

07-01-2017 Parashat Hukat by Menash Zadik

Shabbat Shalom

This week's Parasha tells the story of Moses and the rock. The short version goes like this: Moses tells God the people are thirsty. God tells him to extract water from a rock by talking to it. Moses strikes the rock hard. Twice. And water starts gushing. The Israelites can finally quench their thirst. God immediately turns to Moses and informs him that he will not get to see the land of Israel because he didn't precisely follow his orders. Perhaps like many of you, the first time I read that I, "Are you kidding me?" After all he's done? Our greatest leader, our prophet, the man that stood up to Pharaoh, considered to be a god-like ruler. Moses, who delivered an entire nation of slaves out of bondage to freedom – obeying God every step of the way. That man gets punished by that same god because he hit the rock when the instructions were to speak to it? That's it? You do 1000 things right, and one thing arguably wrong, and that's what you get? So he hit the rock rather than speaking to it. Maybe it was hot there. Maybe he was sick of his people whining. Maybe he was practicing being at bat for the Cubs.

I'm going to break away from Moses for a bit to tell you a story about an Israeli army unit.

The year is 1989. The Palestinian Intifada (uprising) is in full force. Israeli army units are stationed throughout Gaza and the West Bank, in addition to their roles protecting the borders.

An infantry unit is in the Kasbah (old city) in Nablus, known for its narrow alleys and rows of 3 and 4 story buildings on either side of these alleys. There are 12 soldiers waking in a column, 3 of them looking up towards the balconies and rooftops above. It is one of these soldiers that first spots the guy pushing a fridge over a balcony railing, aiming to drop it on top of the soldiers. The guy on the balcony has a weapon slung over his shoulder and it is likely that he is going to use it after the fridge hits one or more of the Israelis. The soldiers narrowly avoid the falling fridge, and 60 seconds later they bust through the front door of the apartment they saw the suspect in. A family of 12 is in the apartment. What appears to be a grandfather, parents, and kids ranging in age from 20's to babies. It isn't the first time the soldiers are in such apartments or homes. To the soldiers that are sons of Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, being in these homes invokes a strange feeling of familiarity. The way adults are dressed, the music coming out of the radio, the language, the smell of the food cooking. The young soldiers look at the people and are reminded of the old photographs their grandparents used to show them of their own families in the old country.

The soldiers rush through the place looking for the person that attempted hurt them. Their commander stands in the main room, listening to the information the soldiers are communicating to him in Hebrew, while trying to listen to what the family members are discussing in Arabic. The Palestinian adults have looks in their eyes that are part fear, part hatred, and part desperation. They keep saying in broken Hebrew that they have no idea where their son is. A hushed, quick sentence the mother says to one of the little kids betrays the position of a hidden door under the rug, which leads to a secret chamber, where the soldiers find the guy cowering. Thankfully he does not use his weapon; instead he raises his arms. 2 soldiers cuff him, and the soldiers begin making their way out of the apartment. The scene is chaotic. The younger kids are crying, the father and grandfather start yelling at the soldiers, cussing them and their families, summoning their god to intervene.

And then the mother lunges at the two soldiers walking the captured man out. She is hurling insults at them, and their mothers, calling the soldiers Jewish pigs, and vowing that the armies of Muhammed will destroy them and the Jewish state. This is not uncommon or unexpected in these situations. The males in the family rarely get physical. They stare or yell at the soldiers. The mothers, on the other hand, often physically attack the young soldiers.

One of soldiers - the same guy who spotted the man on the balcony – instead of stopping the mother with his voice, or body, kicks hard a nearby chair in her direction. The chair hits her, and knocks her down. She is clearly hurt. The soldier then stands over her to make sure she doesn't get up again while his unit mates are walking her son out. The whole thing takes only a few seconds. At that point, the commander instructs his troops to hurry up and get out of there. Things are getting out of hand and he isn't comfortable with the turn of events. The commander is the last one to leave the apartment, and before he leaves he says to the father in Arabic, "you and I are enemies today, but cousins forever". The father's reply indicates he is far more focused on the enemy part.

When the soldiers get back to base they debrief. Military intelligence picks up the guy they arrested, and later they find out that he was implicated in several incidents in which Israeli soldiers were hurt. But that night, during the debrief, the commander calls out the soldier who kicked the chair and tells him he's going to be punished for it. The soldier is shocked and angry. He was the guy who spotted the man on the balcony. He probably saved at least one soldier from severe physical harm or worse. He didn't have time to think when the woman lunged at his mates. She could have been carrying a knife. And why did we worry so much about physically harming the mother of a terrorist? It was probably her that taught this young man to hate us so much. She harbored him, and supported his actions. The soldier did so many things right that evening, maybe even saving a fellow soldier's life. Along with his friends, he helped

nab a terror suspect without a single shot being fired. And he gets punished for one questionable action?

The commander's response was short – He said, “because you didn't have to act this way. Because I refuse to allow us to become like them”. And I believe that to be true. Because you can be just in your mission, but if you use force when words suffice you are not only showing a lack of faith in yourself, but a lack of faith in the righteousness of your mission. Because you can do 1000 things right, and have one thing sully it all. Because the younger kids in that house will never forget the sight of their mother being hit with the chair.

Wars and armed conflicts between people and nations are unfortunately likely to be forever in the domain of humans. War is ugly and messy. It destroys lives, and can destroy souls. That is not something one soldier can change or control on their own. But in that little domain – that night, in that apartment – it was every soldier's duty to control and govern their actions. We should not allow ourselves to treat people with anything less than the whatever dignity could be mustered in a given situation. We should never go down that road. Not even a little. Not even one kicked chair. Because it would be the first crack we'd be putting in the shield that is our true justification and defense.

So that's my story. Now, I'm not comparing that soldier to Moses, nor his commander to God. Far from it. But I do believe that all of us, in our own way, are faced with similar situations throughout life. Some more significant or impactful than others. You can do many things right and one thing wrong, and that one wrong thing would have to be acknowledged and accounted for. Even when emotions are raw, in the heat of an armed conflict, when lives are at stake – We're still responsible for our actions. We can argue over the punishment of course. Sometimes it is more severe than we personally agree with while other times we feel it isn't severe enough.

Far be it from me to try and understand, much less judge, the actions of God, or attempt to make sense of the sin v. the punishment in Moses' case. I probably still think it was a bit too harsh. But I do know that in everything we do in life – acting as parents or children, friends or spouses, employees or bosses, politicians or simple citizens – we are only as good, and right, and deserving, as our latest action. There's no personal mitzvot reward program where for every 9 good deeds we get to be a jerk once. Although sometimes we wish it were the case..

It is our personal commitment to ourselves, our friends and families, and yes – our God – that demands our focus, dedication, and evenness in our approach. And there are consequences

when we fall short. And none of us is exempt. Not even Moses. It wasn't hitting the rock vs. talking to it. It was losing his temper, and exerting force where none was needed or warranted.