



**“Evolving Morality – Israel Part 1”
Rosh Hashanah Sermon, Day 2, 5784/2023
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Dear Friends, I begin today by letting you know that I am going to be speaking about Israel this morning. I recognize that within our diverse community we hold different points of view, but I want to remind us all that our strong feelings emerge from the same source of connection and concern we share for the land and her people, our people. So let’s take a deep breath together and consider not only recent events, but the teachings of our Rabbinic Sages over the past 2000 years.

Taking a look at the wider region of the Middle East, we are all too familiar with the religious violence which has resulted from both theocracy and fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic holy texts: bloody conflicts between Shia and Sunni, oppression of women, and persecution of religious minorities. But are these antidemocratic and archaic religious tendencies confined only to the Muslim world?

Tragically in Israel, within the *Haredi* – ultra orthodox and Settler communities, there are those whose voices have grown louder and become emboldened under the current Government. There are those who regularly call for the death of Arabs and we have even heard these voices from within the Israeli government. This year there has been an escalation of Settler violence in the West Bank including the horrific burning of the entire Palestinian village of Huwara this past February. Israeli military's highest-ranking generals have called this Settler rampage a "pogrom." What have we come to?

We are experiencing a profoundly dangerous moment in the life of the State of Israel- just 75 years old, in which these extreme views have become emboldened and incorporated into Netanyahu’s Ultra-Right Wing Coalition Government.

Now, it is true that when our Torah is read literally, without the benefit of commentary, without 2000 years of Rabbinic response and modification of the laws, the horrors we have recently witnessed in Israel become possible. The murder of Shira Banki, a young woman who attended the gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem, by an ultra-orthodox man; the burning of a Jerusalem church last year, a sacred site for Christians, believed to be where Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes, was evidently perpetrated by religious Jews. The church was spray-painted with the words: *u’ma’avir gillulim min*



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ha-aretz. These are the words recited in our Aleinu prayer at every Jewish prayer service, meaning: May idolaters be removed from the earth.

Let us remember the report that during the rampage at Huwara, the perpetrators stopped their violent acts to *davven maariv* (the evening prayers) and then returned to burning down the town! The use of Judaism, our sacred texts as justification for heinous acts of violence is a true Hilul Hashem- a desecration of God's Name

There is no question that certain Torah texts and traditional prayers can be used to fuel hatred and violence. Torah can be cherry-picked and read without benefit of context and the humanizing approach of Rabbinic commentary. However, there has been a long and persistent Rabbinic project, through the efforts of our greatest sages over two millennia, to respond to the compassionate wisdom of the heart in order to reinterpret those profoundly disturbing, inhumane texts that appear in Torah.

One classic example of this kind of spiritual evolution comes from the book of Deuteronomy, parashat *Ki Teitzei* in which a rebellious child is condemned to death. The text reads: *If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not listen to them; Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place; And they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him to death.* (Deut. 21:18)

But our later oral tradition rejects this possibility. It does so by creating so many onerous conditions to be met, that it would, in fact, be impossible to carry out the prescribed penalty. At times the Rabbis go to the lengths of absurdity to prevent the death penalty, despite the Torah's clear text. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yehudah states that in order to accuse a wayward son, the mother would have to be identical to the father in voice, appearance, and height- And what is the reason for this condition? Because the Torah text says, "he does not listen to *our* voice," The implication being that the voices of the two parents must be equal and once there is a requirement for the voices to be equal, their appearance and height must also be equal." This would, of course, be impossible. In fact, the Talmud records that there never was a case of a wayward son being stoned to death.

We cannot change the text of the Torah. We cannot omit disturbing sections, for they are a record of our history, a record of the evolution of our morality. But we must



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continue the Rabbinic process of interpretation and evolution. That is the legacy of *Torah she'b'al peh*- the oral tradition which defines Rabbinic Judaism.

So as not to present to you a skewed view of this Torah portion, I want to make it clear that most of this Torah portion supports the creation of a compassionate society. Repeatedly, we are commanded to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, to preserve the dignity of the poor, to behave with honesty and integrity and to minimize the suffering of animals.

Our teacher, Rabbi Arthur Green, Rector of Hebrew College Rabbinical School stresses the profound need for us to reclaim Judaism from those on the religious far right, who themselves betray the Rabbinic tradition of reject the compassionate interpretation of the law. He cites the Talmudic debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai as to what is the most fundamental principle of the entire Torah. Many of us are familiar with Rabbi Akiva's response- *v'ahavat l'eiakha kamokha*- You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But Ben Azzai argued, lest you think this rule applies only to your neighbors, understand that there is an even more fundamental principle expressed in the Torah, that **all human beings** are created in the image of the Divine. In fact, the entire project of the Rabbinic period was to uphold this value through the reinterpretation of Torah texts. This has been an ongoing project and we must continue, for the sake of the soul of the Jewish people, and even more so, for the future of humanity.

Rabbi Green has stated "Any mitzvah that doesn't increase the sense of *tzelem Elohim*- must be re-examined." That is, any commandment that does not increase the sense that all human beings are created in the image of Divine, must be re-examined.

Torah has much to teach, as a reflection of our past, but also as the foundation of an ever-evolving moral code. The process of an unfolding Judaism rooted in both teachings: love of one's neighbor and recognition of the Divine aspect in all human beings, is a path to strive for.

There is another perplexing passage at the end of this same Torah portion I cited earlier, that cries out for interpretation and which I want to share with you. This section of Torah is read every year on the Sabbath before Purim, reminding us of historic enemy, Amalek. In Deuteronomy. 25:17-19 it states:

Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, when you came forth out of Egypt; How he met you by the way, and struck at your rear, all who were feeble behind you, when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore, it shall be, when the Lord



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your God has given you rest from all your enemies around, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget it.

These statements seem to present a paradox- remember what Amalek did and also blot out the remembrance of Amalek. Taken within the larger context of this Torah portion, it appears to me to say- Remember what Amalek did to you so that YOU do not become like Amalek and abuse those who are powerless. Remember how your weak and feeble ones were attacked. Now that you are about to enter the land and become an empowered people with your own government and army, remember what it felt like to be powerless and abused. Blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens AND blot out any potential for **you** to become like Amalek.

So, what did our Sages, in their wisdom create to help us learn these lessons on compassion, to absorb these teachings in a visceral sense? They decreed that on Rosh Hashanah we should hear 100 cries of the shofar.

And in discussing this practice the Rabbis of the Talmud ask the question, why do we need to hear 100 blasts of the Shofar? The answer is that it is to remind us of the 100 cries of the Mother of Sisera. And who was Sisera and why does his mother cry? In the Book of Judges (5:28-30) we learn that Sisera was a Canaanite General who waged a war on the Israelites. Sisera's mother awaits his return from battle fantasizing about the spoils of war he will bring home from the vanquished Israelites. However, Sisera never returns. He was killed by a courageous Israelite woman named Yael. Sisera's mother waits and waits until she discovers that her son will never return. She then releases 100 bitter cries of grief. And it is this story, of a nameless woman, the mother of our sworn enemy, bent on destroying our people whom our Rabbis chose as the reason we must hear 100 cries of the Shofar on RH.

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider writes, "Perhaps this is the point that the Sages are making: so great is the grief of any parent for the loss of a child, that we all are left completely bereft. The universality and commonality of suffering over the loss of a child transcends names and identities."

On Rosh Hashanah our rituals demand that we open our hearts to the suffering of others, perhaps especially to the suffering of our enemies. Such a teaching is surely "a far cry" (so to speak,) from the religious violence we are witnessing today.



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In a lesser known midrash, our Sages offer another explanation, that the 100 cries of the shofar symbolize the one hundred cries of our matriarch Sarah, who sees her son Isaac departing with Abraham for the *Akeidah*. (Torah Shleimah, Parshat Chayei Sarah) In this remarkable midrash our Rabbis give voice to Sarah's horror and grief despite the fact that she remains silent in the text of the Torah as her husband blindly obeys what he perceives to be the will of his God. In the cry of the shofar, we are reminded of both the tears of our Mother Sarah and Sisera's Mother. The shofar summons us to hear the bitter grief of others.

And to drive the point home, our Rabbis instructed us to chant a haftarah today that references the tears of Rachel as she weeps ceaselessly for her children: "Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard...wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone." (Jer. 31:15)

Rachel represents the universal empathic Mother. On this day when we stand in judgment, when we are to cleanse ourselves and start anew, our Sages remind us that the place to begin is through empathy for the suffering of others. But the haftarah however, does not leave us in grief but rather assures us that, "there is hope for the future." (Jer. 31:17) The people will return to God and love will be rekindled. Rachel's tears and ours are ultimately redemptive. Empathy is transformative.

And so, the Shofar service concludes with the words: *Ashrei Ha'am Yodeia Teruah*, "Happy are the people who truly understand the Teruah- the cry of the *shofar*."

The shofar cries out **to** each of us, cries out **through** each of us and through the bitter pain of all humanity trapped in cycles of violence. The shofar summons us to hear the cries of others, to open the heart to empathy and compassion. In this way we begin the redemptive process.

Today we must all cry out for the creation of a more just and peaceful world and as well, for a democratic Israel. May we be caring and daring enough to support her ongoing spiritual evolution so that *tzelem Elohim*, the divinity in all human beings is recognized and cherished .