



Parsha Mishpatim
Jeremiah 34:8 - 22, 33:25-26
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I asked the teens in my synagogue if doing the right thing for the wrong reason is ever justified. Without hesitation, they brainstormed a long list of examples of righteousness with negative motivation: A philanthropist gives millions to a cause to promote his name; an athlete visits a children's hospital to deflect some recent negative press.

Our prophets, however, had no room for such nuanced considerations. For Jeremiah at the time of the Babylonian siege of Judah and Jerusalem (589 BCE), doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is never acceptable and takes away the possible benefit of that right thing.

Return once again to my teens. "Okay," I admitted. "You have some great examples there. Now what do we say about doing the right thing for the wrong reason... and then taking it back." They answered with immediate consensus: "That's never okay."

Now my teens agreed with Jeremiah!

In the haftarah paired with Parashat Mishpatim, Jeremiah finds the Israelites guilty of doing the right thing for the wrong reason and then renegeing on that correct action. King Zedekiah has commanded the release of all Hebrew slaves many years after Jewish law mandated their release. According to Torah, Hebrew slaves were to be released after six years of service. Zedekiah did not fulfill the mitzvah on time and when he did finally release them, he did not do so because release of slaves was correct. He commanded release with the ulterior motive of filling the ranks of the defenders of Jerusalem. Slaves were released from one master, the elite of Judah, only to be handed over to another master, the Israelite army. In this first instance, the king did the right thing for the wrong reason. But it gets worse. As soon as there was quiet between two sieges, Zedekiah forced those slaves to return to their masters. If the first action could be defended as necessary for the greater good, this second act is one of cruelty: taking back freedom once granted.

Jeremiah castigates the people. First, the rich Israelites ignored the law and then they released their slaves only to enslave them once again.

Jeremiah promises that they will be punished with sword, pestilence and famine. The prophetic voice pours out with wrath. Babylonia will destroy Judah. Officials and priests of Judah will be killed. Their carcasses will be eaten by birds and beasts. It does not get more graphic than this.

The rabbis choose never to end a haftarah on such a devastating note, and so Jeremiah's comforting words from the previous chapter are added to the end. God will never reject the children of Jacob and David. God will restore our fortunes and take us back in love.

In our sophisticated, subjective world, the harsh morality of the prophet can often feel irrelevant. My teens were saying that the ends justify the means. Jeremiah says that it does not matter that Zedekiah released the slaves. He freed them too late, not in accordance with the law, and certainly not because he realized that freeing them was the right thing to do. Zedekiah and the elite of Judah then prove their moral impoverishment by taking back even this small act of righteousness.

What can we gain from the prophetic outlook? Sometimes, it seems, we need to hold ourselves completely responsible. If we are doing the right thing, we must do it at its proper time. If we are doing the right thing, we should check our selfish motives at the door and consider whether we are doing the right thing simply because it is right. Sometimes, we must act on correct decisions without apologetics.

The reward of doing the right thing for the right reason is found in those additional extra verses from chapter 33 at the end of the haftarah. God wants to continue the covenant made with our ancestors with us. We are in a covenanted relationship with God and will never be rejected. God restores us and loves us. We know this to be true when we are doing the right thing with pure hearts and positive motivation. Jeremiah's lesson for us stands the test of time. We do the right thing for the right reason and do not renege. In this way, we fulfill our obligation to the covenant.

Food for Thought

1. What are some salient examples of righteous actions with negative motivation? How does the reason for doing something affect the ultimate value of the action from a Jewish point of view?
2. Is it possible to defend Zedekiah's command to release slaves into army service if it was intended for the greater good? When do communal needs supersede individual needs?
3. How can we extract usable learning from a haftarah that assumes slavery as a natural and moral part of society?
4. Prophets chastise the people in many of the haftorot that we read regularly on Shabbat. In this haftarah, the threats are particularly graphic and distressing. How do we still listen to the message of the prophet when it is delivered in such a difficult manner?

The author of this week's Unraveller, Rabbi Paula Mack Drill, is a native of Portland, Maine. She graduated from Swarthmore College and in 1987 completed a MSW from Columbia U. and a Masters in Jewish Studies from the JTS. She worked 11 years at the Daughters of Israel Geriatric Center and at the Solomon Schechter School of Essex and Union in New Jersey, and for seven as Asst. Director at Ramah Day Camp in Nyack, NY. At 39 she returned to JTS for six years of full-time study, was ordained as a rabbi in 2004 and has been at the Orangetown Jewish Center in Rockland County, NY since. Rabbi Drill is President of the Rockland County Board of Rabbis, and serves on the Rabbinic Board of Hazon, a Jewish response to the environment. Her work in Domestic Violence Prevention earned her the NY Board of Rabbis Woman of Valor Award. In 2013, Rabbi Drill joined the Rabbinical Assembly Executive Council. Rabbi Drill is married to Jonathan Drill and they have four children.