

Introduction to Lecture by Ruth Messinger at Virginia Tech
Samuel J. Kessler
Wednesday, October 18, 2017
7PM, TORG 3100

Welcome all.

The Torah, the Five Books of Moses, is a remarkable set of texts. The foundational narrative for both Judaism and Christianity, its beguiling and often esoteric prose has motivated myriad generations in the search for what is good, noble, and true in life.

The Torah tells the story of the creation of the world, of the spread of humanity upon the earth to work, guard, and tend it, and of God's choice of one nation to be his, tasked with an incomparable burden of duty, love, and righteousness.

Among its many details, the Torah makes two profound and, perhaps, world-historical moral evolutions—both of which have motivated our speaker this evening, and which I would like to take a moment to speak about.

The first appears right at the beginning, within the story of creation itself. The Torah says, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...And God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.”

We are all familiar with these lines, Genesis 1:26-27. Yet what is hidden from us, what lies actually just under our gaze, is the original intended audience of these lines. It is not us, many generations hence. Instead, it was directed, many years ago, at the kings and priests and prophets of the Ancient Near East, who told their people: The king, and the king alone, is created in the Divine Image. You, his subjects, are but beings born to the soil, yoked to toil, here to do the bidding of those born above you.

The Torah says no. That is its first great moral revolution. All humans are created, *b'zelem elokim*, in the image of God. Not just the King. Not just the high born. Not just the wealthy. Every pair of eyes that opens for the first time in this world is created in the image of God. That was the Torah's first world-historical challenge to the theological dogma of its day.

The second ethical revolution was more personal, a pact between God and God's people, Israel. It is a line repeated often in Deuteronomy. “For the Lord your god is God supreme and the Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who...upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You, too, must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.”

V'a'avntem et ha'gare ki garim hayitem be'ere'tz mitzrayim. You, too, must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.

Again, a verse with which many of us are familiar. But where is the innovation here? It is not in the idea that God cares for the orphan and the widow. That was the role of gods and kings throughout history. Rather, it was in the addition of the third group, the ‘stranger,’ the *gare toshav*, the resident

alien, the foreigner who lives among you and is your friend and neighbor but is not a part of your group, never has been, and does not seek to be. The stranger too, and his family, you must protect and cherish.

This was the Torah's second moral revolution. Not just the weakest among your own people must you care for, but the weakest who come knocking at your door, who come in search of refuge, of shelter, of peace in troubled times, who by the circumstances of life find themselves living in your land, which is to them is a strange land. Follow the example of God and not the example of Egypt, who enslaved those who came to their door for help:

Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof. Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and live peaceably in the land that the Lord your god is giving you.

Two moral revolutions, two moments of radical equality and care, set down into a world that most assuredly, then as now, has struggled to truly embody them.

It is in this life of prophetic echo that it is my great honor and privilege to introduce to you one of our generation's most remarkable seekers after equality, care of the stranger, and pursuit of justice.

Ms. Ruth Messinger is one of our nation's leading advocates in the fight for global equality and human rights. From 1990 to 1997 she was Manhattan Borough President, one of the highest elected offices in the City of New York, where she advocated on behalf of the city's less affluent residents. In 1997, she was the Democratic Party nominee for mayor, running against then-incumbent Rudy Giuliani. From 1998 to 2016 she was the CEO and President of American Jewish World Service, one of America's leading non-profit organizations. AJWS promotes and funds human rights work, women's advancement, and economic development throughout the developing world, doing so all through a uniquely Jewish lens that combines moral clarity and courage, political activism, and on-the-ground hard work for all humans, equally.

In 2015, *The Forward*, America's leading Jewish newspaper, named Ms. Messinger one of the Top 50 Most Influential Jews in the United States.

It is our honor and privilege to host such a dedicated public servant here on the Virginia Tech campus, a university whose motto, *Ut Prosim*, that I may service, Ms. Messinger fully embodies.

Now, before I turn over the floor for the remainder of the evening, let me make just a few formal notes of thanks for those who made this evening possible.

The Malcolm & Diane Rosenberg Program in Judaic Studies, as well as the Levy Fund for Judaic Studies, both housed in the Department of Religion and Culture, have jointly funded both this afternoon's lunch seminar and tonight's events. It is with many thanks to their generous support that Ms. Messinger can be with us today.

After Ms. Messinger has finished her formal remarks, she will be happy to field questions from the audience.

And now, finally, let us give Ms. Ruth Messinger a warm welcome to Blacksburg and Virginia Tech.