

Religious Extremism and the Dangers of Interpreting the Torah Literally

Parashat Va'Etchanan
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How far would you go to keep God's laws? I would hope, at least in a religious context as we sit here in this sanctuary, that you would tell me that you would go very far, that keeping the laws of the Torah are indeed important to you – that you would go above and beyond to uphold our sacred covenant with the Holy One. No questions asked.

But I'm not naïve. If I asked you how far you would go to keep God's laws what I think a more realistic response from you would be is: "Well, which law, rabbi?"

What about the law of not murdering? We find that one in this week's Torah portion. "Well, of course, rabbi, I would go very far in keeping that law...but I would hope it wouldn't take that much for me."

Okay, okay, what about something a little more difficult? What about the law of keeping Shabbat? "Well, that's a silly question, rabbi...I mean, I'm here tonight, I'm observing Shabbat...isn't that enough?" Well, I suppose I'll turn that question back on you. Is it enough? Is it going far enough to just be here tonight and then go home and engage in other matters that are not keeping in the spirit of Shabbat? I promise...as you will see, that is not a rhetorical or judgmental question.

Earlier today we celebrated the holiday of *Tu B'Av*, the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Av*. *Tu B'Av* is commonly referred to as the Jewish holiday of love, or the Jewish Sadie Hawkins day. According to the Mishna, on *Tu B'Av* the daughters of Israel would dress up in white and go dancing in Jerusalem in order to find a suitable partner. It is indeed a celebration of love, not a major holiday in the Jewish tradition, but one that celebrates love and mutual respect and understanding. It begins when the full moon comes out, which happened last night, sometime between the 14th and 15th day of the Hebrew month.

How appropriate it was that hundreds of people gathered in the streets of Jerusalem yesterday, Thursday, to celebrate love – only this time, it was not women dressed in white, dancing in front of the men...it was people of all types – all genders, all sexual orientations, all gender identities – dressed in flags of rainbows to celebrate the diversity of love as Jerusalem conducted its annual Gay Pride Parade. I, too, celebrate this diversity and support mutual and consensual love of all types between any two people who identify in whatever way they wish. I wish I could have been in Jerusalem yesterday, waving a rainbow flag as well.

But had I been there, I would have been in great danger. Because in the midst of this celebration of love, was a Haredi man, Yossi Schlissel, who, dressed in full Haredi attire, black kippah, all black-and-white clothing, long, untrimmed beard, decided to pull out a knife from his black suit coat and stab six people who marched in the parade. The last I heard, two men were moderately wounded, three people were lightly wounded, while one woman was in critical condition.

What's even more horrific is that this man, Yossi Schlissel, was just released from prison, where he was kept for 10 years, after he stabbed three people in Jerusalem's Gay Pride Parade in 2005.

The attack by Schlissel is one that brings up so many disturbing questions: Can we ever truly change our ways? How do we take revenge on people who commit evil? Where is the justice?

There certainly was no justice in the home of a Palestinian family who lived in the West Bank after Jewish settlers committed arson, burning their house down and killing an infant child this morning. "According to reports, two masked men arrived at two homes in Duma, near Nablus. They spray painted the words "revenge" and "long live the Messiah" in Hebrew, broke the windows of the homes and threw two firebombs inside. The attack killed Ali Saad Dawabsha, and wounded both his parents and four-year-old brother." (972mag.com)

Multiple Jewish organizations have come out condemning these acts of hatred, calling them religious extremism. They are. We keep so many in our prayers at this time. We pray for all of those who were wounded in these attacks – them and their families. We pray for anyone who identifies with the LGBT community, for this was not only a physical attack on the people of Jerusalem, but an attack on the values that many of us hold dear to our heart, values of love and mutual respect.

And finally, as much as it pains me, I guess I would like to offer a prayer for these Jewish settlers and Yossi Schlissel. Last week, I touched upon supporting people who had mental illnesses and pray for a day when mental illness did not bring about harm or danger to our lives. Yossi Schlissel and these Jewish settlers who would commit such a crime obviously are people who need help.

How far would we go to keep the laws of the Torah?

To Yossi Schlissel, it seems that he would do anything to keep one law of the Torah – or at least, one interpretation of one law of the Torah. And we all know which one he found so important – ya know, the one about a man not lying with another man...yeah, that one. But in going too far in protecting his one interpretation of one law of the Torah, he failed miserably in keeping another law of the Torah – the fact that we should not kill someone. Okay, so maybe he didn't kill anyone...yet, that is. But I'm sure he would have if he could have. Schlissel's crime is an act of religious extremism. Just because he is Jewish or because he was ultra-Orthodox, this does not mean that his acts should be condoned or supported any more than any other terrorist. I condemn what he did in Jerusalem and what the Jewish settlers in the West Bank did.

How far would you go to keep the laws of the Torah?

Really, I'm convinced that most of us choose which laws of the Torah are more important to us and which laws are not. Therefore, if we're lucky and we have the time, we carefully balance any two conflicting ideas – and choose one that [quote] "matters more." I am pained to hear that Schlissel's one interpretation of one law of the Torah mattered more than another law of not causing danger to one's life.

What was Schlissel's crime? Well, as for his civil crime, I will let that up to the law enforcement of the city of Jerusalem.

But what was Schlissel's religious crime? I believe his religious crime was narrow-mindedness. In interpreting one law of the Torah in one way, he failed to uphold one of the most, if not *the* most important law of the Torah. His religious extremism is not just one that manifests on the streets of Jerusalem, but also in the very text of the Torah. He confined himself to narrow interpretations without being open to any alternatives. We must remember, too, that the Torah is only one piece of text that is sacred to our Jewish tradition. After it, hundreds of books have been written by many rabbis about the various interpretations of how to carry out the laws of the Torah. Do you think they all agree? They're Jews. Of course not.

Dare, I ask, do any of us struggle with this syndrome as well? The syndrome of sticking to the laws of the Torah strictly in some ways but not in others?

Let me use a simple case. Tell me, when the Torah says that Moses lived to be 120, do we really understand that literally? And Abraham? 175? And still able to conceive a child with Sarah at a ripe old age? And what about Noah? 950 years old? Come on, people. When it says that Moses lived to be 120, when it says that Noah lived to be 950, what it really means is that they lived to be really, really old. In other words, we cannot interpret the Torah literally.

Why is it, then, that so many of us interpret the Torah literally in some places, but not in others? Who are we to say that our interpretation of one law of the Torah – especially if we think we are reading it literally – is more important than other interpretation of another law? Are we being a little hypocritical in standing up so vociferously for some laws but not others?

I yearn for a Jewish community that is more open to talking about the different interpretations of the Torah instead of insisting that there is only one way to read the text. I dream of a day when we are not judgmental of other's beliefs and practices because the laws of the Torah that we follow are more "important" than theirs. I pray for more openness and understanding in our world.

I am often asked the question, especially as it relates to death: "what do I do, rabbi?" "How do I follow this law?" "Tell me, please give me an answer." As much as I would love for all of us to follow all of the rules of the Torah, I know that is next to impossible to do every day of our lives. More importantly, I know that in Judaism there is never just one answer to a question. And so, although sometimes I might say "why don't you try this?" I try never to say "you *must* do this." My interpretation of the Torah is only one interpretation – and yours, too, must also have a voice.

How far would you go to keep the laws of the Torah?

Hopefully, you would go very far...as long as it's safe to others – and to yourself.

But hopefully, in going very far to keep the laws of the Torah, you are able to go very far in being open – open to different understandings of the laws of the Torah. Let us together eradicate both types of religious extremists – those who cause physical harm and pain to the world around us, and those who narrow-mindedly only see it their way.