

## **Drasha Kedoshim 5768—Do not stand idly by**

This past week, I read a remarkable article in the New York Times. It told the story of a *sefer Torah*, a Torah scroll, rescued from the squalid remnants of Auschwitz, which was to be rededicated for use as a part of the Holocaust memorial service at Manhattan's Central Synagogue. Facing the impending onslaught of the Germans, the sexton of the synagogue in the town that would later become Auschwitz buried the Torah to protect it from certain destruction.

As far as anyone knew, the Torah scroll—unlike so many of the people who studied its words—survived the horrors of Auschwitz safely buried somewhere in the area. No one who went to search for it after the war had succeeded. About eight years ago, Rabbi Menachem Youlus, of the Save a Torah Foundation, an organization that finds and restores Torah scrolls desecrated by the Nazis, began searching for this Torah, after hearing from survivors that the sexton had buried it only three days before the Nazis invaded. After resting in the earth for over sixty years, Rabbi Youlus found this Torah. Upon examining it, he noted that it was in fairly good condition. Only it was missing four panels.

The search for those panels also yielded the remarkable story of how they came to be separated from their Torah scroll. Rabbi Youlus placed an

ad in a local Polish newspaper, seeking people who had parchment with Hebrew letters. A Polish priest, himself born a Jew and a survivor of Auschwitz, responded almost immediately. He knew what Rabbi Youlus was seeking—he held the four panels removed from that *sefer Torah*. The panels had been taken out by the sexton, entrusted to four people from his community—perhaps to bring them strength during the difficult time to come, perhaps as a way of holding onto the lessons of the Torah when the Torah itself was a forbidden object. Those four people gave their panels to the priest, entrusting them to him before they were sent to their deaths. The priest held onto them for more than sixty years, waiting for the day when someone would come searching.

The story of the restoration of this Torah scroll is a powerful one on many levels. What I find particularly stirring about it, especially this week as we read Parashat Kedoshim, is the number of people who extended themselves to save this *sefer Torah*, this symbol of the Jewish people and our longevity. There was the sexton, who buried the Torah, protecting it from decay and the elements in a metal box. There were the four people who, despite the unspeakable horrors of their imprisonment in Auschwitz, held onto the sacred panels from their Torah scroll, and who had the fortitude to pass them on to someone else when they realized that they would

not survive. There was the priest, who held onto these pieces of parchment through his internment in Auschwitz, and kept them safely for over sixty years. There was Rabbi Youlus, who worked for nearly a decade to locate, rescue, and restore this Torah scroll. Both living during and recalling a tragic time when saving lives was impossible, each of these people stood up—rather than standing by—to protect this symbol of our people.

Our parashah this week speaks to the importance of this kind of behavior. Leviticus 19:16 reads: 'לא תלך רכיל בעמך לא תעמד על דם רעך אני ה'—literally, Do not go about bearing tales among your countrymen; do not stand by the blood of your fellow, I am Adonai, I am God. It is the second half of this verse I want us to focus on today. The interpretations of this verse are many and various. Commentators have struggled to understand what it means not to stand by the blood of one's fellow. One illuminating interpretation comes from the Talmud, *masseket* Sanhedrin, page 73a: The Talmud asks: From where do we learn that one who sees his friend drowning in a river, or being attacked by wild animals, or being assaulted by robbers is obligated to save him? From “Do not stand by the blood of your fellow.”

The Talmud then challenges this association: Does this obligation really come from that verse? Does it not come from here? When facing potential loss of life, from where do we learn that we are obligated to restore

it? It says (Deuteronomy 22:2) in reference to a lost object: “You shall return it to him.”

The Talmud notes that this verse doesn't quite capture the depth of the obligation: If we were to take it from that verse, we would only understand a personal obligation—that is, if you see something like this happening and are actually able to do something. From where do we learn that one must exert extra effort and even engage others in helping to save a life? This is why we teach “Do not stand by the blood of your fellow.” Our parashah teaches us that we must act when we witness a threat to someone else's life—we cannot stand idly by.

This message has taken hold in the Jewish community, especially as a response to the atrocities of the Holocaust. We look back to that awful period in our history, and in addition to mourning the losses of six million Jews, we also stand up and say, “Never Again.” Never again will we allow genocide to run rampant in our world—we will not stand by the blood of our fellow. We will stand up, and respond, exerting extra effort to stem the violence, and to save lives.

Unfortunately, our world is witnessing an ongoing genocide in Darfur, Sudan. For over five years, the government of Sudan, accompanied by their militia, known as the Janjaweed, has been fighting with rebels in the western

region of Darfur. The Janjaweed have taken this conflict to a new level, launching devastating and systematic assaults on civilians who come from the same ethnic groups as the rebels. The Jewish community, owing to our commitment to the message of our parashah, has been at the forefront of responding to this terrible situation. In 2004, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum declared a Genocide Emergency in Darfur. Later that same year, the US government determined that it was indeed genocide. In 2005, the UN concluded the same and asked the International Criminal Court to investigate the Darfur situation. We have stood up, and still people are dying, displaced, and under attack.

The Committee on Conscience page on the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website

[\(http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/alert/darfur/contents/01-overview/\)](http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/alert/darfur/contents/01-overview/)

reports: Hundreds of thousands of civilians have died from violence, disease, and starvation, and thousands of women have been raped. More than 2.5 million civilians have been driven from their homes, their villages torched and property stolen. Thousands of villages have been systematically destroyed and more than 230,000 people have fled to neighboring Chad. But most of those displaced are trapped inside Darfur. Although large-scale government attacks against civilians have declined since 2005, millions

remain at risk. Most of the displaced are not returning home for fear that their villages will be attacked again.

The website offers the opportunity literally to see the results of this violence through a Google Earth portal. Using this tool, I saw that the area has literally been flattened, decimated, left only with the parched ruins of villages and people that once were. It is clear that we must continue to stand up and respond to the horrors of Darfur.

I am proud to be part of a community that takes this message so seriously. We have stood up for Darfur for a number of years. Before I even joined our *shul* as one of our rabbis, I saw this about us—among thousands gathered on the mall in Washington, D.C. to demand a stronger response to the situation in Darfur, I ran into Rabbi Lerner and a sizable delegation from Temple Emunah, who came down all the way from Lexington to be a part of this protest. After learning that women living in refugee camps were often being attacked and raped when they left the safety of their tents to gather wood to build cooking fires, we also responded. We raised money to purchase solar cookers to send to these women, so that they could safely provide food for themselves and their families.

This year, we have yet another opportunity to respond. Barbara Palant, who has been instrumental in organizing how our community stands

up to respond for Darfur, brought to our attention Tents of Hope ([www.tentsofhope.org](http://www.tentsofhope.org)), a one-year campaign that invites communities to respond to the crisis of Darfur by creating tents that are unique works of art—designed and painted by members of these communities—that become focal points for learning about, assisting, and establishing relationships with the people of Sudan. The tent-painting project is being used as a catalyst for continuing to create awareness of the ongoing atrocities in Darfur and to help raise funds to offer other kinds of support to help end this crisis. The project will culminate with a “gathering of the tents” in Washington, D.C., this coming November. Our community is one that has consistently stood up to help prevent the blood of our fellows from being spilled. This provides us with yet another opportunity. Our religious school students will be painting our tent on Wednesday, May 21<sup>st</sup>, and our entire community will have the chance to participate in this momentous project the following day, May 22, as a part of our annual Lag Ba-Omer barbeque. I urge you all to join us as we continue in our efforts to respond to the genocide in Darfur.

Both our parashah and our experiences as a people have taught us the necessity of standing up in response when lives are in danger. May our continued efforts help to make these words of our parasha into a lesson without such an immediate application in the years to come.

Shabbat Shalom.