

## Shmini Atzeret Liberating Foreigners, Together with Our Sisters and Brothers

by Tucker Lieberman on Saturday October 14, 2006 22 Tishrei 5767 Deuteronomy 14:22 - 16:17, Shmini Atzeret

Gay and transgendered people often feel like foreigners within our own communities. We sometimes feel as if we are treated with a double standard or altogether shut out from religious practices. Similarly, as Jews, who are a minority in every nation except Israel, we often feel as if we are foreigners in our own homelands. We understand the meaning of exclusion.

Yet in this week's portion, in which the Jews are still wandering in the desert (Deut. 14:22-16:17), foreigners are excluded from the Jewish community in three distinct ways: They are not explicitly invited to the consecration of the first harvest (the festival of Shavuot), their debt is not forgiven, and, when enslaved, they are left unmentioned in regards to the gentle treatment and the eventual redemption to which Jewish slaves are explicitly entitled.

Thus, while the portion encourages the Jews to literally "come out" of the settlement to worship, celebrate freedom, give ceremonial charity, and cement our own identities, we are, at the same time, encouraged to use identity labels to divide us from others. What might we create if we apply the Torah's vision of Jewish freedom and prosperity to all our neighbors, regardless of their identities?

## Feasts, Loans, and Manumissions

For the holiday of Shmini Atzeret, our Torah cycle retraces its steps to the second half of parashat Re'eh, which reviews some of the laws that set the Israelites apart from other nations. In these verses, spoken by Moses just before the Israelites cross over to the promised land, we are instructed to provide meals inside the settlement to Levites, foreigners, and the poor (Deut 14:29) and to enjoy a consecrated feast outside the settlement with "your sons, your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites from your settlements, and the proselytes, orphans, and widows among you." (Deut. 16:11; c.f. 16:14) Foreigners are conspicuously absent from the second invitation list. It seems they are entitled to charity on the street, but unwelcome to join us on a journey to a sacred celebration.



Furthermore, while interest-free loans to fellow Jews are wiped clean every seventh year, loans to foreigners accumulate interest indefinitely. (Interest is mentioned in Deut. 23:21.) The Torah tells us to cooperate, in a communist fashion, with our kin, and to keep strict accounting books, in a capitalist fashion, with our competitors. This is described as a recipe to dominate other nations (Deut. 15:3, 15:6) and seems related to ending poverty in the Jewish community ("there will not be any more poor among you," Deut. 15:4).

However, within a few lines, there is an admission that it is impossible to truly end poverty. ("The poor will never cease to exist in the land..." Deut. 15:11) We learn that wealth is relative: When we share our wealth, there will not be any poor among us; even so, poverty remains an ongoing challenge. Perhaps this is because an underclass is created when some people are excluded from the vision of prosperity, and because injustice for some leads to suffering for all.

Jews are reminded in this passage to treat our Jewish slaves well, and to guarantee their eventual freedom and severance pay, in honor of the liberation of all Jewish slaves from Egypt. What is the liberation that we honor? Egypt is a real place where a dozen generations toiled, but it is also a metaphorical inner desert where we flee our demons and face the unknown. For example, for some of us, coming out of Egypt includes coming out as gay or transgendered. In honor of this personal redemption and transformation (one Exodus among many), we must see to each other's liberation.

This portion assumes that Jew-by-Jew slavery takes place. The Torah emphasizes the manumission, specifying that owners should free their slaves with grateful, generous hearts. The imperative is to recognize that perpetual slavery is untenable and to begin to free each other.

We know that one path to mutual liberation is to celebrate each other's diversity. In freeing others and helping them to free themselves, we also free ourselves from the idea that some people are our sisters and brothers and others are foreigners who compete for our wealth or even our existence—an idea that traps us all in cycles of fear, hate, poverty, and violence.

## Commanded to Set Each Other Free

The timing of this Shmini Atzeret reading speaks volumes. It is prioritized just after getting born (Rosh Hashanah), purifying our souls (Yom Kippur), and working to feed ourselves (Sukkot). Contributing to the liberation of the human race, therefore, should be understood as one of our core responsibilities. After this Shmini Atzeret reading, which teaches us to give charity and to protect the autonomy of the enslaved, the renewal of Torah study (Simchat Torah) is imminent.

This vision of social liberation is not defined solely by material well being, for, in this portion, there is also reference to spiritual liberation from greed that overshadows compassion. We are



commanded to be grateful for the slaves we know we must set free (Deut. 15:12-18), and generous with the loans we know we must forgive (Deut. 15:7-10).

We can help others avoid the sense of exclusion we have personally felt as gays and as Jews. If, having "come out"—out of Egypt, out of the settlement, and out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender—we can also learn to liberate each other, then we will become more worthy of inheriting a new year of Torah study.