

“We Must Not Remain Indifferent” – Purple Shabbat 5780

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A lot of people, lately, have been quoting Richard Nixon’s statement to the British journalist David Frost: “If the president is doing it, it is not illegal.” Or the more current iteration: “It happens all the time. ... Get over it.”

What was the great sin that led God to give up on the world? “The Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. ... God said to Noah, ‘I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.’” That was a pretty big decision. What could have been so bad as to cause God to give up?

The ancient Rabbis found their answer between the lines of the Torah’s narrative. We read in the opening of today’s portion, “ותשחת הארץ לפני האלהים, ותמלא הארץ חמס”, The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness.” And the Rabbis ask: what is the meaning of “corrupt *before God*?” Why not just say that the earth became corrupt?

The 11th-century exegete Abraham ibn Ezra comments that people “acted corruptly in secret, in ways that were concealed so that no one could know except God. People were acting brazenly, like a slave who misbehaves before his master because he has no fear.” The culture allowed violence and corruption to take place without fear of consequence.

The Jerusalem Talmud offers another insight. It wasn’t just that people turned away or ignored the crimes in their midst. The perpetrators of crime were smart; they cheated in subtle ways. “In what way were they corrupt?” the Talmud asks? A person would go out in search of a pound of beans, and the merchants would measure it out just short – it would be off, but by a small enough amount as to escape the reach of the law. The people acted *corruptly* – they sold each other short; but they took care not to act *illegally*. They operated at the margins of the law; human courts were powerless, and God determined that only He – and I apologize for the gendered language, but the Torah is deliberately anthropomorphic in its description of God’s actions in this story – God determined that only He could take action.

The comment in our *humashim* says that “God deemed their behavior corrupt, but they themselves saw nothing wrong with it.” It wasn’t just the corruption that made God sad; it was the fact that nobody seemed to mind.

Among the published sermons of Dr. Martin Luther King, there is one entitled “A Knock at Midnight.” Speaking to an audience in Cincinnati in 1967, King declared it had become “midnight in our world, and the darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn.” He decried what he called “midnight within the moral order ... the hour when men desperately seek to obey the eleventh commandment, ‘Thou shalt not get caught.’ According to the ethic of midnight,” he said, “the cardinal sin is to be caught, and the cardinal virtue is to get by. ... The Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest has been substituted by a philosophy of the survival of the slickest.”

It was midnight, King suggested, and the victims of corruption were knocking on the doors of the church; and, too often, King contended, the church disappointed them. Too often, people were willing to look away, to question whether corruption was really corruption, or whether there was anything they could do, or whether it was more prudent to stand up with the courage of their convictions or safer to look away. King was preaching a passage from Luke – not a text that we study regularly on Shabbat morning at B'nai Israel; but he could have been preaching from our portion. “The earth became corrupt *before God*,” and the people did not seem to notice.

This Shabbat has been designated in our community as Purple Shabbat. October – and today is only November third, and October was dominated by our celebration of the Jewish holidays, and some people haven't received their November Scroll in the mail yet, so it's okay to talk about October – October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and purple is the color of Domestic Violence Awareness. Many of you know that I care deeply about this issue – I served for many years on the board of the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse; our synagogue has sponsored programs, put out literature, and otherwise worked to ensure that our institution will be a safe space.

I was invited to address a group of faith leaders at a Caregivers Conference in Annapolis about the things we do at B'nai Israel and in the larger Jewish community to address this issue. Domestic Abuse – and power-based violence, more generally – is tough because it operates on the margins. We don't see it or speak of it the same way we might see other plagues like cancer or embezzlement or violent crime.

There are obvious cases that make headlines, but abuse, intimidation, power-inequity can be more subtle. Victims sometimes question themselves – am I really experiencing abuse, or are we just having a bad day? Is someone committing a crime, or is this just the way that things happen, and I should get over it? If I come forward, are people likely to rise to my defense; or will they turn on me or shame me because I have brought something uncomfortable to light? Purple Shabbat is a time to think about a certain form of corruption that takes place in the shadows; and the secrecy enables abusers to act brazenly, without fear, as if what they are doing is normal.

My message to this group of congregational rabbis, pastors, and imams was that power-based violence is real; it occurs in all our communities; and we are not protecting anyone by pretending it doesn't exist, or sweeping it under the rug, or avoiding the subject because – for good reason – it makes us uncomfortable. I hope you've seen the pamphlets, the flyers, the phone number ... and that people know that members of our community need not fear the consequences of coming forward. We will listen. We will hear. We will help. We will not leave it to God to respond to your suffering.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Flood was that it didn't achieve its intended purpose. All those people died; all of God's creations and creatures were destroyed; but lawlessness and violence did not cease. When Noah emerges from the ark, God promises that He will never again destroy the world; but not because He has managed to rid the world of sin or corruption. God promises never to destroy the world “*ki yetzer lev ha-adam ra min'urav*, because the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth.” God realizes that the problems, the challenges, the violence, the depravities, the lawlessness cannot be eradicated by divine fiat. And so it is up to *us*, not just God, to respond.

Think about that lesson in light of the other corruptions that plague society. Gun violence; tax evasion; shady business dealings; racism; poverty; inequality; lying; bullying; abuse. In the aftermath of the Flood, God came to accept that even He could not create a world without corruption. The world, our application of the law, my behavior on that date, that phone call – it wasn't "perfect" because people are not perfect. And neither we nor God can change that.

What we can change is our indifference. We can change the instinct that says it is okay; we can refuse to accept that inappropriate activities are normal; we can resist the cowardly urge to just "get over it."

You could argue that the entire Torah is written in response to that lesson of the Flood. The Torah's commandments and laws deputize us as God's partners in an ongoing process of improving ourselves and perfecting our imperfect world. All those chapters after the Flood become a reminder that we cannot sit and wait for God to act; we cannot doubt that the lawlessness exists; we dare not accept corruption or stand idly by as it takes place.

We will hear it from Moses in a different context when we near the end of Deuteronomy next summer: If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, *do not ignore it*; you must take it back to your fellow. ... *lo tukhal l'hitalem*, you must not remain indifferent. ... If you see your fellow's ass or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it; you must help him raise it.

On Shabbat Noach, on Purple Shabbat, in the darkest hours of midnight, in the face of every disturbing article about inappropriate activity that may or may not be illegal, that is our mandate. We must not remain indifferent. Shabbat shalom.