

Mattot-Masei 5782
We Don't Cancel Torah
Rabbi Betsy Forester

We read a lot of Torah today— almost a full hour. There could be much to discuss. Our reading opened with laws for vows and how they can be annulled, a section completely irrelevant to us today, prompting some rabbis to talk about choosing words wisely and keeping our commitments. We also read of the request by the Reubenite and Gadite tribes to settle east of the Jordan, a narrative some use as a springboard for talking about how we set priorities, and the need to be more concerned about the people in our lives than the property we own. All of that is well and good—and also obvious. Many of us could write that d'var— and none of us would be wiser for it.

Last year I spoke about the profundity of Moshe's recounting the nation's many different encampments over the 40 years of their desert wanderings. I related a kayaking accident and what it means to be mindful of every step one takes in a rapid without a boat. At that time, it was easy to find myself in the biblical narrative and share that connection with you. That was then, this is now.

Truthfully, I found today's reading painful, despite how beautifully it was chanted. It pained me, not because of the parts no longer relevant to us today—vows and oaths, tribal allotments of the Land, and cities of refuge for manslayers, but because of the parts that feel all too familiar: a ferocious holy war against the Midianites, and commands for a broad-scale, vicious conquest of the Land of Israel, in which an entire population and every remnant of its culture is to be decimated by sword—so that we can live there.

I'm going there, today, to that place of cringe-worthy Torah, but I'll lead into it by means of something else.

In her parashah commentary this week, Rav Aviva Richman brings a midrash that shows Moshe in today's reading, and King David a couple of centuries later, both yearning to do what they can even when they cannot do all that they yearn to do. In our parashah, Moshe is about to die, and before he does, he transmits the command to establish six three cities of refuge, three of them east of the Jordan. The Midrash sees Moshe as deeply invested in establishing those three cities. He's not willing to leave it to Joshua, who will lead the conquest, to establish all six of them once the land is settled. Whereas he could have carried out God's last command—the war against the Midianites—and stopped there, the midrash emphasizes that instead, Moshe reaches to do whatever small land-based mitzvot he can accomplish, even though he will not enter

the Land and therefore will be unable to accomplish the many other mitzvot that are contingent on dwelling there. Similarly, in the case of King David, when God tells David that he won't build the Temple, rather than rejecting any connection to the sacrificial cult, David spurs himself with great enthusiasm to prepare for the building of the Temple, promoting a vision he will never see fulfilled. Both Moshe and David do the small bit they can take on as part of a larger vision mostly out of their reach.

Which brings us back to what happens in today's Torah reading. There are many Jews who believe that the instructions for the conquest and description of maximalist borders of the Promised Land we read today justify Jewish sovereignty over what some call "greater Israel," land which includes what is known to us as the Occupied Territories. We know what it's like to live in a country taken by force and a belief in manifest destiny, because we live in one and we have only begun to contend with what it might mean to take responsibility for that. And, like many of you, I know what it's like to love the State of Israel despite needing to come to terms with the circumstances of its rebirth and anger at ongoing outrages of the current occupation. To read today that these problems go all the way back to the beginning is difficult for me, and I imagine it is difficult for many of us.

The Torah promises that if we do not annihilate the inhabitants of the land and destroy every remnant of their culture, "those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live" (Numbers 33:55).

In an anthology of poems generated by the Israel-Palestine conflict, Palestinian poet Tawfiq Zayyad writes:

In Lidda, in Ramla, in the Galilee
We shall remain
Like a wall in your throat
Like a shard of glass,
A cactus thorn,
And in your eyes a sandstorm...

What the Torah predicts in the ancient text we read today has become our lived reality—an ongoing, reciprocal spiral of violence and suffering. We must not turn away from it.

Reading the commands for holy war and genocide in the Torah we love, the Torah that we call “our life and the length of our days,” our pure “Tree of Life,” is may be especially challenging in today’s cancel culture. Our impulse might, God forbid, be to throw the whole thing away—to cancel the Torah because of the parts we do not and should not tolerate.

But we must not turn away, because this same Torah calls us repeatedly to social justice, and to care for the marginalized, the stranger, and all who suffer—and because Judaism fundamentally is not a cancel culture.

We do not cancel; we fix. Rather than turn away, we turn toward, and try to redeem. We do not check our conscience at the door when we encounter a text that makes our skin crawl. We do what we can to redeem it. There are parts of Torah that are meant to set our teeth on edge. That’s one reason why, I believe, the Torah commands us to study it by means of a variety of verbs for the learning exercise. One of those verbs, *v’shinantam*, means to cut through, or bit hard, on the received text. Some encounters with the written Word call for gnashing of teeth. We should not turn away from that responsibility.

There is plenty of material in the Torah that our sages across the generations have redeemed by deciding that we will do things differently. We don’t cancel Torah. We grapple with it. Like Moses and David, we yearn toward a grand vision, and like them, we must strive to do our part, however small, to bring ourselves as close to that dream as we are able.

We cannot change words in the scroll that make us uncomfortable, but we can let them bother us enough to rethink them. That’s what it means to take hold of Torah, wanting it to be our Tree of Life strongly enough to make it so.

May that be our will, and God’s, too. Amen.