

## Communal Responsibility / Violence and Valuing Human Life

Erev Yom Kippur 5779/2018. By Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller

“We just felt like this happened in our city, in Santa Clarita, we felt it was our backyard and we had to do something about it,” said Pastor Maricio Ruiz, after finding a dead body in a thicket of trees just off the side of the road. “I sat up in bed and turned up the volume on the CBS 11 o clock news to hear the pastor better. A gruesome discovery in Stephenson Ranch, was written across the bottom of my screen. Sixty church members had volunteered to look for a missing, at-risk 21-year-old and had spent about 3 hours combing the area when they came upon a badly decomposed, unidentified body. “We just felt like this happened in our city in Santa Clarita, we felt it was our backyard and we had to do something about this, and our church responded,” said the pastor.

It was Friday night, August 17, and I sat up in bed as I heard this story, because it was, in fact straight from Torah portion Shofetim, which we would be reading the very next morning. If in your land, Deut. 21 begins, someone is slain and found in the open, and the murderer is not known, the leaders of the town closest to the body shall take responsibility for it. An unblemished calf is taken, and its neck broken. The town leaders shall wash their hands with water over the calf and declare, “Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve us, God, do not let guilt for the blood of this innocent person remain upon our community.” The story concludes: And you shall be absolved from guilt for this innocent person’s life for you will be doing what is right in the sight of the Eternal.” Putting aside our discomfort with the sacrifice of the heifer, this is a remarkable story of communal responsibility for the safety, not just for one’s neighbors, but for those who were not even from their town. The Talmudic rabbis, commenting on this biblical story, explained that this oath by city leaders was an insistence that they did not permit a climate of lawlessness and violence to exist in their community. (BTSot. 45b) They are not protecting a known killer, and they didn’t see it happen and stand idly by. Such an amazing story of communal responsibility; this happened on our watch, in our city that should be governed by our laws. If this had happened within the city, surely we would have seen or heard and done something. But because we were not diligent enough, someone died on our watch. And more-- the community must atone because human violence degrades the very land, and all the people, not just the slain, are diminished when no one is punished and justice is left undone.

I am so inspired by this piece of Torah, and the vision of communal responsibility that it paints, of the sanctity of human life and welfare, and for its response to violence. How powerful this story is, that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Abraham ibn Ezra, a foremost biblical commentator, says, “torah states “your people Israel” twice in this story to emphasize that the entire nation, not just the nearest city, is responsible when innocent people are murdered, because the nation did not keep its roads safe! Can we imagine such communal responsibility for the well-being of all people? Imagine: What would it look like for us to stop in our tracks every time an innocent person died a violent death? What would it feel like, if we mourned each pre-mature death, as if we bore some guilt for the circumstances that permitted that death to happen to even exist? It sounds crazy, but is it? We conflate violence into political issues rather than begin by looking

at our ethical teachings about the value of life. If we could go beyond the political issues of what contributes to our violent society, beyond social justice campaigns but go right to the ethical heart of it all- can we envision a world where we acted and legislated and talked as if human life was the most precious possession we have, and that every conversation began with the idea that upholding and protecting human life was the greatest value?

The prophets wrote of this vision of a messianic era: that every person can sit under their vine and fig, and none be afraid for their life, or their well-being. Our highest value is a world where every man woman and child is valued for being created b'tzelem Elohim/ in God's image, that within every human being is implanted eternity, because they carry the seed for all of their future generations. What would it take for us to truly value every human life this way? What would it look like for society to hold itself accountable as our ancestors did, for every life ended by unwarranted violence?

And then I read the last footnote in my Torah commentary: "Rabbinic sources report that the ceremony was abolished in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era, because murder had become common and was committed openly." 20 centuries ago- Murder had become common. What must that have felt like, to the elders of their day to say- we can't be held responsible for the well-being of our people. We give up on trying to influence society to be shocked when human life is lost.

20 centuries later, and we still wrestle with that tension, between feeling responsible for the evils in society, and feeling like we must throw up our hands because we can't make an impact for good. Rabbi Brad Artson, the dean of the Conservative rabbinic seminary in Los Angeles, writes of this in his 2001 book, *The Bedside Torah*:

It is virtually impossible to read through the morning newspaper or to listen to the daily news without confronting a series of atrocities that shock and appall. Demagogues who murder, rape, and torture are now daily expectations. Gangs destroying the neighborhoods of our cities, robbing our teenagers of the end of their childhood and much of their future... Each day, we read of a new leader assassinated, of a new war or epidemic or famine that has wiped out the hopes or lives of thousands of people. And behind these episodes of catastrophe lurk the ever-present shadows of environmental poisoning. How easy to respond to this overwhelming and incomplete list of disasters by developing a callousness that ignores reality in favor of a more pleasant fantasy. The world is simply too much of a mess, the level of human suffering too staggering for us to comprehend, let alone try to repair. Facing the choice of feeding a hungry child or of turning the page, how many of us have opted to turn the page? Most of us don't even stop to think that we have made a choice when we did so. Unable to feel everything, we shut down our hearts, choosing instead to feel nothing. And so we remain silent in the face of the unspeakable. We surrender our common humanity, our ability to care, in the interests of preserving our sanity.

We must do better than our 1<sup>st</sup> century brothers and sisters. We have to believe that every human being is of value and that life is the one most precious gift that we hold in

common with every other person on this planet, our lives no more valued and no less. We mourn for those who die natural deaths- and yet we become inured from the onslaught of unnatural deaths; the earthquakes, the hurricanes, the mass shootings, the tragedies that fill our papers. How can we keep our hearts open to the enormous loss of life, and not be swallowed up in grief?

If we do not feel the loss- we will not feel the urge to try to prevent the losses of life that we can do something about. There is a midrash that chides a wealthy man who chooses to eat bread and water. When beggars come to his door, he gives them nothing, because he is eating the same as they. God is furious- you must eat good food and drink good wine, the midrash goes, so that when you see others who have no choice but to suffer, you can feel compassion for them, and do something to elevate their pain. If we do not feel the value of life, then we cannot feel the pain at the preventable loss of life that is possible around us.

How do we accept the reality of violence in our cities- when Chicago marked a summer that each weekend exceeded the shooting and death toll of the week before? If we discard the perpetrators of violence as gang members, then how do we disregard David Katz, the young Jewish man who shot up a gaming convention in Jacksonville Florida in August, killing two others? Not a gang member, no mental health issues, Can we feel diminished when 14 teens die in Parkland, and sickened at the reality that there were 22 school shootings from January through May last school year. Mass shootings such as Los Vegas catch our attention, but the truth is, we are the most violent nation in the world. In 2016, there was almost 1 and a quarter million violent crime offenses. Indeed, if we want to think that in our Ventura shtetl of the country we are untouched by violence, the truth that in Parkland and in Jacksonville, Jewish teens were both victims of and perpetrators of violence calls us to awareness. Not that Jewishness should matter- but it reminds us that those whose lives are shattered are very much like our own families.

How do we act as a society that values human life? Torah teaches that if we build a house with a roof, we must build a parapet, a guard rail around the edges, so no one will accidentally fall over and die. We seek to enact safety measures, regulations, to keep people safe. But do we hold the value of human life paramount to business interests, to industry? When we fight for decades to ban pesticides that have been proven to contribute to cancer rates and childhood asthma, among other illnesses, when we fight for accountability for prescription drug addiction, and it only becomes a conversation once we realize that the life expectancy in America has dropped for white people because of drug overdoses, it is hard to imagine that the value of human life is what binds us together in our common humanity.

This Yom Kippur night is the antidote to the 1st Century rabbis who forfeited their ability to care in matters of life and death. We dress in white- we begin a fast , we think about and imagine our own deaths, and come back to life in 24 hours with good food and water , recommitted to the value of life, and to making of our life something worthy and sacred. We must shake off the numbness that Rabbi Artson so accurately describes. We must accept the responsibility to care for the well-being of others, even those we do not know, as Pastor Ruis and members of his church did in Santa Clarita. We must feel the pain of the daily news, of the

loss of life in our communities, in black urban communities whose members are 8 times more likely to be killed by firearms than their white neighbors. We must feel there is something we can do to reduce the more than 63,000 who die of drug overdoses each year. We must think about what we can do to advocate for legislation designed to raise our level of health and reduce our exposure to toxins because we are charged with these words: "choose life."

Only when we make life our highest value, can we begin to address the social issues we face.

There is a midrash that says we say kaddish when a person dies, because we are trying to cheer God, the Source of Life, who is diminished by the loss, for God's presence dwells within every individual. If God weeps, can we do any less?