



Mishpatim

February 5, 2016

(Jewish Disability Awareness & Inclusion Month)

Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey

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Last Sunday morning, as I was transitioning between the children's portion of my teaching and the adult edsession that followed, I couldn't help but smile upon walking into my office and catching the tail end of our Purim Players' rehearsal. The music was catchy, there was a great story being told, and, most of all, the Players were having a blast, which, of course, is the point of our Purim spiel to begin with, to have fun. Because if we don't laugh on Purim, the only other sensible alternative would be to cry. Purim is, after all, a tragedy! The entire story is tainted by death. So we choose to laugh, because that seems better than crying. And I think we're right to make that decision. When it comes to our Purim celebration in a few weeks, I assure you, I will be there, front and center, having the time of my life, because really, what would this world be without laughter?

But at the same time, what would our world be without tears?

As you know, February is Jewish Disability Awareness & Inclusion Month. This month helps us to remember to celebrate the beauty of each and every human being, no matter how abled or disabled he or she may be. Tonight, though, I submit to you that just as we know how helpful it can be to laugh, so, too, is it ok sometimes to cry, because pain and suffering are real. Because let's be honest: disabilities are no laughing matter. In a perfectly just world, no one, especially our children, would ever have to deal with the challenges of disability to begin with. Ignoring the pain serves no one.

Now not all disabilities are physical. Some of us are challenged in the arena of physical health, while others of us are challenged in the arena of mental health. And some of us, sadly, are challenged in both.



Haman, the Amalekite. Purim's arch-enemy of the Jews. The Hitler of Shushan. Evil personified.

We sigh the collective sigh of relief when this dastardly minister of the King, in full public view, utterly alone, eventually hangs from the gallows, paying the ultimate price for his guilty transgressions.¹

But just when we think the story might be over, it isn't yet. The sons. Haman's ten boys. They killed the boys.² Their parents and their parents' friends are the guilty ones. But the boys? Surely they must have done something, because we have to believe the prophet Ezekiel when he teaches that "The person who sins, that one alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt."³ So why doesn't the story end with Haman's execution?

Maybe they did bear responsibility that we don't know about. Then again, maybe not. The megillah is silent on this question. All we can say for sure is that even after they join their father in death, the boys continue to assume his burden. "If it please Your Majesty," Esther implores of her husband, the king, "let Haman's ten sons be impaled on the stake tomorrow." Ten lifeless bodies. Ten stakes.⁴

Yet for all ten to share the same horrific end is no coincidence. Either each and every boy was led into a life of iniquity by his father, or Ezekiel missed the mark here, because this would be a case in which children **do indeed** pay the consequences of their **parent's** guilt. Either way, one thing is for sure: Had Haman, their father, been a man of virtue rather than vice, they probably would not have suffered the same violent deaths that they did.

Not a mental disability per se, but still, it's not fair. It's not right.

¹Esther 7:9

²Esther 9:7

³ Ezekiel 18:20

⁴Esther 9:13



We turn to Genesis, and the story of Sodom and Gomorah. Abraham knows what is fair and what isn't. You can't sweep away the innocent with the guilty!⁵ So what if the vast majority are guilty? "Will [God] sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be innocent people among the guilty inside the city wall?" It's not fair. It's not right.

Jeremiah knows it, too. He knows it is wrong for us to say that, "Parents have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth are blunted." Rather, "everyone shall die for his or her own sins: whoever eats sour grapes; his or her own teeth shall be blunted."⁶ That is fair. That is just.

But who says that Creation is always fair? Certainly not God.



Three weeks from now, with tablets of stone, one in either hand, Moses will stand before us on the mountain with God. And we will be told that this God, this Judge of all Judges, is also the One who "visits the iniquity of parents upon their children and upon their children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."⁷ And when we hear this, we will remember the tiny infant, born just as the clouds were beginning to darken over Noah's back yard.

We will remember the petrified Sodomite toddler, standing there, crying, dying, as God's sulfurous fire rains down from heaven.⁸

⁵Genesis 18:23

⁶Jeremiah 31:29-30

⁷Exodus 34:7

⁸Genesis 19:24 Genesis 18:23

⁸Jeremiah 31:29-30

⁸Exodus 34:7

We will remember the six-year-old Egyptian, the one who loses her twin brother to the horrors of Plague #10.

It's not fair. It's not right. But it is real.



Skip forward to today.

Today, and every day, we mourn the tragedy of another 17-year-old drug-dealer, standing before the judge, ready to be sentenced. His path was sealed the day his parents used the “good luck” candle from his 3rd birthday cake to light that first joint, place it in his tiny mouth, and video the rite of passage to a roomful of cheering adults.

Today, and every day, we cry with another 8-year-old soccer player, alone, without friends –and without a father –because her father was locked away for molesting her best friend. Who will play with her now?

These children never had a chance. It's not fair. It's not right. But it is real.



Tucked away in the middle of this week's parasha, we read (Exodus 23:19):

יִט רֵאשִׁית, בְּכֹרֵי אֲדָמָתְךָ, תָּבִיא, בֵּית יְהוָה אֶל הֵיכָל; לֹא-תִבְשֵׁל גְּדִי, בַּחֲלֵב אִמּוֹ.

¹⁹ You must bring your choice fruits to the house of the Lord your God. **You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.**”

This verse is odd in at least two ways. First, what does the first part have to do with the second? And secondly, what's so terrible about boiling a kid in its mother's milk to begin with?

Let me address the second question first. Even as our text offers no rational justification for why we should not boil a kid in its mother's milk, and I won't offer any tonight, it remains one of the most important commandments in all of Torah. Why do we prohibit cheeseburgers? Because you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. Why do we prohibit ice cream after a steak dinner? Because you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. Why do we prohibit pepperoni on pizza? Because you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

Now back to the first part of the verse: Genesis 1:28, God's first commandment, tells us:

וּרְבוּ וּמְלִיטוּ “Be fruitful and multiply.” Yes, our children are the fruit of our loins. What greater gift can we give them than a seat in the House of the Lord? But we all know the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. When the tree that gives life to the new apple is healthy, that's a glorious thing, because health begets health. But when the tree is diseased, heaven help the poor apple. So now the two halves become a whole. When it comes to our children, the first commandment is that we bring them under God's protection. The second commandment is that we guard them from any disease, physical or emotional, that we might ourselves carry. Because if we don't, if we permit our children to boil in the cauldron of our own spoiled milk, what chance will they possibly have?



Sylvia Plath, the pioneering Pulitzer Prize winning weaver of confessional words, fought the good fight. February 11, 1963, fifty-three years ago next week, she lost. By her own hands, she lost. Or maybe she won? At 20, an entire bottle of pills was insufficient to finish the task. But what a try it was. For three days, lost in the crawl space under her home, Sylvia rested, blissfully succumbing to the whirling blackness around her. Ten years later, older, wiser, she finally found eternal oblivion, all the while doing the very best she could to protect Frieda and Nicholas, the little ones she loved so dearly, sleeping in the next room. And in a way, we are happy. Wet towels sealing the cracks under each door, the carbon monoxide was successfully contained in the kitchen.

But with her head seething in the oven, it would be ludicrous this think Sylvia could protect her kids from everything. Sylvia Plath. Dead at 30. From that day on, her children, especially Nicholas, would live posthumous lives. March, 2009, fully marinated in his mother's milk, Sylvia's boy found his way back to mom. Like hers, this was a trip fashioned by his own hands. Is that fair?



Bernie Madoff. A ghost from the past, resurrected this week by the forces of the American Broadcasting Corporation. The spinner of lies, the architect of deceit. Crook. Embezzler of billions. Guilty. And father. Father of Mark. Father of Andrew. He tried to protect the boys. All he had to do was keep them in the dark. How could they be expected to pay the price if they knew nothing? But he couldn't do it. Even he couldn't protect them from himself. March, 2010. In solitude, from behind the prison walls, Bernie couldn't keep Andrew from taking matters, and his life, into his own hands. Is this justice? Hardly. But there is nothing we or anyone else can do about it. It's just the way it is. It's not fair. It's not right. But it is real.



In the grand scheme of things, does it matter that one child suffers from his mother's diseased mental state while the other is smothered by his father's selfish transgressions? Yes, it matters, but the end result is the same. Two boys of privilege, damaged by their parents' turmoils. Two boys raised on seething milk. Two boys dead, through no fault of their own. And the pain lingers.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes:

“Pain is the price we pay for being alive. Dead cells—our hair, our fingernails—can’t feel pain; they cannot feel anything. When we understand that, our question will change from, “Why do we have to feel pain?” to “What do we do with our pain so that it becomes meaningful and not just pointless empty suffering?”

Again, easier said than done. But a critical question nonetheless.



Sometimes, life seems too exhausting to carry on. Sometimes we can’t speak, our eyes can’t see, our ears can’t hear.⁹ So long as we continue to live in the world of reality, though, agony and distress will endure. Closing our eyes, holding our noses, or blocking our ears may provide the brief appearance of peace, but we know better. We know that heartache is part of the deal. We can try to mitigate it, but we cannot avoid it. Thank God that “The gates of tears are never locked,”¹⁰ because sometimes that is all that stands between us and something even worse.

In the end, what does it matter? What does it matter that we stand for justice when a simple glance at the world in which we live says differently? Because crack babies do pay for the sins of their parents. Because innocent refugees from war-torn regions do suffer punishment, even as the terrorists who throw them into the fire don’t. Because terminal cancer patients do find the breath of life snatched from their very grasp. The day we choose to ignore this reality, the day we refuse to recognize the reality with which our suffering children live, this is the day we become one critical part less human.

⁹Kohelet 1:8

¹⁰BT Baba Metzia 59a

Two approaches. Seemingly opposite. Both in our same sacred Torah. Reality says that when parents eat sour grapes their children's teeth do become blunted. The prophetic voice says that we cannot let a kid be boiled in its mother's milk. The mother may be a murderer, a drug addict, an embezzler, clinically depressed, a car thief, a schizophrenic. She may be a sinner. She may be ill. God's decree about visiting the iniquity of parents upon their children and upon their children's children, upon the third and fourth generations tells us that it doesn't matter, because whether we like it or not, our own actions do not stop with us. Innocent children pay the price all the time. Children are seething in their mother's milk in every corner of the world. None of it is fair. All of it is real.

So now, the most important part. None of us can cure the afflicted on our own, if at all. No. It's not fair. But there are things we can do to lower the fires that flame the cauldron. Countless children, some of them eighty or ninety years old today, endure. Some of are our friends. Some are our own. And some are us, ourselves. For whatever reasons, they endure. They have found a way to burn yet remain unconsumed.¹¹ They are miracles. Each and every one of them, a miracle. But endurance can be fragile. Who can predict how long it will last?

None of us can extinguish each individual flame on our own, but all of us can participate in the effort. We are instructed in tonight's Torah portion:23:4⁵ "When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it [because of your hatred for your enemy], you must nevertheless raise it with him."

Note: The commandment is not simply that you must raise the animal. No. The commandment is that you must raise it with him. You must do it together, because some things in life that are possible with two are impossible alone.

In the case of this donkey, it was self evident that the animal was suffering under its burden. But not all disabilities are so clear. Sometimes, when a teenager can't wake up in the morning, the reason has nothing to do with laziness and everything to do with clinical depression. Sometimes, when a grown man has uncontrollable fits of anger, it has nothing to do with a moral deficiency and everything to do with post traumatic stress disorder. Sometimes when a child can't learn in school, it has

¹¹ Exodus 3:2

nothing to do with insolence and everything to do with an early diet of leaded water. When people suffer from these kinds of “invisible” disabilities, they often find themselves isolated in a corner of suspicion and accusation. What they need most is not a cure, because they know it’s not so simple. What they need is a partner to help them up. What they need is understanding, and care, and respect. When they need is our presence and love. The cure may or may not follow. But the respect we offer is both within our capacity to give and it is forever.

In the Talmud (Brakhot 5b) we find the most telling story:

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him. Hanina said to him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Rabbi Yochanan replied: "Neither they nor their reward." Hanina said to him: "Give me your hand." Yochanan gave him his hand and he raised him. Why could Rabbi Yochanan not himself? They replied: "The prisoner cannot free himself from jail."

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches: “Sometimes when one person speaks in one corner of the world and another person speaks in another corner of the world, or one person speaks in one century and another person speaks in another century, God, who is above time and space, hears the words of them both and connects them.”

Sometimes. Not every time. Sometimes when one person speaks in one corner of the world and another person speaks in another corner of the world, they won’t come together. Sometimes they will. Sometimes when a child is boiling in the cauldron of his mother’s milk, even the most skilled and loving intervention won’t be enough to extinguish the flame, to save life. But sometimes it will. We can never turn a blind eye, because our eye may be the only one that sees early enough to matter. The truth is, we don’t know. We can’t know. But how will we know whether or not this is one of times if we don’t try?