray that God may keep us from this sin. “