

**It's the Little Things...  
Parashat Shoftim, 5776 (Sept. 10, 2016)**

The following story appears in the Babylonian Talmud, in Masechet Shabbat 156b:

*Rabbi Akiva had a daughter. But astrologers said to him, "On the day she enters the bridal chamber, a snake will bite her and she will die."*

*On the night of her marriage, she removed a brooch and stuck it into the wall. When she pulled it out the following morning, a poisonous snake came trailing after it; the pin had penetrated into the eye of the serpent.*

*"Was there anything special that you did yesterday?" her father asked her. "A poor man came to our door in the evening," she replied. "Everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was none to attend to him. So I took the portion of food which was given to me, and gave it to him."*

*Thereupon Rabbi Akiva went out and declared: "Charity delivers from death.' (Proverbs 10:2) And not just from an unnatural death, but from death itself!"*

A butterfly flaps its wings in China, and a tornado develops in Missouri. A pebble is thrown into a lake and ripples build on one another to create a tidal flood. We've all come across the idea that little things can make a big difference, but do they always? Can't some things just be minor, insignificant moments, that don't impact our lives or the world around us?

Our tradition says no. The things that we choose to do can have an incredible impact. Earlier in the year, when we read Parashat Kedoshim, we are instructed: **לֹא תִשְׁנֶה אֶת אַחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ**, "Do not hate your brother in your

*heart,*” (Lev. 19:17). While most people would agree that it’s not good to hate others, I often have people say to me, “Rabbi, if I don’t do anything harmful to them, or even act differently toward them, why can’t I hold onto my hatred? What if someone did something awful? Shouldn’t I hate them then?”

Many of us have harbored grudges before, and I would argue, in fact, that human beings are hard wired to hold onto resentment as sort of defense mechanism, a way to avoid getting hurt in the same situation, or by the same person, in the future. But the Torah, our Rabbis, and all of our ethical laws are not instructed to us to tell us how people actually are, but rather to paint a picture of the incredible beings each one of us COULD be.

Hatred is easy. It sneaks into our lives and minds so innocuously, and burrows its way deep into our hearts. Sometimes small slights dig in deep, and hurt us; other times it is the unexpected traumas that stay with us. But when bad things happen, we often look to hate or to blame a person, institution, country, or idea. At times, it is so quick that it’s almost a reflex. Hatred is easy, forgiveness is hard.

But in this week’s parasha, we read what the results of this type of everyday hating can be. At the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> Aliyah (Deut. 19:11-12), we read about cities of refuge, where someone who ACCIDENTALLY kills another

person may flee. But, if a person intentionally commits murder he is forbidden to stay there:

וכי-יִהְיֶה אִישׁ, **שָׂנֵא לְרֵעֵהוּ**, וְאַרְבַּ לּוֹ וְקָם עָלָיו, וְהִכָּהוּ נֶפֶשׁ נֶמֶת; וְנָס, אֶל-אַחַת הָעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה. וְשָׁלְחוּ זִקְנֵי עִירוֹ, וְלָקְחוּ אֹתוֹ מִשָּׁם; וְנָתְנוּ אֹתוֹ, בְּיַד גֹּאֵל הַדָּם--וְנָמַת.

*A person hates the one close to him, and waits for him, and rises up against him, strikes him down and he dies; if he flees to one of these cities [of refuge], the elders will take him from there and give him over to the hand of the victim's avenger, and he will die.*

On the surface, it makes sense that a person who intentionally kills another should be brought to justice. The interesting thing about this verse, however, is not the prescribed punishment for a murderer, but rather the motivation for the murder in the first place: hating one's fellow human being in one's own heart.

The verse above could have simply described the punishment for “one who waits for his neighbor and kills him,” but it begins by saying that before this person acts on his desire to kill another, the desire has to spring from somewhere. Sifrei, the midrashic commentary to the Book of Deuteronomy, explains this by saying that this phrase “**שָׂנֵא לְרֵעֵהוּ**” connects these two parts of Torah in an interesting way. It cautions us that if we are careless in observing an ethical precept that we deem small or of little impact on our lives and our world, we will ultimately go on to violate larger and larger ones, as in

the case mentioned in Parashat Shoftim. The person described here started by letting hatred fester in his heart, allowing it to simmer day after day, until it consumed him, until he had nowhere to turn but toward violence.

How often do we hear about small disputes turning violent, about hatreds blown into chaos by slighted individuals or groups? Whether we talk about the wave of shootings gripping cities like Chicago or the terrible tragedy we will be commemorating tomorrow on 9/11, hatred only serves to harm others, never to improve the world.

This message could not come to us at a more appropriate time. We are one week into the month of Elul, a time when we reflect on the year that has past, in order to prepare ourselves for the year ahead. Throughout this process of introspection, many of us focus on doing *teshuvah* for all that we have done wrong, asking forgiveness from the people in our lives for all the times we have missed the mark. But too often, people forget about the flip side of *teshuvah*: forgiving those who have done us wrong.

Robert Brault, an author and newspaper columnist, coined the saying, "Life becomes easier when you learn to accept the apology you never got." And 1000 years earlier, Maimonides said almost the same thing in his masterwork, *The Mishneh Torah*:

*It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not grant pardon. One should rather easily forgive and not easily grow angry...they should forgive with a full heart and generous spirit. Even if that person caused distress and committed many offenses, one should not exact revenge or bear a grudge. (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:10)*

Why is this so? Even if we are in the right, and someone does wrong to us we are not allowed to hate? That is absolutely, 100% correct. Human beings are wonderfully imaginative creatures, but oftentimes we cannot see the way our anger and frustrations can affect us and the world around us. Most of us, hopefully, will not let our frustrations boil over into violence that cuts another person's life short, but how many of us have cut other people out of our lives over slights that could have been forgiven? How many times have we treated others unfairly, unkindly, or unsympathetically because we couldn't let go of past wounds?

In the end, those who suffer most are ourselves. While we may be able to hurt others the way they hurt us, is that really the type of person you would like to be? When we are wounded by another, we know how much it can hurt, and we should be all the more unwilling to hurt another since we know how terrible it feels. Too often, however, we lower ourselves give in to hatred, to holding on to grudges long past, and more often than not, the people we hurt the most are ourselves.

Our lives, who we are as people, are the sum of the actions we take, the choices we make. Will we choose to live our life in anguish, torn up by past wrongs, or to forgive, not forgetting what is right and good but also not allowing the pain of the past to determine how we act and live through our future.

The month of Elul calls us to see the best of ourselves and act on those traits. We ask, over and over, to be forgiven in the New Year, but will we be the ones who forgive others? True forgiveness only comes when we no longer live in the pain of the past. We must be able to free ourselves from the prison of hate, to walk free and live lives of infinite possibility, unencumbered by the errors of our brothers and sisters. Forgive, that you may live.

Shabbat Shalom