

Vayeira (Genesis 18:1-22:24)

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There are many stories in today's parsha (Genesis 18:1-22:24) --Sodom and Gomorrah -- Sarah's reaction to learning she will bear a child at the age of 90 years -- Adonai saving Ismael -- and the binding of Isaac.

Instead of these, I will be addressing a darker side of Vayeira. Buried in this Torah reading are examples of the ordinary violence practiced against women.

Abraham passes off his wife Sarah as his sister in order to protect himself. Only through the intervention of Adonai is Sarah's rape averted. Neither God nor many scholars chastise Abraham for his action.

Lot offers his daughters, who have never been intimate with a man, and telling the crowd of males "do with them as you please." He does this to protect his own honor as the crowd clamors for the men he is hosting and who, by custom, come under the shelter of his roof. God does not intervene nor do many scholars chastise Lot.

In these and other stories we begin to see that women become "the other." Women become the ones whose safety and well-being can be sacrificed to save frightened males. This is a recurring part of Jewish history. Male Jews subordinated by the majority culture in turn subordinate their women.

In today's parsha we see another form of violence, that of Sarah against Hager. Again, violence emanates from the one with the most power against the one with lesser power.

First Sarah directs Hager to go to Abraham's bed. Then, Sarah anticipates that without the protection of the community both Hagar and Ismael will perish in the desert and orders them to leave the camp. Sarah sacrifices them to protect the inheritance of Isaac, her own son. Sarah is neither criticized by the text nor by many scholars. There is no recrimination by Adonai who actually demonstrates being on Sarah's side by telling Abraham to listen and do what Sarah wants. The cycle of violence continues.

It is often easy to excuse violence when it is "just" one person against another. How often do we hear and read statements such as: that person has emotional problems; that person was abused as a child or that person has anger management problems? These statements attempt to justify the violence and to blame the victim. For if the perpetrator is not to blame than it must be the victim.

However, what can we say to excuse violence that comes from an organization? We are outraged when colleges and universities condone violence by virtue of their official policies or by virtue of their overlooking the bad behavior of male athletes or coaches. We are outraged when corporations condone violence by virtue of their policies and procedures or by virtue of their overlooking the sexual misconduct of high-ranking male executives.

We are seldom outraged when religious organizations condone violence by virtue of their rules and regulations or their customs and traditions. We often are not outraged when our political organizations and agencies advocate or condone violence against their own citizens or against those wanting to become citizens.

As I speak about violence I bet most of you are thinking only of physical violence – such as occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia Tech or Sandy Hook, or of the young Muslim woman shot because she wore a hijab. Or other forms of violence such non-consensual sex involving children and adults, date abuse or spousal abuse. Yet there are non-physical violent events that affect each of us every day of our lives. We might initiate the violence or we might be the victim. Either way we are affected.

Harassment, bullying and intimidation are forms of non-physical violence. Withholding of affection, love, food, money, or respect is a form of non-physical violence. And yes, discrimination is a form of violence.

The violence promulgated by institutions is more insidious. An institution that comes readily to mind is religion. It is the religious institution that defines who can participate in the religion and in what way.

It is not the Torah that excludes women from studying or from being counted as a whole person for purpose of a minyan. It is that early male sages failed to imagine a woman doing these things and sometimes claimed that this was dictated by Torah. The notion that women are not equal has been perpetrated over the centuries by male religious leaders.

It did not take long for this notion of women being “less than” to move from the church and synagogue to make its appearance in local, state and

federal government laws and statutes. Violence now had a new form. For years, the civil law condoned assault and rape by the husband. Civil law continues to give rapists parental rights. Civil law forbade the type of work women could do and thus how much they could earn.

There is no shortage of historical violence against Jews. The violence has come from individuals conforming to their social norms. The violence has come from laws and rules passed by governments, both elected and not, and carried out by governmental agencies.

Last month the Rabbi in the Charlottesville Virginia synagogue removed the Torah scrolls because he feared that the synagogue would be torched.

There is no shortage of violence against those who fail the test of being gender normative. Our international Queer community faces violence based on anti-GLBTQ laws in numerous African countries, South and Central America, the Soviet Union and in Chechnya to name a few. In many of these countries the legalization and normalization of this hate has been perpetrated by American radical Christians. In some countries it has been implemented through Sharia law and **not** by the Quaran.

Nor is there a shortage of violence in our own country. The violence here is not new. It has been ongoing for generations. And again we can look to the radical religionists and their victims. We can look to Mathew Sheppard tied to a fence and left to die. We can look to multitudes of lesbians and some gay men whose children were ripped from them because of whom they loved. We can look at shootings such as took place at the Pulse nightclub and the murder of Trans members of our community. We can look at an administration that attempts to eliminate us by removing us from

official websites, ignores our presence and removes us from government sanctioned surveys.

State governments have passed laws allowing local police to arrest and detain persons who cannot prove they are in this country legally. This, in a country that has no national identity card and the only identification required to be carried at all times- by males of draft age- is the Selective Service Card. While the driver's license is only required when someone is actually driving a motor vehicle.

And today local and state governments pass laws to curtail or limit the free execution of rights guaranteed by federal law and upheld by the Supreme Court. Among these are the right to vote, the right to marry a person of the same sex, and the right to have an abortion. These limitations are all acts of violence. At the state level we are seeing laws that purport to protect religious freedom but in actuality make it legal for the ultra-religionists to discriminate against the "other."

The absence of laws to protect and the presence of laws to restrict coupled with political leaders who advocate violence against all those who are not part of their group have created a situation in which hate and violence have become normalized – a situation in which we all are possible victims of violence.

By not speaking out with one voice against the violence described in Vayeira the sages helped normalize it. By saying that violence is just part of human nature, the silent sages are essentially saying "boys will be boys", In the case of Hager and Sarah maybe the sages believe that violence is acceptable when protecting ones familial inheritance.

By your silence do you aid and abet? Just as speech can be a killer so to can silence. If remaining silent will bring harm then there is an obligation to speak out against the perpetrator. This obligation to speak out is **higher** than the taboo of *lashon ha-ra*.

Our tradition is very clear. **It is forbidden for one person to harm another. This applies to all and it applies equally.** This includes physical abuse and sexual abuse. It includes emotional and economic abuse. It includes any form of abuse.

This Torah portion provides an opportunity to look at ourselves and the world we have created. It provides the time and the space to reflect on our own violent patterns of behavior. It provides an opportunity to address and change our own negative attitudes-- and behaviors.

It is an inconvenient truth that every action has an equal reaction. It is an inconvenient truth that what goes around comes around. Would you rather suffer the consequences of your own destructive patterns or would you rather reap the benefits of your own changed attitudes and behaviors? What will your choice be? The choice is yours. Make it so!

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