

Gene, your favorite Torah portion has almost as many aspects to it as does your rich personality! You and I read only one incident in the passage, the one right at the end. Of course, since it's your birthday, you got maftir--the final word!

Actually, the passage we shared is the only part of the text that deals with a set of characters. It is this fact that can help us understand something rather profound: Life is sometimes messy. The Torah doesn't abandon us to that troubling conclusion without suggesting something even more profound: there is a firm foundation into which we may bolt handrails to get us through the upheavals and over the cracks that appear on the path of life.

The sidra starts with principles that apply to the cohanim. They must avoid ritual impurity, especially contact with the dead. These principles are what

guide modern day Cohanim to avoid funerals and cemeteries. The ancient class of cohanim is a subset of the tribe of Levy. Our Torah portion turns next to the rights and privileges of the l'viim, the Levites, and the sacred food they alone may eat, taken from the sacrificial offerings of the people, Israelites or non-Israelites. As long as the offerings are physically perfect and offered with purity of purpose, they are acceptable. Neither the offerings nor the priests making the offering may have blemishes. This is to drive home to the people that the rites that unite them with their God must be as strong and recognizably ideal as possible. This is an element of externalized respect that serves to strengthen our sense of self-worth and our potential to be more like God. That yearning is in keeping with the principles elaborated on last week in parashat Kedoshim, the Holiness Code.

Our Torah portion continues with an overview of the sacred times that come regularly throughout the year. Of all the sections of this Torah portion, this most shows the orderly underlying structure of the world and the part we play in recognizing and preserving this order. In the midst of recounting the holy days and seasons, Moses reminds the people that they are to leave the corners of their fields for the poor and for the stranger. We move through the seasons of the year, counting sevens and fourteens, looking for new moons and full moons, eyes on the heavens and feet upon the earth.

Then into that orderly, neighborly, godly universe comes a terrible intruder, the disenfranchised son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father. He and a full-blooded Israelite get into a fight right outside the camp. We are given no

details about what or who started the fight; we are only told that the disenfranchised man cursed God.

In our story, Moses and God are called in and a new principle is formulated: blasphemers are to be identified by those who have heard their defamation and then stoned outside the camp by the entire community.

God continues: anyone who strikes down a human being is to be put to death. Although you can replace the life of an animal with another animal, you cannot do that with a human. If you have harmed another person, the penalty is “life for life, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him.”

At the end of the Torah portion, the blasphemer is stoned.

So, bear in mind: we went from the orderliness of the priestly life to the orderliness of celebrating the sacred times and seasons to the compassionate treatment of the less fortunate to an incident where a kind of outsider damned the whole system and was executed according to a law and underlying principle. Chaos broke in but was not allowed to do permanent damage to the structure.

## ACT II How to Put Torah into Practice

This week I attended the annual Jewish Christian Dialogue sponsored by Sacred Heart University. Over the years we have formed very strong bonds with one another despite our different religious traditions. We have made it past stereotypes and prejudices and have come to rely on one another to further the cause of peace between Jews and Christians across the country and ultimately around the world.

This year the funding covered tickets to *Wicked* on Broadway. Many of us had already seen the play and were eager to see it again in the context of our conference. I wondered as I watched the development of Elphaba, the quintessential outsider, which of us in our group was identifying with her. Elphaba, the sickly green Wicked Witch of the West portrayed by the incomparable Margaret Hamilton in Hollywood's rendition of the *Wizard of Oz*, is not wicked by nature. She is deemed wicked by circumstance, by decree of a manipulated majority, by the fact that her integrity does not allow her to accept the abuse of creaturely rights going on in Oz. In short, she is scapegoated for standing up for what has always been the value system of Oz at a time when those values are being undermined by the wizard's manipulative force. There was wickedness in the play, but Elphaba was not its essence.

After the play eight of the women clergy, Jewish and Christian, I among them, felt that we had to go down to Ground Zero. Evil had surely been present in the Wall Street area on Sept 11 and evil had certainly been perpetrated upon innocent people and upon our national psyche. We went to offer prayers and simple songs of peace, a group of colleagues and friends trying to use our voices toward rebuilding the divine orderliness we believe in in our different ways.

What we saw plastered on the wooden walls that line the street near the construction site, in stark contrast to the older pictures of loved ones and first defenders lost and the flowers left for them, were the ghoulish and savage pictures that were produced to celebrate because the enemy-with- a-capital- E was destroyed. We were not, I'm sure, the only ones who

were struck by the similarity between the pictures of jubilant Americans gesticulating and chanting and wrapping themselves in flags on May 1st and the infuriating pictures of Those Barbaric Others captured in the same poses on their streets on 9/11 and the days following.

None of us was praying out of misplaced sympathy for the evil mastermind who caused thousands to die in his stand against what he found intolerable. We prayed because of the impact that evil had on our national psyche.

There is a prayer that we say daily. You can see it in our siddur in the weekday section. It has been reworded by the Reform Movement and is much improved:



וְלִרְשָׁעָה אֵל תְּהִי תַקְוָה, וְהַתּוֹעִים אֵלֶיךָ יָשׁוּבוּ, וּמַלְכוּת זְדוּן  
מִהָרָה תִשָּׁבֵר. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, שׁוֹבֵר רָשָׁע מִן הָאָרֶץ.

*And for wickedness, let there be no hope, and may all the errant return to You, and may the realm of wickedness be shattered. Blessed are You, Adonai, whose will it is that the wicked vanish from the earth.*

When we set our reactions within a context of principled order and try to emulate the holiness of God, we do not rejoice at the destruction of an individual. Even those who actually were involved in killing bin Laden took care to provide his body the burial rites due him in a respectful way. That is the way human beings can behave when they are at their best.

We must never give evil such power over us as to reduce us to the level of the foe who acts in ways that revolt us. To paraphrase “some are born wicked and some have wicked thrust upon them”.

In our conversations with our friends, or with those with whom we disagree, let us put the principles found in this week’s Torah portion into practice. Let us be like the followers of Aaron, seeking peace and pursuing it. Let them rise from dialogue with us saying “I don’t know if I’ve been changed for the better, but because I know you, I have been changed for good.”