

Davar Torah Ki Tetzei Sept. 10, 2022

By Liz Waksman

Shabbat Shalom. This week's parsha contains a lot of challenging passages. So I'd like to begin with a question today: When is "good enough" enough?

Spoiler alert, I'm going to answer my question right up front, and then you can listen to the rest of this drash or zone out, as you wish. The answer to my question is... IT DEPENDS. By the way, I used to practice law, so you may not be surprised by that answer.

The question I'm asking, whether "good enough" is enough, is relevant to this very moment in time, these weeks leading up to the Yomin Noraim, when as individuals we engage in self-reflection, we consider our need for repentance, we ask forgiveness from those we have wronged, and we contemplate how we might do better in the coming year. And yet, being only human, even as we engage in this process of cheshbon hanefesh, we are keenly aware that we will fail to live up to the ideals we set out at the start of the New Year. As we all know, gym memberships soar when we make New Years' resolutions in January, and then fall precipitously in February. I'd venture to guess that a similar dynamic applies to Teshuva at this time in the Jewish year.

The question of whether "good enough" is enough is also relevant when we step back and consider broader arcs of time in our lives. Have I given enough to charity. Have I done enough to support social justice causes. Have I done enough to make the world a better place.

Given the times we have been living in, particularly the last 5 years or so, many of us are feeling exhausted, drained. Politics, pandemic, inflation, is it a recession, is it not a recession...We are tired. We are at risk of giving up, losing hope. What to do? Here is where I will apply a super fancy neologism of my own invention: "situational good enough-ness." Here's an application of the concept. Support a charity that is meaningful to you, and dig a little deeper if you can, but please just try keep the purse open. Attend a rally that resonates with you, don't feel guilty about sitting out some others, and keep up the good fight. If we all steward our pet projects, hopefully basic needs will be met.

Please don't sneer at this idea of good enough-ness or consider it naive. It's not about settling for a mediocre solution. Good enough-ness can do wonders. It allows us to recharge and be ready for the next battle. It is also a philosophy embraced by Doug Tallamy. If you haven't heard of Doug Tallamy, here's a fun fact: He's an entomologist at the University of Delaware who is known as a rock star in the world of gardening. Sounds a bit niche-y, sure, but here's the thesis he puts forth in his book, Nature's Best Hope: If homeowners convert just a fraction of lawn to garden beds filled with native plants, these little steps taken by lots of people can restore viable habitats for pollinators and restore ecosystems without major infrastructure changes or government intervention. "Don't worry about the planet, ' Tallamy says, "that will drive you crazy." Even a window box on an apartment balcony can play a part if we all join in.

I'd rather talk about gardening, but I guess I have to say a few words about the parsha.

For context, Moses is continuing to list and review numerous mitzvot and social edicts as he delivers his valedictory. Many of these I find to be problematic.

People employ various strategies when tasked with sharing a drash in such situations. One approach is to focus on the Haftarah, and we do have a poetic Haftarah this week, one of the Haftarot of consolation that we read between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashanah. This series of Haftarot signal hope, redemption, better times ahead. They're nice.

Another approach is to focus on a single passage in the parsha that is beyond reproach. For example, in Ki Tetze we have the mitzvah of Shiluach HaKen – that we don't remove eggs from a nest in the presence of the mother bird, which is taken to be a form of rachmanut, or compassion, towards other creatures. Other examples are the mitzvah of returning lost objects, and the obligation to pay a day laborer's wages on that day, or building a parapet so that no one falls off your roof, or returning lost objects.

I think we can all agree on the merits of these edicts. But the darshan who focuses on these "nice mitzvot" ignores passages that are truly challenging to us in our modern world. For example, the treatment of a woman taken captive in war, the stoning of a wayward son, not turning over a fugitive slave (which is good, except

for the slavery part), the respectful treatment of a corpse following capital punishment (also not bad, if you are ok with capital punishment), trumped up charges challenging the purity of a bride (purity of a bride? I can't even...), forced marriage to a rapist, and the prohibition against wearing garments that are supposedly only for the other gender. Yeesh.

How does one deliver a drash about these topics? Well, a person might employ a kind of situational good-enoughness and say that these examples demonstrate the innovations that the Torah brought in its time. For example, forcing a woman to marry her rapist was a form of protection, particularly economic protection (the subtext here being that she is damaged goods and no one else would want to marry her. And of course, that she had no other way to support herself in society).

As a woman, this is a very difficult passage to read. Imagine how the survivor of a sexual assault would feel if we said "well, you know, The Torah was advanced for its time." I have no doubt that the passages about slavery, or gendered garments, are similarly troubling for many among us. To put this in modern parlance, does the parsha need a trigger warning?

Let's return to my original question: When is good enough enough? Is it good enough to deliver a drash on this parsha that focuses exclusively on the Haftarah? It is good enough to deliver a drash that focuses on mitzvot that easily align with modern values, like returning lost objects or building safe roofs? Is it good enough to gloss over Torah passages that continue to be used (in other communities to be sure, but maybe also in our own) as a basis for discrimination and hatred? When do you think good enough is enough, and when it is very much not good enough?

As we approach the Yomin Nora'im, I hope that we each think about whether what we are doing, and how we are being, is good enough, and whether we have the capacity to do even better. Shana Tova, Shabbat Shalom.