

**Responding to an Unjust World with Jewish Values:
a Dvar Torah on Noah & De-escalate Washington**

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Have you ever been watching the news, or reading it on your phone, and just thought that the world and the society we live in is so corrupt and so awful that the only way out is just to scrap it all and start over? This week the Torah indulges this fantasy: in Noah, G-d floods the world and starts over with the right people in charge. Certainly an impulse I think we all have moments when we can relate to. But after the flood subsides, G-d makes a covenant with us, saying “Never again will I bring doom upon the world on account of what people do, though the human mind inclines to evil from youth onward; never again will I destroy all living beings, as I have just done.” The Torah tells us this story as if to say: G-d will never respond to human injustice by disposing of humankind--but even if G-d did want to make the world right by wiping out all of humankind except for the one best family--it wouldn't work.

So how do we respond when we feel powerless before people who do horrible things, if we can't wipe them off the Earth? Judaism tells us: by insisting on the worth of all human beings, empowering the oppressed, protecting the vulnerable, and creating accountability. I don't want to just talk to you about these things in the abstract, I want to share a real world example of what this looks like in practice: there's an initiative on our ballots in Washington State that embodies a Jewish response to injustice for me. Washington State is 5th in the nation for deadly use of force by law enforcement, and De-escalate WA's Initiative 940 is a response that embodies Jewish values.

We've all seen heartbreaking stories in the news of people, predominantly Black, killed by police officers who feared them even though the facts show they were no threat. I'm sure I'm not alone in my outrage, or in my conviction that Black Lives Matter. But Judaism asks more from us than outrage. Judaism demands that we have the moral courage to see the full humanity of the least powerful and the most powerful, of those we see as “us” and of those we see as “them”. It demands that we seek solutions that care for the safety of everyone in our communities - including the people who break our laws, and including the people who uphold our laws. Deadly use of force can be a polarizing topic, but the coalition supporting Initiative 940 gives me hope, because they are building the relationships between law enforcement and communities that keep everyone safer. I'm inspired by the willingness of advocates with very different perspectives to step outside of their comfort zones and come together to find ways to save lives.

We know from our own exodus from Mitzraim that liberation is a journey we lead ourselves on, not a gift bestowed by Pharaohs. Even Moses, with his palace upbringing, could not lead us out of Egypt without his resilient, clever, persuasive siblings who grew up as slaves. As we work for liberation, we too must seek the guidance and the wisdom of the people whose daily lives are most impacted by the toxic systems we seek to dismantle. If we want to end sexism, we must listen to women. If we want to end racism, we must follow the lead of people of color, especially Black people. If we believe the systems we have built to keep our communities safe need to change in order to truly fulfill that purpose, we should look to the people these systems are failing to understand how. This is the principle that led me to deeply consider Initiative 940, an initiative designed and led by leaders from tribal communities, communities of color, disability activists, and by relatives of people killed by law enforcement who wanted to build real solutions that would make both their own communities and police officers safer.

The Torah tells us over and over that we must use our power to protect the most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the indentured, the stranger, and any "other" who lives among us. It commands us to do this not as a gesture of charity, but as an act of justice rooted in our own memories of being a vulnerable "other" in Mitzraim, in our wanderings in the wilderness, and in our more recent history. Initiative 940 ensures that when law enforcement partners with community stakeholders on oversight and curriculum, these community stakeholders include some of the most vulnerable people in our communities who have historically been denied a voice: people with disabilities, LGBTQ folks, people of color, immigrants, non-citizens, Native Americans, youth, and people who have been incarcerated. Initiative 940 responds to the disproportionate impact of deadly force on people with mental illnesses by ensuring police officers have the right training to de-escalate situations nonviolently, understand mental health crises, and provide first aid on the scene. Officers are often confronted with erratic or alarming behavior they may not have been trained to understand or manage, and we do them a disservice if we don't fully prepare them to de-escalate such situations. I value that this initiative grapples with the messy reality that being vulnerable and being dangerous are not mutually exclusive, and that police officers need practical training in order to non-lethally handle people in crisis who may in fact pose a threat to others. We cannot live the mitzvot to protect the vulnerable if we do so only when they embody perfect innocence, or if we do so only when there is no cost to us.

The Torah and our tradition tell us that we are accountable to one another. On Yom Kippur, Rabbi Zlotnick invited us all to do the work of being accountable for the white supremacy of our society, and for facing the legacy of racism not just in our country, but here in Seattle. Here in our synagogue, even, as hard as that is for some of us to hear. As Jews, we have this beautiful opportunity to begin our new year by being accountable and atoning, face to face, with people we have wronged, and to engage in teshuvah by changing ourselves for the better. Every year

we practice relational, transformative accountability--when I think about how we can use these skills to repair the world, I again find a role model in De-escalate Washington's approach. Initiative 940 establishes independent investigations when use of force results in death or serious injury, by a joint body of law enforcement and community stakeholders selected for appropriate expertise. This is the kind of ongoing accountability that builds lasting trust between police and the communities they protect and serve. Our state laws currently make this the most difficult state in the country to hold police officers accountable for unjustified use of deadly force, and this initiative would also bring our legal standard in line with the rest of the country; having a system where criminal accountability is seen as possible is important to building trust in our legal system and law enforcement. That trust is, in turn, essential to the safety of police officers in our communities.

When someone you love commits a crime, harms someone, does something really bad--do you stop caring whether they live or die? G-d doesn't: when Cain is held accountable for murdering his brother, Abel, G-d gives him a mark of protection so that the people he encounters in his exile do not kill him. Judaism challenges me to treat every person as a being created in the image of G-d, whom I can't wash my hands of, or wash my planet of. That includes people who commit acts of violence that appall me - whether that violence is criminal or lawful. I've never seen a world without the violence of white supremacy, or without the violence of prisons--I'm in that wilderness between slavery and freedom, still--but my Judaism inspires and compels me to keep imagining, to keep seeking. And to keep heeding and following the powerful cries and dreams of the most marginalized, like the pillars of smoke and fire my ancestors followed to the promised land.

As many of you have heard, we aspire to be a 100% voting congregation, and I encourage every single one of you who is eligible to vote to do so this fall. Clearly I hope I won't be the only one voting Yes on Initiative 940, but more importantly, I hope that in those moments when you feel overwhelmed by injustice, you'll resist the fantasy of sweeping the bad people away, and instead lean into the messy, relational work of transformation and accountability with your fellow human beings. May we make this a Shabbat Shalom.