



Parashat Ki Tetzei – August 20, 2021 – 12 Elul, 5781

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

While I date myself in saying this, the video footage coming out of Kabul earlier this week for me invoked images from my early childhood of men, women and children scrambling to the rooves of buildings in Saigon, trying to be evacuated with the U.S. troops being withdrawn from the conflict. Seeing children of about my age caught up in the desperation of that moment, made all the more visceral the panic and hopelessness of those left behind.

I will leave it to pundits to dissect who is responsible (or irresponsible) for the lightning-fast deterioration of conditions in Afghanistan. There is no doubt plenty of blame to go around. But encountering these events in tandem with this week's Torah portion (Parashat Ki Tetzei) turned my thoughts in a different direction.

Parashat Ki Tetzei opens with the verse: *Ki tetzei l'milchamah al oivekha, un'tano Adonai elohekha b'yadekha v'shavita shivyo* ("When you go to war against your enemy, and God delivers them into your hand and you find yourself in the position to take captives ..."). From that point, the discussion asks us – the victors – to imagine ourselves in the place of the vanquished, to think of the horror, the desperation and pain of their circumstances.

While we as readers might want the text to then prescribe how instead of enslaving those who are under our control, we should allow them to go free, demonstrating mercy and paving the way for peaceful co-existence, the actual text moves in a different direction. It's Author seemed to intuit that an edict that departed so markedly from the norms of the day (and, sadly, is not so far removed from the experience of war in many instances in our own day) stood little chance of finding an audience. So, in place of establishing a ruling only to have it routinely subverted, the text pronounces limits on the abuse that the Israelites can inflict on their captives, forcing their captors to take measured steps that continually impress upon them the innate humanity of those they may be regarding simply as "booty".



I would be the first to admit that the text that results is one that I would hold up as exemplar of the Torah’s “elevated morality”. I much prefer the “kumbaya” version that I compose in my own head. But I also stand in awe of a scriptural canon that has endured the test of time and managed to find a receptive audience across a diversity of settings.

The Torah’s power, it would appear, lies not in its ability to conjure a utopian image of an alternative Creation (complete with an alternative and far more elevated set of inhabitants), but rather to convey an aspirational message to all of us who on a daily basis wrestle with the temptations of our circumstance, the shortcomings of our will, self-discipline and (limited) comprehension, the obstacles that life imposes as we attempt to follow through on our convictions or even to lay a path that will bring us closer to making these a reality. And it is with these themes that we are asked to wrestle continuously, especially in this season of *teshuvah*.

The world we inhabit may not – likely, will not – ever fully cohere to the text that I would like our Source to have bequeathed us. We will be lucky if it someday approaches a fully approximation of the reality that the extent text does describe. But in this season I – indeed, we – are called upon to take at least incremental steps to bring this about. In doing so, our tradition promises, we serve to elevate not only our own small corner of existence, but the larger fabric of Creation of which this is a part.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Rachel Safman