



***Parshat Ki Teitzei***  
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**Flow**  
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I want to talk to you about something that is very pleasant and productive at the same time. You hear a lot about it from creative types, from artists, singers, composers, writers, athletes—but it is not limited to these fields. It is the feeling of having flow. F-l-o-w. Here is how having flow is defined by dictionary.com:

*In positive psychology, a flow state, also known colloquially as being in the zone, is the mental state in which a person performing some activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity.*

When you have flow, when you are in the zone, you are doing something that you are really good at, something that you have been trained to do, something that evokes the 10,000 hours Malcolm Gladwell taught us it takes to get really proficient at our chosen craft, and you are gushing forth with your creativity. The hours go by. Time melts away. You don't even notice. The writer writes, the pianist plays, the singer sings, the athlete competes, and before they know it, several hours have passed.

I am going to come back to flow, but first I want to talk about the Torah portion. *Ki Teitzei* begins with three seemingly disconnected vignettes. Each is unseemly. Each will seem like the Torah on its worst day.

The first vignette concerns an Israelite soldier who, while conquering a foreign town, is attracted to, and lusts after, a woman in that town. From time immemorial there is the problem of rape during wartime, and the Torah is dealing with that problem. The Israelite man wants to have relations with a captive woman, in Hebrew, *eishet yfah toar*, which means an attractive woman. He is far from home. He has not had relations in a while. He wants this attractive

woman, now. We would want the Torah to just say no to this. There is no way this can be anything but rape. Unfortunately the Torah does not do that. Rather, the Torah says to the Israelite soldier: you may not have her *now*. But here is a procedure which would allow you to have relations with her. You have to cut her hair and cut her nails, so she is no longer as attractive; you have to hear her mourn her parents and her home and her own community which got conquered by the Israelites for thirty days. At the end of thirty days of hearing her mourn, without her hair and nails, if the Israelite soldier wants to have relations with her, he can do so. We would call that rape, because it is. It is sex against her will. This passage concludes with the Torah's assessment that by having sex with this captive woman, the Israelite man has married her.

The second unseemly vignette takes place not in war, but in peace time. It concerns an Israelite man who has two wives whom the Torah refers to as *ahuva*, the wife that is beloved, and *snuah*, the wife that is unloved. If both wives have born this man sons, he cannot discriminate against the son of the unloved woman. He has to give each child his due without regard to the fact that the husband loved one woman and did not love the other.

The third unseemly vignette concerns the infamous case of the *bein sorer u'moreh*, the wayward and defiant son. This son does not listen to his parents, rejects all parental entreaties. He is a glutton and a drunkard. He stays in his room all day, gorging himself on meat and drinking wine. *Honey, what you are you going to do today? Leave me alone!* He slams his bedroom door, eats a steak, drinks another bottle of wine, and collapses on his bed. The end of this unseemly saga is that the parents take their wayward and defiant glutton and drunkard to the town square, and the elders of the community stone him to death.

Yuck. Yuck to the whole thing. Yuck to a Jewish soldier who rapes with the Torah's permission. Yuck to a husband married to two wives. Yuck to stoning a defiant son to death.

Why is it even here? Why do we even read this? What could be the possible point of all this ugliness?

Here is why it is so important and directly relevant to our lives.

Rashi says these three vignettes are not disconnected at all. Rather, they flow one into the other. The Israelite man should say no to the attractive captive woman. But he cannot control his appetites. He has sex with her, against her will, and brings her home as his wife.

Side note: This is not the main point of this sermon but is a lesson that emerges here. To quote Andy Stanley, *when you lose self-control, you lose control*. When you lose self-control, when you should say no to something, but you cannot control your appetite, and you say yes to it, your loss of self-control directly causes you to lose control of your life. That is what happens here.

The Israelite man comes back from war: Hi, hon, I'm home. Listen, want to tell you about something. Let me introduce you to this woman I met in the town we just captured. In the fog of war, things happen. We got together. And now we're kind of married. Don't worry. You're still my first wife. You're my main wife. But she is my second wife. I hope you'll get to know her and grow to like her. Then, turning towards his second wife, the captive woman, the Israelite soldier says: this bedroom is for my first wife and me, why don't you take the room down the hall. She is ripped from her home. She is torn from her parents. She is raped. And now she lives in perpetual tension with a first wife who hates her very existence in a home where she will always feel like a second-class citizen, the unloved wife.

Which leads to the third vignette. According to Rashi, the wayward and defiant child is the son of the Israelite man and the captive woman. I love Rashi's explanation here because it humanizes the defiant child. Who can blame him for his anger, for slamming the door, for wanting to escape the world? Who can blame him for not listening to his parents? Why should I ever listen to my Dad? He raped my Mom. He kidnapped my Mom. I have no home. I have no safe place. In Israel I'm not Israelite enough. In my Mom's community I'm seen as the big Jew. And the thing that really gets me is that my Dad says he did this with his religion's blessing. Why would I ever want any part of that?

In other words, these three unseemly vignettes speak to the power of flow.

There is good flow. That is in the creative and athletic fields. All your years and 10,000 hours of hard work and training lead up to this moment of creativity and expression.

There is bad flow. You say yes to something you should say no to. You lose self-control. You lose control. Your world becomes a hot mess.

But the power of flow, for good and for bad, is not restricted to individuals. It is obviously, and painfully, true for our country.

There is bad flow, very bad, when it comes to the Coronavirus. Covid-19 leads to death and dying and sickness. That flows into lockdown and social isolation. That flows into economic meltdown. That flows into food insecurity and evictions. That flows into social unrest. That flows into poisoned politics which cannot solve our problems.

There is bad flow, very bad, when it comes to racial injustice. Jacob Blake is shot in the back seven times while he goes to his car. In his car are his three sons, ages 8, 5 and 3. They see their father shot in the back multiple times. He is, as you all know, paralyzed below the waist. He was, as you all know, posing no danger whatsoever to law enforcement. He was trying to *get*

*away from* law enforcement and be with his young sons. By the way, it was his 8-year old son's birthday. This is racism, pure and simple. This is hating on a man because he is black.

The police brutality inflicted on Jacob Blake has created a flow of positive energy. It flows into the decisions of professional athletes, in basketball, baseball, and hockey, to not play their games in solidarity with the cause of protecting black lives. That energy flows into the march on Washington yesterday to mark the anniversary of Dr. King's speech.

What can we do to get good energy to flow in the world?

I don't have an answer when it comes to *the* world. But I do have a suggestion when it comes to *our* world. This concept of flow can be helpful.

What I want to share with you came from my nephew Noah. I have spoken about him before. He used to do stand up comedy, back in the day when there was stand up comedy. And he is a writer for Mrs. Maisel. He is also incredibly wise and soulful.

I am part of a large family with deeply felt and conflicting points of view. A few weeks ago there were some heated emails on our family email thread about racial justice. The fault lines in the Jewish world, and at Temple Emanuel, exist within my own family. There are family members who say: there is systemic racism in America, it is endemic, it is structural, it is a moral blight on our country, and it is a moral obligation to address racial injustice now. There are other family members who say: Black Lives Matter is anti-Semitic and anti-Israel. Why are you focused on discrimination against blacks when anti-Semitism and BDS is on the rise?

As you all know if you have ever participated in a family email thread among diverse points of view, one long email begets another long email, and before you know it you have a hundred long and emotion-filled emails talking past each other. Then came Noah's email, which

was the last email. It stilled the noise and made everyone think. After it there was nothing left to say, just to reflect and do. He writes:

Unfortunately there is no perfect solution, and no right answers on how to bring together a society that is already incredibly divided, and seems to be growing even more so by the minute. But...while we can't immediately change or control things at the big picture societal level, we can very much attempt to make change in our own personal lives...

And to that end, I'd invite you all to participate in a quick self-reflection. Since this email thread started with BLM in the subject line, ask yourself what you know about Black people and their opinions on racism and oppression in America that you didn't receive from the news, or an article coming from either political side. Do you have any Black people's #s in your phone? When's the last time you sat down to a meal with a Black person or a Black family? When is the last time you interacted with a Black person that wasn't through work? If the answer to those questions is none, one, never, once etc. then perhaps take time to reflect on your lack of understanding of their struggles on a real, grounded personal level. It's absolutely ok to have concerns over the BLM movement and it's alleged or real associations, but if you've spent more time trying to denounce BLM than you have spent trying to form relationships with and learn/understand from actual Black people, then perhaps that's a personal shortcoming you can look to rectify. I know I would absolutely be hurt to find out about a Black family's email chain denouncing Israel, Zionism or championing the BDS movement without having meaningfully interacted with Jews and Israelis.

Love my nephew. And he's so right. It's Elul, and *the* world is so broken. It's Elul, can we make *our* world a little less broken? Can we use the power of flow to make our world more decent one decent encounter at a time? Shabbat shalom.