



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Healing the Heart of Darkness

מישפטִים

ETHICS · MISHPATIM · 5775, 5782

Jobbik, otherwise known as the Movement for a Better Hungary, is an ultra-nationalist Hungarian political party that has been described as fascist, neo-Nazi, racist, and antisemitic. It has accused Jews of being part of a “cabal of western economic interests” attempting to control the world: the libel otherwise known as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fiction created by members of the Czarist secret service in Paris in the late 1890s and revealed as a forgery by *The Times* in 1921.[1] On one occasion the Jobbik party asked for a list of all the Jews in the Hungarian government. Disturbingly, in the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2014 it secured over 20 per cent of the votes, making it the third largest party.

Until 2012, one of its leading members was a politician in his late 20s, Csanad Szegedi. Szegedi was a rising star in the movement, widely regarded as its future leader. Until one day in 2012. That was the day Szegedi discovered he was a Jew.

Some of Jobbik’s members had wanted to stop his progress and spent time investigating his background to see whether they could find anything that would do him damage. What they found was that his maternal grandmother was a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz. So was his maternal grandfather. Half of Szegedi’s family were killed during the Holocaust.

Szegedi’s opponents started sharing information about Jewish ancestry online. Soon Szegedi himself discovered what was being said and decided to check whether the claims were true. They were. After Auschwitz, his grandparents, once Orthodox Jews, had decided to hide their identity completely. When his mother was 14, her father had told her the secret but ordered her not to reveal it to anyone. Szegedi now knew the truth about himself.

Szegedi decided to resign from the party and find out more about Judaism. He went to a local Chabad Rabbi, Slomó Köves, who at first thought he was joking. Nonetheless he arranged for Szegedi to attend classes on Judaism and to come to the synagogue. At first, Szegedi says, people were shocked. He was treated by some as “a leper.” But he persisted. Today he attends synagogue,

keeps Shabbat, has learned Hebrew, calls himself Dovid, and in 2013 underwent circumcision (with an ultra-Orthodox *mohel*).

When he first admitted the truth about his Jewish ancestry, one of his friends in the Jobbik party said, “The best thing would be if we shoot you, so you can be buried as a pure Hungarian.” Another urged him to make a public apology. It was this comment, he says, that made him leave the party. “I thought, wait a minute, I am supposed to apologise for the fact that my family was killed at Auschwitz?”[2]

As the realisation that he was a Jew began to change his life, it also transformed his understanding of the world. Today, he says, his focus as a politician is to defend human rights for everyone. “I am aware of my responsibility, and I know I will have to make it right in the future.”[3]

Szegedi’s story is not just a curiosity. It takes us to the very heart of the strange, fraught nature of our existence as moral beings. What makes us human is the fact that we are rational, reflective, capable of thinking things through. We feel empathy and sympathy, and this begins early. Even newborn babies cry when they hear another child cry. We have mirror neurons in the brain that make us wince when we see someone else in pain. *Homo sapiens* is the moral animal.

Yet much of human history has been a story of violence, oppression, injustice, corruption, aggression, and war. Nor, historically, has it made a significant difference whether the actors in this story have been barbarians or citizens of a high civilisation.

The Greeks of antiquity, masters of art, architecture, drama, poetry, philosophy and science, wasted themselves on the internecine Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the last quarter of the fifth century BCE. They never fully recovered. It was the end of the golden age of Greece. *Fin de siècle* Paris and Vienna in the 1890s were the leading centres of European civilisation. Yet they were also the world’s leaders in antisemitism, Paris with the Dreyfus Affair, Vienna with its antisemitic mayor, Karl Lueger, whom Hitler later cited as his inspiration.

When we are good we are little lower than the angels. When we are bad we are lower than the beasts. What makes us *moral*? And what, despite it all, makes humanity capable of being so inhumane?

Plato thought that virtue was knowledge. If we know something is wrong, we will not do it. All vice is the result of ignorance. Teach people the true, the good, and the beautiful and they will behave well. Aristotle held that virtue was habit, learned in childhood till it becomes part of our character.

David Hume and Adam Smith, two intellectual giants of the Scottish Enlightenment, thought that morality came from emotion, fellow feeling. Hume said the most remarkable feature of human

nature is the “propensity we have to sympathise with others.”[4] Adam Smith began his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the words, “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.”[5] Immanuel Kant, the supreme rationalist, believed that rationality itself was the source of morality. A moral principle is one you are willing to prescribe for everyone. Therefore, for example, lying cannot be moral because you do not wish others to lie to you.

All five views have some truth to them, and we can find similar sentiments in the rabbinic literature. In the spirit of Plato, the Sages spoke of the *tinok shenishba*, someone who does wrong because he or she was not educated to know what is right.[6] Maimonides, like Aristotle, thought virtue came from repeated practice. *Halachah* creates habits of the heart. The Rabbis said that the angels of kindness and charity argued for the creation of man because we naturally feel for others, as Hume and Smith argued. Kant’s principle is similar to what the Sages called *sevarah*, “reason.”

But these insights only serve to deepen the question. If knowledge, emotion, and reason lead us to be moral, why is it that humans hate, harm and kill? A full answer would take longer than a lifetime, but the short answer is simple. We are tribal animals. We form ourselves into groups. **Morality** is both cause and consequence of this fact. Toward people with whom we are or feel ourselves to be related we are capable of altruism. But toward strangers we feel fear, and that fear is capable of turning us into monsters.

Morality, in **Jonathan Haidt**’s phrase, ‘binds and blinds’.[7] It binds us to others in a bond of reciprocal altruism. But it also blinds us to the humanity of those who stand outside that bond. It unites and divides. It divides because it unites. Morality turns the “I” of self interest into the “We” of the common good. But the very act of creating an “Us” simultaneously creates a “Them,” the people *not* like us. Even the most universalistic of religions, founded on principles of love and compassion, have often viewed those outside the faith as Satan, the infidel, the antichrist, the child of darkness, the unredeemed. Large groups of their followers have committed unspeakable acts of brutality in the name of God.

Neither Platonic knowledge nor Adam Smith’s moral sense nor Kantian reason has cured the heart of darkness in the human condition. That is why two sentences blaze through today’s parsha like the sun emerging from behind thick clouds:

You must not mistreat or oppress the stranger in any way. Remember, you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

Ex. 22:21

You must not oppress strangers. *You know what it feels like to be a stranger, for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Ex. 23:9

*The great crimes of humanity have been committed against the stranger, the outsider, the one-not-like-us. Recognising the humanity of the stranger has been the historic weak point in most cultures. The Greeks saw non-Greeks as barbarians. Germans called Jews vermin, lice, a cancer in the body of the nation. In Rwanda, Hutus called Tutsis *inyenzi*, cockroaches. Dehumanise the other and all the moral forces in the world will not save us from evil. Knowledge is silenced, emotion anaesthetised and reason perverted. The Nazis convinced themselves (and others) that in exterminating the Jews they were performing a moral service for the Aryan race.[8] Suicide bombers are convinced that they are acting for the greater glory of God.[9] There is such a thing as altruistic evil.*

That is what makes these two commands so significant. The Torah emphasises the point time and again: the Rabbis said that the command to love the stranger appears thirty-six times in the Torah. Jewish law is here confronting directly the fact that care for the stranger is not something for which we can rely on our normal moral resources of knowledge, empathy and rationality. Usually we can, but under situations of high stress, when we feel our group threatened, we cannot. *The very inclinations that bring out the best in us – our genetic inclination to make sacrifices for the sake of kith and kin – can also bring out the worst in us when we fear the stranger. We are tribal animals and we are easily threatened by the members of another tribe.*

Note that these commands are given shortly after the Exodus. Implicit in them is a very radical idea indeed. *Care for the stranger is why the Israelites had to experience exile and slavery before they could enter the Promised Land and build their own society and state. You will not succeed in caring for the stranger, implies God, until you yourselves know in your very bones and sinews what it feels like to be a stranger. And lest you forget, I have already commanded you to remind yourselves and your children of the taste of affliction and bitterness every year on Pesach. Those who forget what*

it feels like to be a stranger, eventually come to oppress strangers, and if the children of Abraham oppress strangers, why did I make them My covenantal partners?

Empathy, sympathy, knowledge, and rationality are usually enough to let us live at peace with others. But not in hard times. Serbs, Croats and Muslims lived peaceably together in Bosnia for years. So did Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. The problem arises at times of change and disruption when people are anxious and afraid. That is why exceptional defences are necessary, which is why the Torah speaks of memory and history – things that go to the very heart of our identity. We have to remember that we were once on the other side of the equation. We were once strangers: the oppressed, the victims. Remembering the Jewish past forces us to undergo role reversal. In the midst of freedom we have to remind ourselves of what it feels like to be a slave.

What happened to Csanad, now Dovid, Szegedi, was exactly that: role reversal. He was a hater who discovered that he belonged among the hated. *What cured him of antisemitism was his role-reversing discovery that he was a Jew.* That, for him, was a life-changing discovery. The Torah tells us that the experience of our ancestors in Egypt was meant to be life-changing as well. Having lived and suffered as strangers, we became the people commanded to [care for strangers](#).

The best way of curing antisemitism is to get people to experience what it feels like to be a Jew. The best way of curing hostility to strangers is to remember that we too – from someone else’s perspective – are strangers. Memory and role-reversal are the most powerful resources we have to cure the darkness that can sometimes occlude the human soul.

[1] Marcin Goettig and Christian Lowe, “Special Report: From Hungary, far-right party spreads ideology, tactics,” Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-farright-special-report-idUSBREA380IU20140409#PUagU6ZvCiQtZgD8.99> (accessed 22 December 2015).

[2] Ofer Aderet, “Former Anti-Semitic Hungarian Leader Now Keeps Shabbat,” *Haaretz*, October 21, 2013.

[3] Dale Hurd, “Crisis of Conscience: Anti-Semite Learns He’s a Jew,” Christian Broadcasting Network, December 6, 2013, <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2013/August/Crisis-of-Conscience-Anti-Semite-Learns-Hes-a-Jew/>.

[4] *Of Pride and Humility*, part I., section XI, T 2.1.11.2. 112

[5] *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (CreateSpace, 2013), 9.

[6] See [Shabbat 68b](#); Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mamrim 3:3*. This certainly applies to ritual laws; whether it applies to moral ones also may be a moot point.

[7] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

[8] See Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003.

[9] See Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists* (New York: Ecco, 2010). The classic text is Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).



1. Do you believe humans are inherently good, inherently bad, or neither?
2. If being part of a close-knit community (a “tribe”) often leads to a lack of empathy for strangers, shouldn’t we work towards ending tribal associations?
3. If the Torah teaches us to care for “the stranger”, why do you think there has been so much persecution throughout history?