

Guns, God & Hearing Suffering

This morning we read *Parashat Sh'mot*. In my mind, it is one of the greatest portions in the entire Torah. It contains so much, and it is so rich.

It begins on a note of optimism. There are all these children of Israel who come to Egypt, and it lists their names. They become numerous. They become a people.

This really begins the birth process of the Jewish people. In Genesis we have the early family history, really of one extended family. Now that family has grown into, as the Torah calls it, *B'nei Yisrael* – literally the children of Israel. They are Jacob's children and grandchildren and descendants, whom we refer to as “the Israelites.”

But all that is quickly turned on its head as a new king arises in Egypt who does not know or remember or care about Joseph, and he deals with the Israelites in harsh ways.

They are enslaved; they are treated ruthlessly; the baby boys are sentenced to death.

After that dynamic first chapter, the spotlight focuses in on one particular family with the incredible story of Moshe's birth, his journey down the Nile, and his rescue by Pharaoh's daughter.

And then we learn more about Moses, who is forced to flee to the land of Midian, marries Zipporah, and then in Chapter 3 encounters God at the burning bush.

From there we have the narrative of God convincing Moses to take on the leadership role, followed by his initial failure.

There is a lot here.

I want to hone in on a particular moment when God breaks into history - when God suddenly enters into the narrative in a new way.

Previously, in the book of Genesis, we have God as a creator and a destroyer.

God creates the world and God destroys the world in the flood. We have God responding to individuals, sending Abraham on his journey to a new land and hearing Sarah's cries for a child.

But we don't have God participating in the large-scale events of humanity in history.

It is as if the God of Genesis after the creation and destruction is a personal God of the ancestors.

Here, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, engaging with our earliest ancestors in a one-on-one level.

While God makes promises to Abraham about his future progeny, God does not really act on those promises.

Until now.

Now, you might say that God was acting behind the scenes in the Joseph story, making sure that things would turn out well. But God is not mentioned there.

Suddenly in the book of Exodus, in this morning's Torah reading, God breaks into history.

So, when does it occur?

When does God enter into history?

The moment where this happens, in my mind, is at the end of Chapter 2, just before Moses' encounter at the burning bush.

The text reads: "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon these Israelites, and God took notice of them." (Exodus 2:23-25)

This is a breakthrough moment, not only in Jewish history, but in human history, and it sets up one of the most important paradigms of behavior and action in the world.

God steps into the narrative when the Israelites are groaning, when they *yizaku*, when they cry out. God hears their *shava'tam*.

Their cries rise up to God.

It's as if the waters are getting heated and start to boil, and then the steam rises up to the heavens and stirs God to act.

Now you might say that this is not new; in fact, it is simply a reference to God's promise to Abraham – that God promised Abraham nationhood and territory in the land of Canaan and promised to free Israel after a long period of servitude.

But even though God may have foretold these events to Abraham, that does not relate to this moment.

This is the moment where God hears suffering and God is moved to act.

In the very next scene Moses suddenly becomes aware of God's presence at the burning bush, and Moses is given his assignment to free the Israelites and bring them to God's holy mountain where God will reveal God's self and the core of God's Torah to the people.

There are a number of lessons that we can learn from this. First, as our *Etz Hayim Humash* reminds us, the Hebrew term for “cry for help” is also used in the book of Job in reference to the last groan of a dying person. “God responds to the Israelites, not because they besought divine help, but because God sees their suffering.” (See Job 24:12)

Abraham Joshua Heschel defined our entire Jewish religion as “the awareness of God's interest in humanity.”

Heschel expounded upon that in his masterpiece, *God in Search of Man*. But it is this moment, when God's search is truly activated – in response to suffering.

There is a second lesson that we can learn, which is that God helps through human beings, that God's power is fully actualized through humanity. God does not immediately send the plagues and then the Israelites coming running out of Egypt. Instead God sends Moshe, and that becomes the model. God sends, if you will, divine energy that, like the burning bush, is present.

It is not like the normal fire that consumes something and then it is no more. It is an unending fire. God's presence is right here in this sanctuary right now. God's presence is everywhere. We merely need to open up our minds, our eyes, our ears, and become aware of God's presence. Then we become God's partners in redeeming the world.

God needed Moses to be his human partner to lead the Israelites out.

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As I mentioned earlier, around the country this is the Sabbath to stop gun violence. In churches and synagogues and other houses of worship, rabbis, priests, ministers, imams and others are speaking about gun violence.

There are many, many forms of suffering in our world. There are people being ravaged by disease, people who are impoverished, people who endure terrible natural disasters, but sometimes people are the victims of human violence.

Of all forms of suffering, this should be the easiest to alleviate. This is not natural evil that exists no matter what, such as a hurricane or a baby born with a terrible disability. This is something that we can control. It is human beings inflicting violence upon themselves, a consequence of our having been given free will.

But in the case of gun violence, we cannot simply wring our hands and say that there will always be crazy people and we need to rid ourselves of violent video games and make sure that the mentally ill get better treatment.

While we might live in a society that does glorify violence too much, and we certainly know that far too often those who suffer from mental illness are not given the treatment they need, we must take simple action to create a more just society.

We must hear the cries of those who suffer - in the case of the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, the cries of children, our most vulnerable, who suffered and are no more.

But it's not just Newtown, every day, children and adults in inner cities are the objects of gun violence. The school

superintendents of Chicago and Oakland said that every year they lose two dozen students to gun violence in their communities. Their Newtown experience is every week.

Our gun laws are lax, they are weak, and it's time that we all rise up with one voice and be partners with God in effectuating justice, in crying out for justice, and making sure that we have common-sense gun laws.

85% of all Americans and 74% of NRA members support background checks for all gun purchases.

Why haven't we passed such simple legislation?

The American public has been transformed by the impact of the tragedy that occurred in Newtown, Connecticut.

In the days after the tragedy, I had the opportunity to stop in Newtown. As I got off the highway, I could almost feel it in the air – pervasive sadness and despair. People had written in large letters on wooden signs in front of their homes – “WHY?” I have shared some of these pictures in the lobby.

The memorials were almost too intense to speak of. Buried among many Christmas trees was a tiny little *Hanukkiyah*, which folks had lit up on Hanukkah in front of the memorial for Noah Pozner, a Jewish child and the youngest murder victim.

That little *Hanukkiyah* reminded me that we as human beings can bring light to darkness.

We can take action.

Today, you will find handouts (at the end of this document now) showing ways that you can make your voice heard. I ask you to take one of those sheets and, after Shabbat, sign an electronic petition, make a donation, become active on social media, and join our own Middlesex Interfaith Coalition to Stop Gun Violence.

You can also send me an email to join our group. Hundreds from various faiths in our area have already joined, signed petitions, and become active.

The reality is that millions around the country have become activated on this issue, and this is a moment where in the face of tragedy and the terrible pain and anguish of these families, we have an opportunity to bring more justice, more light, and more redemption into our broken world.

It's not too much to ask to have background checks on all gun sales, to have better registries. It's not too much to ask to have a ban on high-capacity ammunition clips.

We can make a difference.

In April of 1775, there was the shot heard 'round the world, and that shot freed us from British tyranny.

As I wrote in the *Lexington Minuteman*, "As horrific as the Newtown shots were, let those shots be a call to free us from the tyranny of gun violence."

<http://www.wickedlocal.com/lexington/news/opinions/x1058221486/Lerner-A-shot-heard-round-the-nation#axzz2GwIv5QO8>

God breaks into history in response to suffering. We, too, should respond to the suffering and break into the history of gun violence, becoming God's partners in acting and making this world a little more just, a little bit safer, and a little more holy.

I thank all of you for being my partners in this effort.

Shabbat Shalom.



National Sabbath to Stop Gun Violence Make Your Voice Count

Advocacy:

- 1) Call the President: 202-456-1111
- 2) Call your two senators and your Member of Congress: 202-224-3121
 - Ask for 1) Background checks on all gun sales
 - 2) A comprehensive assault weapons ban
 - 3) A ban on high capacity magazines
3. Sign the petition from Mayors Against Illegal Guns at www.demandaplan.org

Keep informed through the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence:

1. Sign up for email alerts at <http://www.csgv.org/>
2. Join the conversation at: <https://twitter.com/CSGV> and at www.facebook.com/Coalitiontostopgunviolence

Activate your social network:

1. If you have not done so yet, please join Facebook and Twitter.
2. Email/Facebook/Tweet these links to your friends and colleagues.
3. Follow Rabbi Lerner @RavLerner and Rabbi Fel @RabbiFel

Join the Middlesex Interfaith Coalition to Stop Gun Violence Activist Email List! Sign-up Sheets are outside the Sanctuary. Or Email RabbiSec@TempleEmunah.org with your name and email.