



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

The Jewish Obsession

The popular media often accuses the Jewish people of an obsession. Some accuse us good-humoredly of an obsession with food. Others maliciously accuse us of being obsessed with money. I agree that there is a Jewish obsession. I maintain that it is justice with which we are obsessed.

I define an obsession as an idea which dominates our thinking even when there are other important concerns that we need to address. Thus, the person who is truly obsessed with a particular idea cannot ignore that idea even when he is busy working, playing, or attending to other personal needs. Naturally, this can reach the stage where the obsession is pathological and actually interferes with the necessary functions of life. But the Jewish obsession with justice is not at all pathological.

One example of a Jew obsessed with justice is Rabbi Moshe Rivkish, who lived in the late 17th century. His name is certainly not a “household name,” even among individuals who are familiar with the heroes of Jewish history. Students of the codes of Jewish law, may know the name of his major work because it adorns the margins of every edition of the *Shulchan Aruch*. The name of his work is *Be'er HaGolah*, but not everyone

who consults his work regularly knows the author’s identity. Many more are likely to be familiar with the name of his distinguished grandson, Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna.

Be'er HaGolah is not a commentary in the usual sense of the word. It is a reference tool, in which the author supplies the sources in the Talmud for the statements found in the code. Occasionally, but rarely, the author allows himself a phrase or brief sentence of commentary. Inevitably, these few comments express Rabbi Moshe’s “obsession” with justice.

Here is one example of such a comment: “I write this for all future generations, because I have seen people who have grown wealthy from monies they derived from cheating non-Jews in business. Ultimately, they were unsuccessful and their properties deteriorated so that they left no blessing behind. On the other hand, I have seen many who have sanctified God’s name and returned profits derived from non-Jewish customers who mistakenly overpaid for merchandise. Ultimately, they were successful, became materially wealthy, and left a significant inheritance to their offspring.”

What do we know about the personal concerns of this individual who was “obsessed” with justice for non-Jews? Based upon the preface to his work, we learn that he was driven, not once but several times, from his hometown of Vilna in Lithuania. Each time, he was a victim of fanatically anti-Semitic non-Jews, and each time he left with just the

clothes on his back and his personal diary, forced to abandon all of his possessions, including his painstakingly accumulated library of holy books.

His critical personal concerns did not interfere with his fundamental obsession: justice for all human beings, even those at the hands of whom he suffered greatly.

This late 17th-century Moshe learned to be obsessed with justice from the first Moshe, Moses our Teacher, and from the words he speaks in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Devarim* (*Deuteronomy* 1:1-3:22). Moses begins his lengthy and eloquent valedictory to the Jewish people with his predominant concern. He is nearing the end of his life and his duty was to prepare the people to enter the Promised Land. But instead of instructing them about the methods to be used in entering the land, conquering it and settling it, we find him addressing the people with these words:

“So I took...wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you... I charged your magistrates at that time as follows, ‘Hear out your fellow man, and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger...You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike...’”

Moses too is obsessed with justice, to the extent that he interrupted his final instructions to the Jewish people and prefaced them with his plea that they establish a fair and equitable judiciary that would mete out justice to all, even the “stranger,” the non-Jew.

This week is a special Shabbat. It is the Shabbat that precedes the major fast day of Tisha B'Av. We follow the reading from the Torah portion with a selection from the very first chapter of the *Book of Isaiah*. It is called

Shabbat Chazon, or the Sabbath of the “prophetic vision” of Isaiah.

Here, too, the prophet has numerous concerns, not the least of which is his critique of the sinfulness of the Jewish people. But he does not fail to express his obsession, which like the biblical Moses and the 17th-century Moshe Rivkish, was the cause of justice. So he concludes his vision of what the final redemption will look like: “I will restore your magistrates as old...After that you shall be called City of Righteousness...Zion shall be saved by justice.”

We are confident that Zion will indeed be saved, imminently and gloriously, and that the justice we practice will be acknowledged by all mankind, thereby resulting in the universal blessing of the Almighty God of Justice and Mercy. ■