“Speaking Out”

D’var Torah for Erev Shabbat Naso, June 5, 2020

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In a passage from late in the Talmudic tractate Shabbat, the Rabbis are discussing various humane and inhumane treatments of domestic animals. Certain harnesses, ropes, cow udder coverings, and so forth, are prohibited, presumably because they cause discomfort to the animals.

But they notice that certain Sages violate these rules. Does anyone call them out on it? Yes, as it so happens. Even by name, at the risk of embarrassing prominent Sages.

Suddenly their discussion shifts to a sweeping general point. It’s so disarming as to merit reading aloud. The Talmud states:

*“****Anyone who*** *had* ***the capability to*** *effectively* ***protest*** *the sinful conduct of* ***the members of his household and did not protest,*** *he himself is* ***apprehended for*** *the sins of* ***the members of his household*** *and punished. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of* ***the people of his town,*** *and he fails to do so, he is* ***apprehended for*** *the sins of* ***the people of his town.*** *If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of* ***the whole world,*** *and he fails to do so,* ***he*** *is* ***apprehended for*** *the sins of* ***the whole world.”***

 כׇּל מִי שֶׁאֶפְשָׁר לִמְחוֹת לְאַנְשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ וְלֹא מִיחָה — נִתְפָּס עַל אַנְשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ. בְּאַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ — נִתְפָּס עַל אַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ. בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלּוֹ — נִתְפָּס עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלּוֹ

Yes, the Rabbis might only be talking about the “sinful conduct” of abusing their domestic animals. But one suspects the Rabbis are actually going out on a limb and sneaking in a sweeping ethical maxim here. Anyone of us who *could* protest conduct that we know is wrong, whether close to home or in the wider sphere of society, whether it is comfortable or uncomfortable to do so, is him/ or herself culpable on some level for that conduct. Culpable!

I can hear some of us saying that they would like to raise their voices in protest against the looting and vandalizing of innocent shopkeepers’ businesses. Yes indeed. I cannot disagree. No excuse for that.

But the torture and killing of an apprehended suspect, whether he is innocent or guilty, passive or aggressive? Somehow *that* leaves us incapable of speaking out? And a visible *pattern* of such treatment over a long period of time and a wide swath of geography – is *that* not something we citizens can shout out against?

Is *that* not something worth risking our comfortable place in society for?

When I say “comfortable,” I mean comfortable in all the ways we are comfortable: our race, our educational credentials, our professional reputations, our economic status, our connections to seats of power and authority. Our willingness to let elected officials use law enforcement to protect *us*, but not to protect *all* of us.

Today, many rabbis in Israel observed a day of fasting to call out this moment as one of moral emergency. They specifically remembered George Floyd, but also Iyad Al-Halak, a young, innocent autistic Palestinian man killed this past week in an all-too-recognizable scenario. The rabbis were not bending to popular opinion. On the contrary, they were doing the uncomfortable thing by protesting wrongdoing among their own people, and thus not accepting the passive culpability that comes with keeping silent.

Our Torah portion gives us the script of the Kohen’s famous threefold blessing, whereby the Kohen bestows safety, prosperity, well-being, divine graciousness and light. But before and after he gives the blessing, he is warned that it is technically his blessing to bestow. It is God’s. He is the steward of that blessing. He has authority only insofar as he is willing to use it for the higher purpose to which he was appointed.

Likewise an officer of the law. Likewise and elected official. Likewise a captain of industry, a superintendent of schools, or a religious magistrate. All can do more harm than good because of their power and authority; yet all can do more good than anyone else in society *because* of their power and authority.

Likewise the average individual. We have the power to bless, and the power to protest, and the power to make right that which is not right. And the expectation to do so, if our ancient Rabbis are to be believed, not to mention the clarion call of our own God-given conscience.