

D'Var Torah
Shabbat Ki Tetsei
(Shabbat 6 September 2014)
By Cherna Crome

When I was asked to give a D'Var Torah the relevance of the date or the subject of the Parsha was of no particular consequence. But in fact for me, as a Scot and as the daughter of a sculptor, both the Parsha for this week and that for next week - Ki Tavo, are very significant.

As we have read today, Ki Tetzei continues with the code of laws contained in Moses' three discourses which form the bulk of Devarim, the book of Deuteronomy. The whole Parsha is a series of often unrelated miscellaneous laws, dealing with a multitude of different topics, some relating to marriage, others with adultery and divorce, the death penalty, neighbourly relations, building codes, etc.

We encounter in chapter 24 verse 16: "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers. Every man shall be put to death for his own crime."

Of course, it was the Hammurabi Code in those days to punish the sons for the crimes of their fathers. The Hammurabi Code decreed that if a builder erected a house which collapse, and the owner's son was killed, the builder's son, not the builder, was put to death.

But the Rabbonim point out to us that we read in the second Book of Kings that when Joash, one of the kings of Judah, tried to stamp out corruption amongst the priests, he was killed by two of his officials. He was succeeded by his son Amaziah who did not put to death the sons of his fathers' murderers. He only executed the officials. It states: "Yet he did not put the sons of the assassins to death, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the Lord commanded, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins."

This begs the obvious question: "How is this principle compatible with what we read four times in the Torah that "children may suffer for the sins of their parents?" (In Exodus, Numbers and twice in Deuteronomy). Not only that. In Jeremiah, Chapter 31 we read: "The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

The Rabbonim suggest that this is human justice, as opposed to divine justice, and when we consider the whole of the code of laws in the discourses, we realise that it is all to do with social responsibility and the justice on which all nations

must build their systems of governance. In the recent Parsha, “Shoftim—Judges”, Moses enjoins the people—using the singular “atah”, for ‘you’, to set up righteous judges and honest police in every city, for, as has been often observed, one of the three great principles of Judaism, Shalom, cannot exist without social harmony and justice. These are the responsibility of each and every one of us.

Therefore, in essence today’s Parsha is about social responsibility and it is appropriate that we read about it at this time, as in another 12 days the nation on the other side of Hadrian’s Wall has the opportunity to exercise its own social responsibility and decide whether to remain annexed to England, as it has been for the last 307 years, or become wholly independent again. That outcome may turn out to be a sour grape, and it will have consequences for us, for our children and for our children’s children for generations to come. At least change will come peacefully via a stub of pencil and the ballot box and not as elsewhere in the world, even today, by the sword. And one thing I can say about Scotland - it may seem a warring nation with its red haired, kilted, pipe playing people, but at least it is the only country in the western world where no Jew has ever been killed for his religion.

I said at the beginning that not only today’s Parsha but also next week’s, are of particular significance to me. Next week’s Ki Tavo starts out with the ceremonies of the first fruits, but later in chapter 27 verse 15 we find the 12 curses followed by the six berachot, the first curse being. “Cursed be he who makes a sculptured or molten image.....and sets it up in secret.” As the end of this curse, “and sets it up in secret” makes clear, the ban was not on art in general or sculpture in particular, but against making an idol to worship in secret. And yet, there has been something of a Jewish prejudice against sculpture that has lasted to this day. As the daughter of a sculptor – need I say more. Just let me finish by telling you a story to illustrate the dilemma.

Shortly after the creation of the State of Israel and the opening of its Embassy in London, a Jewish client of my father’s wanted to present one of his sculptures to the Embassy. It was of a father blessing his son on a Friday night. My father wrote to the then Chief Rabbi, Israel Brodie, to ask about its appropriateness for the embassy but did not receive a reply. Some time later, he happened to meet the Chief Rabbi at a function and reminded him about the letter and the lack of a response.

“I didn’t forget”, replied the Rav. “You asked a shileh. Did you really expect a reply?”

Shabbat Shalom