

Pursuing Justice, Removing Our Guilt Parashat Shofetim, 5777

A SWALLOW, returning from abroad and especially fond of dwelling near humans and their buildings, built herself a nest in the wall of a Court of Justice. She felt safe there, in a place built as a shrine to the rights of all.

After some time had passed, and the swallow felt at home, she laid her eggs and hatched seven young birds. She felt joy in her heart and love in her home.

One day, a Serpent came gliding past the nest from its hole in the wall near the Court. He noticed the newly hatched baby birds, and waited until the swallow had left the nest to find some food, whereupon he promptly returned and ate up the young unfledged nestlings.

Upon returning, the Swallow, found her nest empty. She lamented greatly and exclaimed: "Woe to me, who has been so aggrieved! that in this place where all others' rights are protected, I alone should suffer wrong."

A Court of Justice is not only a place where laws are enforced, where cases are heard and penalties meted out. It is a symbol, an edifice of wood and stone that stands for an unshakable believe in universal justice.

This week, Parashat Shoftim tries to paint a picture of such a world, one in which justice is the rule, and no slights will be tolerated. We read those famous words, צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה, "Justice, justice shall you pursue that you may live and inherit the Land which Adonai, your God, is giving you." (Devarim 16:20).

But what does it mean to "pursue justice?" Just before, in verse 19, we are told that justice is unwavering, that it bends neither one way nor the other, that it is not colored by any partiality, that it is fair, equitable, and that its universal application is a matter of consequence for us all, as laws and rules that are NOT made justly "blind the eyes of the of the discerning and overturn the plea of righteous."

Blinding our eyes, overturning our righteous pleas... this is what I feel when the weight of the past days and weeks pushes me down. On top of all of the insanity surrounding the racist actions and reactions spawned in Charlottesville last week, the blows to our sense of right and wrong continue unabated.

This week, a 30-year-old transgender woman, Kiwi Herring, was killed by police officers responding to reports of an altercation. But on top of this tragedy, of the

light of someone so young and vibrant being extinguished, the initial reports surrounding her death mis-gendered Kiwi as a man. In the days that followed, more and more reports have been published saying that she was repeatedly harassed around her neighborhood by people who hated her for nothing more or less than being who she was.

That SAME DAY, Wednesday, in Jerusalem, a group of female, Americans studying at the Jerusalem campus of the Reform Movement's Hebrew Union College we to the Kotel to join the Women of the Wall in their Rosh Chodesh service to start the new month of Elul. They were stopped from entering, taken to a security room, and forced by guards citing security concerns to lift their shirts and skirts, despite laws that prohibit such invasive body searches. The flimsy reason given to justify these humiliations was because of vague security concerns the fact that the Women of the Wall had been "smuggling Torah scrolls into the Kotel. "Smuggling Torah scrolls." As if bringing more people together to experience words of Torah was somehow a dangerous activity we needed to guard against.

These types of dehumanization are an affront to the very core of the passionate, equitable and foundational Justice the Torah proscribes. At the conclusion of this same Torah portion we read moments ago, we are told what to do when coming across the dead body of an unknown person. The very first thing the elders of the cities are to do is be sure they were not even partially responsible for that death, the death of a stranger whom they had never met. If this is the respect with which we are commanded to treat the physical remains of a complete stranger, how much more care, compassion, and kindness must we show to EVERYONE around us, every person we meet, every soul we touch, and most especially the people we see everyday.

It's not about liking everyone; it's not about being everyone's best friend. But the fact remains that we are commanded to treat every person, no matter who they are, what they do, who they love, what they look like, how they think, or how you think about them, as an image of the Divine, as a little piece of God in miniature, as something sacred and holy.

Dr. King so famously wrote that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." BUT THE MORE IMPORTANT PART of that piece from his Letter from a Birmingham Jail is what follows: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Our sages taught us precisely the same lesson in the Talmud, reminding us: כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה, "All Israel is responsible for one another."

(Talmud Bavli, Shavuot 39a). Take care of one another, because no one has the right to make anyone “other”; all of “them” are a part of us.

A swallow may not have rights in a human court, but our sacred spaces must be sacred for all, or they are sacred for none, whether those spaces are the Kotel or our neighborhoods, our own homes or our synagogues. We all carry the beautiful burden to be connected to one another. We are not free to say that what affects one person is far from the rest of us, or means little. It means the world .

Shabbat Shalom.