

Phil Platcow's Minchah D'var Torah 5779/2018

We have just read a pretty tough Torah portion. I don't mean that it's hard to read ... although I think the only thing I do that is harder than reading Torah is raising children. No, it's the content of this afternoon's Torah portion that is tough. Did you read the English as we chanted the portion? Historically, we've read the alternative portion, but to Cantor Vera's and Rav Mona's credit, we have decided to take on some subjects that are relevant today and may touch us personally. Indeed, the subjects of the Torah are often timeless, but how we interact with them may be different give our perspective 3,000 years later than its writing.

The topics of incest, disrupting a neighbor's relationship, homosexuality and bestiality evoke strong emotions to this day. As the father of a daughter who is part of the lesbian community, the text gets my attention. I think that many of you know Alissa from her participation in the MLK Gospel Shabbat event a couple or 3 years ago. She is studying to be a rabbi at Hebrew Union College, the seminary of the Reform Movement. As is their practice, Alissa is spending her first year of rabbinical school studying at the beautiful campus in Jerusalem immediately adjacent to all the different sects of Judaism. She is working with a reform synagogue on a weekly basis leading services, blowing shofar and even davening in the Kineret, the Sea of Galilee. She is taking advantage of every possible experience to grow and enhance the existence of everyone around her. She even participated in a beach clean-up project organized by my other daughter Melanie on the shore in Tel Aviv about a month ago. Is she a credit to society, let alone Judaism? I think so.

The prohibitions of incest, bestiality and homosexuality arise, according to Athalya Brenner, author of *The Intercourse of Knowledge, On*

Gendering Desire and Sexuality in the Hebrew Bible, out of a desire to create boundaries in society and to safeguard paternity. Naturally, it makes some sense to consider these prohibitions within the structural paradigm of a given society, in this case, ancient Israel and its mores, as presented in the biblical texts (law and narrative), not to mention the other nomadic societies surrounding them at the time. Brenner also notes that reading our modern definitions into the relevant biblical texts – or any other culturally different text for that matter – may not always be helpful, or at least it can be very challenging. This indicates that attempting to understand biblical texts in terms of our mores of today may not be appropriate. To me, this suggests that we are allowed to evolve in our understandings.

Note in the text the several mentions of “uncovering the nakedness” of fathers, mothers, children that come before the line on homosexuality. Actually, those earlier paragraphs take up 2/3 of the Torah reading, whereas the mention of homosexuality takes up only one sentence. A prayer often said during the morning minyan in my other shul talks about the impact of surrounding passages on other passages. That is, the verse before may describe or add some understanding to the verse that follows and vice versa. These mentions of incest and uncovering the nakedness suggests a consideration of consent, control, abuse of power, etc. derived from the paragraphs before, which may be also describing the homosexual interaction.

Speaking of vices, we also know that males are considered superior to woman – listen, I’m not saying it’s right, I’m just stating an interpretation of the time. I would quickly add that in our Jewish orthodoxy, while there may be some social/legal separation of responsibilities that we may construe as subjugation of women, the orthodox revere the role that women play as mothers raising the next generation and keeping general order in the household, and for

continuity of the male's blood line. As a relatively liberal male, I certainly respect the role my wife plays in our household, and I am lightning-fast-quick to point out that she has an amazingly important role in the success to date we have enjoyed from our three terrific children, now pretty much adults. Now, back to the text. I believe that the biblical task, harsh as it is, was designed to regulate societal survival, which is equated with continuity. Naturally, anything that blurs the lines of the normal routine of the time is prohibited, as it might damage the social texture and the family in particular.

We might construe this as a function of power and the society of the time. It was important for the male to have the power and control. In male homosexuality, the receiving male's position of power is seen as compromised. In terms of concern regarding continuity, male homosexuality is seen as wasting the seed of continuity.

Most biblical texts of this time were written for the male, not so much for the female given the paternalistic nature of the society. So, ladies, I'm not sure that you are off the hook in this or not. Female homosexuality per se is not necessarily a concern, except when it might keep a male from procreating. And female homosexual marriage might be a concern because it might take women out of the procreating pool and also suggest that women could take the role of a controlling male in the marriage. Today, our society has evolved a bit, and homosexual partners can adopt, or become foster parents to help keep society in order, take care of children who desperately need loving parents, and also to continue a name lineage, though perhaps not in actual blood.

G-d ends this portion with "it is by those ways (the practices of perversion), that nations which I am casting out before you defiled themselves." G-d warns us that we shall keep His charge not to engage in any of the abhorrent practices that were carried on before us.

We have an election coming up. Besides the candidates, we have Question 3 on the Massachusetts ballot to repeal the ban on discrimination against transgender people in places of public accommodation, such as restaurants, malls, and restrooms. This question deserves our attention (read with emphasis).

I would suggest that when we do not treat our neighbor with respect and decency, that's when we defile ourselves and abdicate our responsibility as an extension of G-d. At this time of Yom Kippur when we strive to reflect on our lives and chart a path forward, may we reflect on these passages of thought-provoking behaviors as a means for us to not necessarily be a literalist but rather one who considers the aspects of decency and respect for our fellow human being regardless of how they describe themselves, and chart a path together for a united world of goodness, compassion and diversity.