

**Parashat Shoftim**  
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My forty-one- year old son and his wife flitted through Boston a few weeks ago on their way to Stockholm where he was scheduled to give a speech. My word, “flitted” of course is emotionally charged reflecting a parent’s wish to have more time with her child. In contrast, I think my son would describe his visit as three hours filled with good food, reasonable conversation and not too much parental guilt. And I suspect he left emotionally satiated, maybe even a little too full.

I cannot tell you how many visits or phone calls make for an ideal parent/child relationship. When I miss Marty, though, it sometimes helps for me to remember that he seems to have grown into a man who can both find meaning in life and add goodness to the lives of others. I don’t take entire credit for this these virtues, of course, but I do think my willingness to respect Marty’s autonomy, even when I miss him, has in some ways been a catalyst to this outcome; even at a distance I trust he partners with my wish that the world be made a better place.

My thoughts about parenthood sometimes prompts my wonderment in our referring to God as Father or Parent, particularly when we read a text such as Deuteronomy, one that is so filled with violence and acrimony. Is it even fair to compare natural parenting with the Divine version? After all, we generally expect our kids to become increasingly self-sufficient, but at the same time we seem caught up in lifelong yearnings for a Divine Parent who can indefinitely nurture, comfort, guide and shield us. And God not only doesn’t dissuade us from this dependency but is piqued with us if we attempt much self-sufficiency. When the relationship seems to be working we consider this a great gift; but when it isn’t it engenders profound feelings of abandonment, and judging from our most recent parshahs, feelings that are experienced on both sides.

And I can offer many additional reasons why I often don’t believe the God of my prayers exists in texts such as Deuteronomy. Let me offer a few:

Human parenting requires constancy – Our Divine Parent claims constancy but appears to roar in and out of history with no regard to our inability to read the clock of Eternal time;



Human parenting is anchored in stability – But in the historic texts our Divine Parent seems to sow more chaos than calm;  
Human parenting is founded on nurturance and comfort – but our biblical Parent most often voices rage, jealousy and threats of destruction; Deuteronomy seems particularly bereft of stories of kindness and compassion;  
Human parenting imbues children with a belief in their inherent worthiness – what a Jewish idea! – while our biblical Parent focuses on our failures.

It's no wonder then, as I imagine myself by the banks of the Jordan River, that I experience mostly physical and spiritual exhaustion. I'm not feeling enlightened or strengthened; the wonders wrought on my behalf inspire more intimidation than awe. Memories of salvation from slavery and manna in the Wilderness are no longer my own. I am honoring my Parent in having become a good soldier, not asking too many questions. I look forward to the bounty of the Promised Land but am unclear as to why a moral life is of itself good. My Parent's parting words as I prepare to cross the river only add to my angst; my Parent, I am told, will be less evident now and future Divine prophets less trustworthy than Moses, the only leader I have known.

But, of course, there is redemption in Torah not only for the individual but for the relationship between God and humanity. Our parshah's historic text is interrupted with a mitzvah, the protection of the manslayer. How remarkable it is that this mitzvah about unintended consequences is juxtaposed against stories of intended violence. For me when I hear of mitzvot like these I hear God cry out from a place beyond history and call me to a different relationship.

We first read the mitzvah narrowly, understanding that it attempts to balance justice with compassion in a particular circumstance; we then, as we do with most mitzvot, read it more broadly. And in this second reading a call to balance our destructive urges against the compelling vision of our role in Creation emerges. Consider some of the elements of this mitzvah:

It is aspirational- unlike many mitzvot it doesn't command immediate behavior – but rather seems to imagine a time when we, having left the heat of battle behind, will be more capable of reflection;

Though the mitzvah focuses on an individual's bloody act, it reminds us of the need to sanctify a land made impure by the violent behaviors of many; I read it as a call to cleanse the land, our land, of vengeance;

It challenges the false assumptions that fuel vengeance: that we are inevitably capable of reading intention in the minds of others, that there are no redemptive qualities in the wrongdoer and that we are necessarily entitled to act on our rage. It imagines instead

our capacity to build cities, imagine, whole cities, founded on second-chances.

This mitzvah, I believe, is a call to retreat from chaos, a call to renewal, stability and morality. The voice, I believe, doesn't arise from history though, with God chasing after His errant children, but rather cries out from the Creation. And within that narrative lies another story of a fraught Divine Parent/child relationship. Setting aside the theologies of sin and free will, the story of Adam and Eve is about adult children and the Divine Parent coming to terms with what it means to be fully human. Did Adam and Eve just choose to be curious and seek knowledge or is this an expression of what it inherently means to be human? Could they have found meaning in life and in their relationship to God had they remained passive creatures? Conversely, had God not ejected Adam and Eve from Eden how would the Creation have remained dynamic? Why would there have been any mitzvot? Aren't the mitzvot the catalyst to a living, evolving Creation?

Heschel describes one aspect of our relationship with God as “radical amazement.” A well-known Buddhist therapist, Tara Brach, describes the challenge of addressing the painful relationships in our lives as “radical acceptance.” I've struggled to find words that aptly describe our paradoxical relationship with God, so I offer “radical estrangement” as a possibility. Hopefully this term captures the paradox of our having to challenge the boundaries of our relationship with God before we can not only draw closer to the Divine but also find sanctity within ourselves. Conversely it addresses the Divine's paradox, referred to in today's parshah, that a too present Parent cannot be fully understood or known. Possibly, just as God pulled back to allow space for Creation, the Divine must retreat a bit to allow space for spiritual relationships to grow.

It has been said that there are no atheists in foxholes. In the midst of battle, we turn to a Parental God both for protection and to assuage guilt for the events of war. Ultimately, however, as long as we seek God in human history, we risk being left diminished and frustrated by this relationship. Better we invest less effort in sorting out the jealousies and entitlements of biblical history and respond to its call to mitzvot instead, to attach less to our youthful dependencies on a Parent and to call home as adults instead, ready to re-enact the Creation within human affairs. Our struggle then lies not within history but rather in building a mutual trust with the Divine as co-Creators.

Shabbat Shalom.