

**Do Not Remain Indifferent**  
Rabbi Mona Alfi  
Shabbat Ki Teitze - August 28, 2020

All week I have struggled about how to talk with you tonight. Not what to talk about, but how. The “what” was clear to me. I had to speak about the shooting of Jacob Blake, Jr. But how to speak about it was more complicated.

And then as I read this week’s Torah portion, it became so clear to me. In Parashat Ki Teitze, Moses warns us:

You shall not watch your brother’s ox or his sheep go astray, and hide yourself from them; you shall in any case bring them again to your brother.  
And if your brother is not near you, or if you know him not, then you shall bring it to your own house, and it shall be with you until your brother seeks after it, and you shall restore back to him.  
In like manner shall you do with his ass; and so shall you do with his garment; and with every lost thing of your brother’s, which he has lost, and you have found, shall you do likewise; you may not hide yourself. (Deut. 22:1-3)

לא תוכל להתעלם - Lo tu'chal l'hit'a'lem - You may not hide yourself, also translated as “you may not ignore,” and “you may not remain indifferent.”

In this text when it says “brother” it isn’t literal, rather it means anyone from our community, a reminder that we have a kinship with more than just those in our immediate families. And it’s talking about how we should behave when we see something of value that has been lost or taken away from our kinsman.

Rabbi Mark Sack reminds us that “the Jewish Study Bible says, “The law makes a moral appeal to conscience, but possesses no legal sanction” (p.415). With this declaration, the Torah is giving us less a law to follow, but more an approach to life: we must be oriented to being engaged, being not only aware of injustice, but having a desire and motivation to do something about it.”

In other words “לא תוכל להתעלם” is not merely about property, it’s about everything. “You may not remain indifferent” is about how we are supposed to live our lives so that when we see our fellow suffering, when we see something precious to them has been lost, or taken, we must act.

Too many of our fellow Americans have lost their sense of safety and security. They have lost the ability to sleep at night, lost the ability to send their children out into the world without fear that they will be taken from them.

We can not hide ourselves from what is right in front of us.

We as a society can no longer deny what we have seen with our own eyes. Our fellow Americans are beings are being treated as less than human, as having a lesser right to dignity, to justice, and to life itself.

We can not remain indifferent.

In Elie Wiesel's acceptance speech for the Nobel peace prize he said: "Action is the only remedy to indifference: the most insidious danger of all."

To be silent at this time, is to be indifferent, it is to be complicit, and to be guilty of allowing a system of oppression to continue.

When asked to sum up the entire Torah, Hillel taught - what is hateful to you, do not do to others, all the rest is commentary, go and learn it.

לא תוכל להתעלם - *Lo tu'chal l'hit'a'lem* - You may not hide yourself, you may not ignore, you may not remain indifferent, this is part of that commentary of what it means when Hillel said "what is hateful to you, do not do to others."

We know exactly how dangerous it is when silent bystanders say "its not my problem." Or worse, "well they probably did something to deserve it." That is what enabled the Holocaust to occur. Indifference. It wasn't just the avowed Nazis, it was all of the silent bystanders who while themselves might not have killed Jews, still felt that the Jews probably deserved some of what they were getting.

Indifference is dangerous. Systems of oppression and bigotry thrive from indifference.

Rev. Martin Niemoller was a well known, and controversial, German Lutheran pastor. Leading up to WWII he did nothing to oppose Hitler or fascism, rather, he even welcomed Hitler's ascent to power. He only began to oppose Hitler when he began to go after the churches. And it was only then, when his own interests were being attacked, that he woke up to what was going on.

In the 1950's, he tried to atone for his complicity by touring through Europe and preaching about his own sins. And that is when he became known for saying this:

First they came for the Communists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Communist  
  
Then they came for the Socialists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me

Every week there is a new name in the news, some shocking story of someone who was shot or murdered. A new casualty of institutionalized racism held up for us all to see, and all to witness.

To say that there is no racism in America is to bear false witness to things we have all seen with our own eyes, and that we know to be true.

Jacob Blake Jr.'s sister said this week "So many people have reached out to me saying they're sorry that this has been happening to my family. Well don't be sorry because this has been happening to my family for a long time, longer than I can account for," Letetra Widman said. "It happened to Emmett Till, Emmett Till is my family. It happened to Philando, Mike Brown, Sandra. I don't want your pity," Widman said. "I want change."<sup>1</sup>

The Torah teaches us that Emmett Till, Philando Castile, Mike Brown, Sandra Bland, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Jacob Blake, Jr., are our family too. We are all children of God, all of us brothers and sisters.

After Cain murdered his brother Abel, God asked Cain in horror "where is your brother?" – and Cain answered with contempt "am I my brother's keeper?". God punished Cain, not just for the murder, but also for that answer. It is time for humanity to learn that we can not continue to answer that question as Cain did.

The time is now for us all to step up and learn three essential lessons or things will never change.

We are all from the same family of humanity.

We are all responsible one for the other.

And there is no justification for us murdering and hating each other.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/26/us/jacob-blake-sister-family-statements/index.html>

I agree with Letetra Widman, I want change too, and it is long overdue.

As Hillel taught more than 2000 years ago:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

What are we waiting for? How many more people must lose their lives? Have their bodies broken? Their freedom taken away? Now is the time for us to act! And we must each of us start with ourselves.

We must speak up when we witness racism.

We must rise up when we see injustice.

And we must demand true equality for all people in this country.

And we must do what we all have the power to do, whether it is peaceful protests, writing letters to our elected officials, voting, or making sure that others have the ability to vote. We must use our power not just for ourselves but for the betterment of our entire society.

I know that many people look at the destruction of property by some during the protests over this summer, and use that as justification to turn away from what racism that they have seen.

But Rev. Dr. Ron Bell urges us to look again and really see what is happening. He said:

“I think you were so busy looking for a riot that you missed the gathering of the grieving.

I think you were so busy looking for the looters that you missed the lament and heartbreak of a community.

I think you were so busy looking for trouble that you missed the tragedy of systemic racialized trauma on the bodies of black and brown people.

Tonight, tomorrow, and even the next day, I beg of you, look again. Look again.”

His words are an urgent reminder for us to take to heart and live by the ancient command that calls out to us from our Torah:

לא תוכל להתעלם – *Lo tu'chal l'hit'a'lem!*

You may not hide yourself from your what you see,  
you may not ignore your fellow's suffering, and  
no matter what, you may not remain indifferent!