

5. JUSTICE AND MERCY

Introduction

Starting from the profound realisation that the Bible reveals only one God, a God who is both just and merciful, it is understood that even difficult issues (such as the correct interpretation of opposites like love and hate, war and peace, violence and non-violence, revenge and forgiveness) must not become a pretext for opposing Judaism and Christianity.

The simplistic view of a God who wants justice and revenge in the Old Testament and a God who calls for love and forgiveness in the New Testament, although declared a heresy by the Church with the condemnation of Marcionism, is still wrongly stereotyped today.

“Justice, justice shall you pursue”

A particularly sensitive issue in this context is that of *neqamah* (often interpreted as revenge), which is explicitly forbidden to the children of Israel and at the same time is an expression of the great divine love of justice. He cannot tolerate that the evil done should go unpunished, that the cry of the oppressed and the wronged should go unheard: injustice will not have the last word, and He will intervene directly to make wrongs right.

“Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Deut. 16:20) are the words that Moses addresses to the children of Israel before they enter the land of Canaan. He knows that he will not be able to participate in this new phase of Jewish history because the end of his days is approaching, and with thoughtful solicitude he imparts his last teachings, including: “You shall set up judges and law enforcement officials for yourself in all your cities that the Lord, your God, is giving you, for your tribes, and they shall judge the people [with] righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show favouritism, and you shall not take a bribe, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts just words. Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live and possess the land the Lord, your God, is giving you” (Deut. 16:18-20). Why is the word “justice” repeated twice? Since no word in the Torah is useless, there must be a reason for a word to appear twice. The reason may be that we need time to reflect, to ask ourselves whether what we are really after is justice, and not something else that only appears to be justice.

The Lord stresses the importance of righteousness so that His people may remain on the right path and receive His blessing. But it is good to remember that justice (*ṣedaqah*), before being a political and social ideal, is a divine attribute, along with

that of mercy (*raḥamim*). Psalm 145 defines God as a king who is patient (*ḥanun*), merciful (*raḥum*) and righteous (*tzaddiq*): “The Lord is just in all His ways and good in all His works” (v. 17). If there were only justice, the world would not last, because no one, not even the most righteous, could withstand the severity of divine judgment; nor if there were only mercy, because wrongdoers would systematically go unpunished: it is in the dialectic between the two that the history of civilisations lies. Justice, then, is not an outward conformity to the Torah, but an intimate and trusting relationship with God, of which the observance of the precepts is the outward expression. It is the inwardness that gives value to the outwardness, and that makes the outwardness visible.

Mercy, forgiveness and its limitations

There are numerous biblical passages in which mercy (*raḥamim*) appears, a word derived from *reḥem*/womb, indicating God’s visceral, maternal love, e.g., “And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed: Lord, Lord, benevolent God, Who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth, preserving loving kindness for thousands” (Ex. 34:6-7); “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10); “Hear my voice in accordance with your love” (Ps. 119:149); “The earth is filled with your love, Lord” (Ps. 119:64).

Every night before going to sleep, a Jew recites the *Shema*, which is preceded by these words: “Lord of the world! I forgive all those who have angered me, who have vexed me, and who have sinned against me... make us lie down, our Father, in peace, and make us rise up, our King, in serene life and in peace, spread over us the hut (*sukkah*) of your shalom (*peace*).”

On the holiest day of the Jewish year, *Yom Kippur*, a day entirely devoted to fasting and prayer, the Lord forgives sins committed against Him, but even He cannot forgive sins committed against other people: in the days of penance preceding this great day, each person must go to the one he has offended and ask him directly for forgiveness.

A significant example of this can be found in the following story: during the Second World War, Simon Wiesenthal (1908 - 2005) was a prisoner in a camp near Lviv (Ukraine), and a dying SS soldier wanted to be forgiven by a Jew, but he felt he could not. Afterwards, the question of justice and forgiveness continued to haunt Wiesenthal, who wrote a book, *The Sunflower*¹⁸, in which he recounts the whole affair and asks the reader what he should have done under the circumstances. The latest Italian edition contains 47 answers, including those of Abraham Heschel, Primo Levi, Gabriel Marcel, Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Maritain, which provide interesting food for thought and insight.

Wiesenthal could and perhaps should have forgiven the soldier if he had asked for forgiveness for the sins committed against him, but how could he forgive the sins

¹⁸ S. Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, Schocken 1998.

committed against others? Put more simply, if A slaps B, can C forgive him?

Violence in the Bible

The violence in these books confuses all readers, Jews and Christians alike: “The experience of reading the Bible involves an element of pain because of the huge gulf between certain biblical verses and our conscience. How can we bridge the gap between the moral world of the reader and that of the Bible?”¹⁹.

M. Goodman identifies three types of reading: the *fundamentalist* reading, based on a belief in the total sanctity of the text and the subordination of the reader to it; the *anarchist* reading, which bridges the gap between the text and his or her moral conscience through a creative and ingenious interpretation of the text; and the *perplexed* reading: “The perplexed reader is the one who does not alienate himself from the text, but also refuses to compromise his moral values in order to agree with the text”²⁰.

When asked how a person can compare his values with the sacred text, Goodman’s answer is that the source from which the individual draws inspiration for this “primacy of conscience” is precisely the Torah. Indeed, it is the Torah itself which shows that the human conscience is a place of revelation²¹.

Bibliography

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19 M. Goodman, *The Last Words of Moses*, Maggid 2023 [*L’ultimo discorso di Mosè*, tr. di R. Volponi, Giuntina, Firenze 2018], 167.

20 *op. cit.*, 168.

21 For further details see *op. cit.*, 170-174.