

Ki Teitzei 5778
Rabbi Betsy Forester
Slippery Slopes

Today's Torah reading contains many laws that should have made us proud of our heritage, and some that just seem odd, and others that feel problematic in light of modern thinking. It starts out, shall we say, not so warmly.

The *parashah* opens with three different, disturbing scenarios, ostensibly so that we, or at least our ancestors, will know what to do when those circumstances occur. In the first, an Israelite warrior notices a woman among his foreign captives. He wants her, but he may not simply have her. He must marry her. But first, she will live in his home for a month. There, she must shave her hair and cut her nails--she must become unattractive--and he must watch her grieve for her parents. After that, he may wed her, or, more to the point, bed her. While this process undoubtedly represents a positive development over earlier practices relating to war, it's still pretty awful to imagine what it could be like for that poor woman.

In the second case, a man has two sons, the older from a "hated wife" and the younger from a "beloved wife." The Torah prohibits the father from saving the prime inheritance for the second son, the one born to the beloved wife. Again, an improvement over previously accepted practice, and again, it sounds like a sketchy home life.

In the third scenario, the Torah introduces us to the "wayward and defiant son--*ben sorer umoreh*, as he is called. He does not listen to his parents and must be stoned to death for the crimes of gluttony, drunkenness, and obstinacy. Those crimes are not capital offenses elsewhere in the Bible, like false prophecy, murder, adultery, and kidnapping. What are we to make of this severe sentence, brought upon a youth?

Our sages jump all over the *ben sorer u'moreh*. The Talmud in Sanhedrin records extensive efforts to define and limit its hypothetical applicability. The rabbis reach the conclusion that a youth deserving such a sentence must possess flaws and bad habits that have reached a point of malignancy, and lead him inevitably to destroy his family and, as they put it, "stand at the crossroads and rob people." If there were ever such a youth, his execution would be an act of proactive justice.

That still doesn't feel so good, does it? The Talmud doesn't like it, either. The sages split hairs to legislate this case into oblivion. Rabbi Shimon goes on record saying that

such a case never happened and never will happen, and that the Torah records this law only for us to reap the reward of insightful exegesis. In other words, this case only appears for us to learn that the Torah does not mean what it looks like it says. Cool.

Um...I'm still uncomfortable. There's something happening here, and it's not exactly clear. A deeper reading that appears elsewhere in the Talmud traces the *ben sorer umoreh's* malevolency back to before he was even born. There, the Talmud suggests a midrashic read in which the aforementioned cases of the captive wife the son of the hated wife, and the wayward and defiant son actually make up a sequential narrative (Sanhedrin 107a). A wife taken in captivity by a lustful soldier becomes hated, and the son born to her grows up insecure, unhappy, and disenfranchised from his family and community. He begins to act out, abuse alcohol and commit petty crimes. Eventually, everyone gives up on him. How sad. We can understand how that could play out.

Yet note the glimmer of hope in that reading: a wayward youth can be redeemed, if interventions are made in time to change his trajectory.

Let us now return to where the rabbis make it virtually impossible ever to find a true *ben sorer umoreh*. I regret to inform you--and this part usually gets left out when it is taught--that along comes Rabbi Yonatan, who says, "Not so fast. There was such a case. I saw it, and I sat on the grave of that youth" (Sanhedrin 70a-73b). Oy.

Rabbi Yonatan calls all of us to account. He wants us to understand that if the people who are supposed to show young people how to function in society fail to do so, tragic consequences will befall many people.

The notion of a "slippery slope" of bad behavior has been around since the beginning of civilization. I'd like to give it a bit more of a modern context. 52 years ago, close to 1,000 young people in L.A. came together to protest a new curfew, a new loitering law, and the closure of a certain juice bar on Sunset Boulevard. It seems that youth presence was bad for business, and the kids came out to say that they had a right to be seen. Law enforcement responded by sending in a few busloads of LAPD officers in full storm gear.

Steven Stills was driving into L.A. that day when he encountered the rally. He went and wrote the song "For What It's Worth," a song that became Buffalo Springfield's only hit. Its lyrics continue to be relevant, with the words "It's time we stop, hey, what's that sound, everybody look what's going down" calling us to ask what is happening in our

country today and ask how we got to this point. The song cemented the the rock counterculture's socially conscious voice.

Its lyrics refer to 'a man with a gun over there.' Today, the mention of "a man with a gun over there" feels frighteningly real. Our country is witnessing and epidemic of killing. And so, while we could talk about many "slippery slopes" in relation to today's *parasha*, I would like to take a few minutes to stop and take stock of "what's going down," specifically with regard to "mass shootings," particularly those that are motivated by white supremacy and the marginalization of people who are perceived to be "different." I would like clarity to come from this *bimah* about how we got here and what this moment asks of us as Jews. My interest comes from a desire to live into what our People has always stood for and what we are teaching our children downstairs today as we have done for 4,000 years.

When our leaders marginalize and tolerate the "othering" of people because of how they look, speak, worship, love, because of where they come, because of their poverty or their illness, through hateful speech and hateful acts, and when our leaders, and we as citizens, tolerate their being marginalized, we should not be surprised that as of exactly 2 weeks ago, 297 mass shootings had occurred in 2019, averaging out to 1.2 shootings per day, with 1,219 people were injured and 335 dead). There have been more mass shootings than days in the year 2019. We should not be surprised. We should be horrified.

On September 3, the leadership of the Reform Movement released a statement in which they "express [their] deep concern about the coarseness of public discourse, led in too many ways by the President of the United States." The statement calls out "speech that demeans and demonizes, [creating] an atmosphere of permission for further intolerance and calling on politicians and all Americans to "loudly and unambiguously call for an end to a politics infused with bullying, hateful diatribes, and personal character assaults." They produced this statement because our Jewish tradition has taught them that, as Conservative Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously preached, "...morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

The Reform Movement is not the first to call out what is happening. The Conservative Movement and the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America have produced similar statements in the recent past.

There could be nothing more authentically Jewish than a concern for the dignity for all people, not to mention our own self-preservation as Jews living in this country. We must not hide from what we need to say because we live with certain political realities. The way an educated, self-aware Jew perceives and walks in the world is always *Torah*. When a societal issue touches on explicit Jewish values and laws, it is Torah. If we want to understand what Torah comes to teach us about how we should be thinking and behaving, then we must lean in.

Let us not make the mistake of blaming mass shootings on people who struggle with mental illness. It is intellectually dishonest and morally wrong. I quote to you from a statement issued by the American Psychological Association on August 4: "...it is clearer than ever that we are facing a public health crisis of gun violence fueled by racism, bigotry, and hatred...Psychological science has demonstrated social contagion--the spread of thoughts, emotions and behaviors from person to person and among larger groups--is real, and may well be a factor, at least in the [most recent] El Paso shooting...Routinely blaming mass shootings on mental illness is unfounded and stigmatizing. Research has shown that only a very small percentage of violent acts are committed by people who are diagnosed with, or in treatment for, mental illness. The rates of mental illness are roughly the same around the world, yet other countries are not experiencing these traumatic events as often as we face them. One critical factor is access to, and the lethality of, the weapons that are being used in these crimes. Adding racism, intolerance and bigotry to the mix is a recipe for disaster."

In this sanctuary today we have many activists. We also have many people who endeavor each day to build a better world in less public ways. There are many, important ways to combat intolerance and I hope and pray that each of us will find ways to bring change within our own spheres of influence, in the public square.

I hope that we will always find the strength to live into the the values that formed us as a People and remind us of who we are as individuals. On this Shabbat, I pray that each of us will discern whatever slippery slopes we are called to tend, in our own attitudes and behavior and in our society. May our discernment bear sacred fruit in this world.