

Besieged by Bullying

Parashat Behar-Beḥukkotai

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My parents moved to a new neighborhood and a new school system between 5th and 6th grade. My new school, Sunview Elementary, was no more than a mile from my home. Every day I would walk or ride my bike to and from school, rain or shine, since my parents worked full time. There was another kid from my new school who lived a few houses away from me on the other side of the street...his name was Chuck. For some inexplicable reason, Chuck decided to make it his life mission during that first year at Sunview to make my life miserable. I was never sure what I exactly I did to inspire such relentless teasing, but for whatever reason, I was his special target for incessant bullying in the hallways, on the playground, and especially on the way home from school. He would walk several steps behind me after school and taunt me: “Ratskin” he would call to me, “I’m going to kick your...you know what.” I had several strategies...I would seriously pick up the pace, cross the street, or pretend that I saw my Mom coming from the other direction: “Oh, hi Mom!” I would call out loud enough for him to hear me...anything; whatever it took to get away from him. And nearly every day as I planned my departure from school, I would look around to make sure he wasn’t leaving at the same time. There was never actually any physical violence...he never punched me or kicked me or picked a fight with me. The bullying was entirely psychological; it was pure torment and fear. Of course these episodes happened long before the internet existed... I don’t think Mark Zuckerberg had even been born yet! But if there was an internet or Facebook or My Space, I can only imagine how this kids’ bullying would have escalated into cyberspace. I can only imagine what his Twitter tweets might have been: “Just scared the you know what out of Ratskin on the way home from school!”

Bullying is as old as humanity...and we find footprints of it all over the Bible. Remember Esau’s intimidating stature and complexion, his brutishness and physicality. *Admoni kulo k’aderet se’ar*: Esau emerged from the womb ruddy and hairy. He’s a hunter, a burly outdoorsman, in contrast with Jacob who is described as an *ish tam, yosheiv ohalim*: a mild man who prefers staying close to home. This is the classic bullying set up, because bullies seek out

victims who are passive, easily intimidated, or those who tend to have fewer friends—perhaps because they’re the new kid in school like I was, and of course, those who are younger or physically smaller. So we have Jacob, the home body, in the kitchen, cooking stew, when Esau, fresh from the hunt invariably with blood on his hands, bursts into the kitchen with ravenous hunger and little patience. His demand that Jacob hand over the food he is cooking on the stove is barked furiously at his younger brother: “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, I’m famished.” Later in the narrative, upon hearing that Jacob received his father’s deathbed benediction, Esau proclaims that he will kill Jacob out of revenge, a threat that forces Jacob to leave home and run for his life...for 20 years! Like my elementary school bully, no physical violence is ever done to Jacob, but the larger, more physically threatening Esau certainly tormented Jacob mentally and emotionally for a huge part of his life. And there are other similar cases as well: Cain and Abel, Ham and Noah, the men of S’dom and Lot, Jacob’s sons and Joseph, Sh’chem and Dina, the desert shepherds who harass Jethro’s daughters, Pharaoh and Moses, Goliath and David, Amnon and Tamar...People have been wielding intimidation, threats, coercion, and harassment for time immemorial.

But today, bullying has reached a dangerous, life threatening pitch, and the internet has a tremendous amount to do with it. An MTV/AP poll reported that 22% of youth ages 14-24 said that a romantic partner had written falsely about them in text messages or on line. 90% of middle school students reported having their feelings hurt in an on-line setting. 75% admitted to visiting a website that bashed another student. And 19% admitted to saying something hurtful about someone else on line. The nature of the internet makes bullying a potentially 24/7 occupation, and the numbers of kids who read those smears incalculable. Kids are targeted when their on-line identity is stolen and rumors or gossip is spread about them; When online photos are altered to suggest false ideas about them; When secret voice or video recordings are distributed without their knowledge. And the most frightening outcome of this modern form of bullying is that it is leading more and more tragically to kids committing suicide out of utter humiliation and embarrassment. Rhetaeh Parsons, the 17 year old high school student from Halifax whose rape was photographed and then went viral causing her unbearable misery and pain. She died on April 10th, only the most recent addition to a tragically long list of cyberbullying victims.

Perhaps the most shocking statistic of all, though, was how many parents don't even know what cyber-bullying is all about! 15% report knowing nothing about it...and I wonder how many parents take active steps to know what their kids are doing on line, what sites they are visiting, who they are chatting with, and what their profiles contain on Facebook and other social media. Recently a mother asked me if I thought it was fair that she insisted that if her teenage daughter wanted a Facebook account that she have to friend her own mother so that she could check up on her daughter's on-line identity whenever she wanted. The daughter obviously resisted. I told the mom that she absolutely had that right, and as long as that child is under her roof, her safety and well-being are her primary concern. Look folks, this is becoming a deadly epidemic, and so much of it can be stopped if parents become more aware of their children's on line activities. Know what your kids are viewing, insist on parental controls, and the use of computers in common spaces at home. It could very well save your kids' lives.

This morning's parasha contains the admonition: *lo tonu ish et amito*...do not wrong another person. The kind of wrong that the Hebrew word *tonu* implies, according to the Rabbis is **verbal**...do not commit verbal wrongdoing upon another person. It's even worse than monetary fraud, because money can be restored...but the pain and disgrace brought about by verbal humiliation can never fully be repaired. In a comment on that Talmudic teaching, Rabbeinu Yona, a 13th Century Spanish commentator, wrote that the pain of public humiliation is worse than death. And if that was the case in 13th Century Toledo, 700 years before the internet was invented, how much truer is it today, when the dimensions of public humiliation are all the more expansive. Perhaps that's why so many targets of bullying are tragically choosing death instead of the consequences and emotional pain of being bullied on line or in person.

To tell you the truth, it's not only the Torah's specific prohibition of verbally wronging another that inspired me to give this sermon today. I thought it would be even more fortuitous to speak about this on the occasion of a double b'nai mitzvah in our shul. I had hoped there would be as many kids here today as there are. I am giving this sermon for you; to you. I wanted you to hear my personal story of having been bullied. And I also want you to know that you have options and support systems that you may not even realize if you become the victim of a bullying situation. The funny thing is that a few years later, when I got to high school, I started working out and joined the swim team. Getting into shape not only made me feel healthier, it also gave

me a measure of self-confidence I was lacking as an awkward, lanky sixth grader. Surprisingly, once I became a competitive swimmer, that kid from across the street never bullied me or even spoke to me again, and I didn't even have to say a word. I guess I carried myself with more confidence and self-respect. But I also knew that there were people in my life I could talk to...parents, grandparents, teachers, and others who I knew were in my corner. I want to say to all of the kids who are here today that bullying, whether in person or on-line, or threatening someone physically or verbally are cruel and dangerous behaviors. In many cases it can be illegal, and we know that it can be life threatening to another human being. Furthermore, to stand by while someone else is being harassed or bullied is also both morally and religiously wrong. *Lo ta'mod al dam rei'echa*, don't stand by while your neighbor's blood is shed. You have a responsibility to speak up and come to the defense of others. Tell a teacher, a parent, or another adult who you trust. I don't care if you never spoke to that person before in your life, or if they're your best friend. I don't care whether you despise the person or if you are extremely close. Regardless of your relationship with the victim of bullying, he or she is a human being, and you have a religious obligation to do something to help. It is catastrophic that kids are taking their own lives because they feel there was no one on their side in school or in their communities. We are all responsible!

And if you are being bullied, I want you to know that no matter what that bully says to you or about you, that *what God says about you* is that you are holy, and that you are created in His image. Nothing that anyone says can deprive you of what makes you special and unique and valuable just the way you are. No matter what pain you are experiencing now, there is so much life ahead of you, and so much to look forward to in your future. Most of all, remember that you are never alone. You have people in your life who love you and care for you. If you are feeling afraid or alone or desperate, please talk to someone you trust...and *I want you to know—whether you attend Har Shalom or not; whether you're Jewish or not, that you can certainly talk to me...my email address and phone number are on the Shabbat handouts.*

Unfortunately, bullies often do what they do because of something that's going on their life...because they are angry or depressed or hurt by something happening at home or at school. Indeed Esau's behavior is not only because he was born this aggressive guy, but also because his mother blatantly favors his younger brother; because he is deprived of his father's final blessing

and birthright; because his father's love seems to be exclusively connected to the food he hunts for him, but not the kind of unconditional love Rebekkah shows for Jacob. Is it any wonder that he grows up with so much hostility in his heart? Who was in his corner? Who made him feel valued or important?

We reap so much of what we sew. Let us create healthy homes and loving families where kids grow up feeling accepted instead of isolated, loved unconditionally instead of selectively. Remind them of the adults who are their champions, their supporters, and their allies. Then perhaps we will finally render both bullies and their victims truly a thing of the past.