

## Parashat Shelach Lecha

Criticising the apparent barbarities of other religions is something that religious people do rather well. Indeed, there's nothing like a well stirred pot of self-righteousness and hypocrisy to make us feel better about ourselves and deflect us from the problems of our own faith. Many of us are well versed in the evils of Islamic regimes around the world, from women stoned to death by Taliban for adultery, to limbs of thieves chopped off in Saudi Arabia, to the execution by hanging from cranes in Iran for the crime of being gay. Christians are burned alive in Pakistan for allegedly blaspheming the Muslim prophet and holy book, while Daesh in Syria enslave captive women and decapitate their orange clad prisoners for being anything other than their particular brand of fundamentalist Islam. Indeed, those who perpetrate these atrocities cite chapter and verse from the Koran in justification of their actions. All of which leads us to declare that Islam must be a fundamentally evil religion. The problem apparently lies in their Scriptures. But what of ours? While we decry stoning for adultery, the justification of slavery, the idea of slicing off limbs in tit for tat punishment, an eye for an eye, the burning to death of heretics and blasphemers and genocidal wars against unbelievers, the fact remains that all of these and more are recorded in our own Scriptures as having been perpetrated by our people over long periods of our past. And all in the name of Adonai! We look on at the Koran and declare it evil, but atheists and others look at ours from without and declare that same of us - that we are hypocrites who turn a blind eye to the barbarities of our own texts. Indeed, when you read our Scriptures from an impartial perspective you have to admit that they have a point. We proclaim that all genocide is wrong and that the abominations committed by other religions reflect the nature of their god, and yet in commentary after commentary you will find excuses and exceptions being made for appalling acts committed by our people and commanded by God in the Torah. "Adonai said to Moshe, "On behalf of the people of Isra'el, take vengeance on the Midyanim. After that, you will be gathered to your people." Moshe said to the people, "Equip men from among yourselves for war. They are to go and fight Midyan, in order to carry out Adonai's vengeance on Midyan. You are to send to the war a thousand men from every one of Isra'el's tribes." So out of the thousands of people in Isra'el, a thousand armed men from each tribe, 12,000 altogether, were mustered for war. Moshe sent them, a thousand from each tribe, to the war; he sent them and Pinchas the son of El'azar the cohen to the war, with the holy utensils and the trumpets for sounding the alarm in his care. They fought against Midyan, as Adonai had ordered Moshe, and killed every male. They killed the kings of Midyan along with the others who were slain — Evi, Rekem, Tzur, Hur and Reva, the five kings of Midyan. They also killed Bil'am the son of B'or with the sword. The people of Isra'el took captive the women of Midyan and their little ones, and they took as booty all their cattle, flocks and other goods. They set fire to all their cities in the areas where they lived and all their camps. They took all the booty, all the people and animals they had captured, and brought the captives, booty and spoil to Moshe, El'azar the cohen and the community of Isra'el in the camp on the plains of Mo'av by the Yarden across from Yericho. Moshe, El'azar the cohen and all the community leaders went to meet them outside the camp. But Moshe was angry with the army officers, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds coming in from the

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battlefield. Moshe asked them, "You let the women live? Why, these are the ones who — because of Bil'am's advice — caused the people of Isra'el to rebel, breaking faith with Adonai in the P'or incident, so that the plague broke out among Adonai's community! Now kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has ever slept with a man. But the young girls who have never slept with a man, keep alive for yourselves. Pitch your tents outside the camp for seven days." You know the saying, "What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander"? This phrase is employed to expose holding forth a "double standard." If some kind of behaviour is wrong, it's probably wrong for both sides, not just one. What we condemn other religions for we turn a blind eye to among ourselves and justify because, well, our God is the real one, so that's justified but since other gods are not they are not. I don't know this account of the killing of the Moabites makes you feel. How do you feel about the enslavement of virgin Moabite girls? How do you feel when you read of the cold blooded execution of women and children? And how do you feel about the fact that, according to the text, it was Hashem that commanded all of this? So, is genocide right or wrong? Or do we want to eat our cake and have it?

The problem of violence in God's name, the kind of violence we condemn in other religions today, is repeated throughout our texts. Take Vayikra 20 for instance, an integral part of what scholars have called 'the Holiness Code': "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, that is, with the wife of a fellow countryman, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death. The man who goes to bed with his father's wife has disgraced his father sexually, and both of them must be put to death; their blood is on them. If a man goes to bed with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be put to death; they have committed a perversion, and their blood is on them. If a man goes to bed with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they must be put to death; their blood is on them. If a man marries a woman and her mother, it is depravity; they are to be put to death by fire, both he and they, so that there will not be depravity among you. If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he must be put to death, and you are to kill the animal. If a woman approaches an animal and has sexual relations with it, you are to kill the woman and the animal; their blood will be on them. If a man takes his sister, his father's daughter or his mother's daughter, and has sexual relations with her, and she consents, it is a shameful thing; they are to be cut off publicly — he has had sexual relations with his sister, and he will bear the consequences of their wrongdoing. If a man goes to bed with a woman in her menstrual period and has sexual relations with her, he has exposed the source of her blood, and she has exposed the source of her blood; both of them are to be cut off from their people. You are not to have sexual relations with your mother's sister or your father's sister; a person who does this has had sexual relations with his close relative; they will bear the consequences of their wrongdoing. If a man goes to bed with his uncle's wife, he has disgraced his uncle sexually; they will bear the consequences of their sin and die childless. If a man takes his brother's wife, it is uncleanness; he has disgraced his brother sexually; they will be childless." Wow! The offences in this passage sound like a regular episode of the Jeremy Kyle show! Joking aside though, how do you feel about people being stoned and burned in the name of

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God? Would you be ready to cast the first stone? If not, then why not? After all, wasn't it God that commanded it? As the people of Israel are recorded as saying at Sinai, "All that the Lord has commanded we will do." Well in this week's portion we encounter a similarly difficult passage to handle. As we read in Bmidbar 15:32, "While the people of Israel were in the desert, they found a man gathering wood on Shabbat. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moshe, Aharon and the whole congregation. They kept him in custody, because it had not yet been decided what to do to him. Then Adonai said to Moshe, 'This man must be put to death; the entire community is to stone him to death outside the camp.' So the whole community brought him outside and threw stones at him until he died, as Adonai had ordered Moshe." Amen? Do I hear a halleluyah? No?

This event constituted our people's first judicial execution of an offender. It's a shocking scene, not least because of the offender's apparently trivial crime - simply for gathering wood on Shabbat. It's all the more shocking when we consider that no such specific law prohibiting the gathering of wood yet existed, for all that the Torah had said about Shabbat is this (Shemot 35:1-3): "On six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is to be a holy day for you, a Shabbat of complete rest in honour of ADONAI. Whoever does any work on it is to be put to death. You are not to kindle a fire in any of your homes on Shabbat." From this it is evident that the only specific Shabbat prohibitions listed in the Torah concerned the very general demand that one desist from working on Shabbat and, secondly of kindling a fire. That Moshe clearly found it very difficult to decide what this man's offence actually was and what, if any, judgement awaited him is evident from the text which tells us that, "They kept him in custody, because it had not yet been decided what to do to him." This man's case was truly problematic in that according to strict letter of the law it could be argued that he had done nothing wrong. Did the man's gathering of wood constitute work? In lieu of a more detailed explanation as to what work consists of perhaps not. At the very least, in lieu of a more precise definition as to the nature of 'work', it would surely be cruel to condemn the man? Moreover, while kindling a fire had been specifically prohibited on pain of death according to the strict letter of the law the man had not actually kindled a fire but had been caught collecting kindling. According to the letter of the law then the man might well have been let off. And yet he was not. Unable to decide, the text tells us that Moshe passed the question upward, to Hashem Himself, who apparently ruled that he should be put to death.

What do we do with this passage? The Targum Neofiti, speaking for one traditional approach, explains the reason for Moshe's delay in that the case of the wood gatherer was one of four legal cases that came up before Moshe. In two of them Moshe was quick (to act) and in two of them he was tardy. And in each case Moshe said: I have not heard (the like). He was quick to act, the Targum tells us, in the case of the unclean persons who could not keep Pesach at its appointed time and in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad because civil cases were involved. But in the case of the wood gatherer and in the case of the blasphemer who pronounced the holy Name blasphemously, the Targum tells us that Moshe was tardy because these were capital cases, and this was in order to teach the judges who would

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succeed Moshe that they should be quick in civil cases and tardy in capital cases, so that they would not be in a hurry to put to death even one condemned to death; and so that they would not be ashamed to say: We have not heard (a similar case), since Moshe our master has also said: I have not heard. There is certainly wisdom in this traditional interpretation of the passage. It basically says that we should not be in a hurry to condemn people to death. I'm sure we would all endorse this sentiment. And yet it doesn't change the fact that, in essence, this man *was* stoned to death for a definition of the law that had not existed at the time of the alleged offence, for doing a great evil - no less than gathering wood. Was that fair? And lest we be the first ones to cast a stone we might well be reminded that if the same principle was applied to us we might be found guilty ourselves of some breach of Shabbat laws. After reading this can we still proudly insist that our God isn't as barbaric or as keen to condemn people for as yet undefined religious technicalities as those blood thirsty gods of other religions? Indeed, lest us not be tempted to dismiss the case of the wood gatherer as a one-off we must remember that in legal terms this was *not* a one-off and that case law was in fact being established. The stoning to death of the wood gatherer therefore established legal precedent for the future.

Whichever way we cut this and other similar passages I don't think we can evade the conclusion that perhaps they tell us more about the way our ancestors thought about God than God Himself. Indeed, no one can truly say that they are able to think and explain God in a neutral way. We are all products of our own time and our thoughts about God and how we think of Him speaking to us are necessarily constrained by our contemporary outlook. Given that this is so it would be surprising if our ancestors *didn't* think of their God as the people of other societies at that time thought about their gods. Thus Hashem is presented in the earliest Scriptural accounts as a warrior god; the leader of the tribe, who led His people into battle and commanded the displacement or annihilation of the nation's enemies. It would be surprising if they *didn't* think of Him as an absolutist monarch who possessed ultimate power and authority and who, holding the lives of His people in His hands, demanded absolute obedience to His every command. Indeed, in as much as, to our present day consternation, the Torah permits slavery, we actually find that God is envisaged in the Torah and Tanakh as a slave owner who has purchased the people of Israel and who may therefore do as He likes with us. As we read in Vayikra 25:42, "For they are my slaves, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt." As has been somewhat humorously said, God created humankind in His image and we have been returning the favour ever since. The fact that God has allowed His people to explain Him to themselves in human terms within the limitations of our own time and culture, as with our ancestors, is an act of supreme grace, but at the same time we must recognise that this limits our understanding of God. That is not to say that there is nothing unique about the Torah's vision of God in comparison to that of those of other nations. But as Yeshua said to his talmidim in his own time, "I still have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them now." In the same way he said, "Nor do people put new wine in old wineskins; if they do, the skins burst, the wine spills and the wineskins are ruined. No, they pour new wine into freshly prepared wineskins, and in this way both are preserved." Every

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generation is like an old wine skin that can only take so much revelation. It is because of this that instead of thinking of the giving of the Torah at Sinai as a one off supreme revelation we perhaps ought rather to think of it as the start of a process in which, generation by generation, the ball of our understanding about who God is and what He desires from His creation is moved on one yard at a time. Certainly the teachings of Yeshua demonstrate an evolution of thought about God in this respect. Thus, when presented with a situation in which according to Vayikra 20 the death penalty ought to have been carried out, Yeshua decreed the opposite. As we read, "But Yeshua went to the Mount of Olives. At daybreak, he appeared again in the Temple Court, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The Torah-teachers and the P'rushim brought in a woman who had been caught committing adultery and made her stand in the centre of the group. Then they said to him, "Rabbi, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in our Torah, Moshe commanded that such a woman be stoned to death. What do you say about it?" They said this to trap him, so that they might have ground for bringing charges against him; but Yeshua bent down and began writing in the dust with his finger. When they kept questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "The one of you who is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Then he bent down and wrote in the dust again. On hearing this, they began to leave, one by one, the older ones first, until he was left alone, with the woman still there. Standing up, Yeshua said to her, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." Yeshua said, "Neither do I condemn you. Now go, and don't sin any more.""

We note the progression of thought in Yeshua's teaching in that, while in the case of the wood gatherer the divine verdict was to stone the man to death (even though no specific command had been broken), Yeshua's verdict was that the woman caught in adultery should be set free. In fact she was set free *without* condemnation, for "neither do I condemn you". The progression of thought about God in Yeshua's teaching is marked as we examine other passages. In Luke 9 we read of how "He sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village in Shomron to make preparations for him. However, the people there would not let him stay, because his destination was Yerushalayim. When the talmidim Ya'akov and Yochanan saw this, they said, "Sir, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?" But he turned and rebuked them." Indeed, in thus rebuking his talmidim, Yeshua moved the ball of understanding about God on from that envisaged at the destruction of the Midyanites. Thus Torah was not and *is not* a one off revelation. To the contrary, our understanding of God continues to evolve, hopefully in a positive way, to this present day. I believe that it is the task of each generation to push the ball forward in a progressive fashion one yard at a time. And that is why, in spite of the difficulties presented in our own Scriptural traditions, we can condemn barbarity in our present age and rightly demand "not in God's name!"