



*Parshat Vayikra — Shabbat Zachor*  
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**Counter World**  
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Every year the Oxford Dictionary comes up with a Word of the Year, a word that captures the ethos and mood of our time. For 2018 the word of the year is *toxic*. Toxic was used widely to describe our natural environment, relationships, culture, politics, the state of our national conversation.

The *word* of the year is toxic because all too often our *world* feels toxic.

Here is my question for you. If the world is toxic, do you have a *counter* world to which you can retreat where you feel safe and sound, seen and heard, loved and valued?

The Israelites inhabit a toxic world, a wilderness that is hot, dry and endless. They are thirsty and hungry. Rootless and wandering. Every grain of sand looks the same. Every day looks the same. Times 40 years.

What do they do?

They create their counter world, the Tabernacle, an alternative and much happier reality. In a world of drab sand, the Tabernacle is full of color, of red, purple and blue fabrics, fine gems, dolphin skins, beautiful wood. In the desert, they are preoccupied with the lower rungs of Maslow's hierarchy, eating, drinking, surviving. But with their counter world, with their Tabernacle, they can think about higher emotions, guilt and gratitude.

The Israelites had a counter world that was better than their wilderness. What about us? How can our counter world be better than our toxic world?

In the toxic world, people are driven apart. How can we create a counter world that brings people together?

In the toxic world, people knock each other down. How can we create a counter world where we lift one another up?

In the toxic world, we feel drained. How can we create a counter world where we feel rejuvenated?

How do we get this wonderful counter world? The Torah's answer could not be more clear. In the Torah God created the world in six days. But the Tabernacle was created by Israelites. The same is true for us. If we want a counter world, we have to build it.

Let me share examples of four counter worlds that work.

The first counter world is a gym—or any other place where you work on your physical fitness and health. The psalmist says it plainly: *loh hameitim yehallelu yah*, the dead do not praise God. While there are no guarantees, we need to do our part to try to stay alive and healthy as long as we can by developing a regular work out life. A good gym is a sanctuary for body and soul.

Last month Shira and I went to visit our 24-year old daughter in Los Angeles. The twenties can be a tough decade. Twenty-somethings have a lot to figure out. What they do for a living; how to make ends meet; the search for a life partner; many move around from job to job and from city to city and from relationship to relationship. Many are far from home and from the support structures of their youth. That is why David Brooks calls these the odyssey years. Most of Jordy's friends are experiencing their own version of the odyssey years. What does their counter world look like? Answer: Soul Cycle. Every Sunday this group goes to Soul Cycle for an intense hour spin class, from which they emerge recharged.

What are you doing for yourself, physically, to stay healthy? What is *your* version of Soul Cycle?

We also need a counter world at work. We spend so many of our waking hours at our job. And yet, how much can any one employee really do to shape the culture of a work environment? Most of us inherit our work spaces; we do not create them.

While we may not be able to set policy and culture for our larger work force, we can control the personal quality of our interactions. We can be a mensch with the people in our little orbit. Our small act of decency creates ripples.

In her book The Power of Meaning, Emily Esfahani Smith relates a study of cleaning and janitorial staff at a large hospital in the Midwest. Cleaners are crucial to the safety of a hospital. This study focused on their morale. How did they feel about their jobs?

A deep learning emerged. If the cleaners felt respected as people by doctors, nurses and families, they felt like they were part of the healing team. If doctors, nurses and families knew and used their names—how are you Ben?—they had a high morale. If people would walk around the floor they were mopping to respect their work product, they had a high morale. But if they were unacknowledged, if they felt invisible, if people would walk on their floor while they were in the middle of cleaning it, they had low morale.

You do not need to be the CEO to shape a culture. It is ordinary acts of menshlikeit done every day that shape a culture. Knowing, seeing, and caring about the people we work with. Are we creating a counter world of menshlikeit at work?

Here is the third counter world that you can shape: a regular prayer space. I was talking recently with a person who is new to our community; who is in fact not Jewish. But he and his wife and children have been coming to our services, Friday nights and Shabbat morning. They are interested in learning more about Judaism. What draws you to a service in a language you do not understand, I asked him? I do not understand the Hebrew. But I do understand the vibe.

The vibe is a deep serenity. Nobody is on their phone. Nobody is climbing the corporate ladder. Nobody is striving. Everybody is there to just be, to sit, to enjoy unhurried time with their loved ones. Where else does that happen, he asked? Nowhere else for me. That is why we are there.

Do you have a spiritual counter world where you can just be?

And the fourth counter world is the most important of all. A gym is important. Work is important. A spiritual center is important. But the most important counter world is what happens in our home. There too we have the power to shape that world.

Recently something happened in our community that is unusual. A granddaughter decided to sit shiva for her grandmother. According to Jewish law, one does not need to sit shiva for a grandparent. But, like the Israelites who created the mishkan with gifts from their heart, this shiva flowed from her heart.

During one of the evenings of shiva she shared that when she and her husband were raising two small children, this grandmother, then 83 years old, would regularly drive from Connecticut to Newton, a drive of more than two and a half hours, to be helpful. She would take care of both children, her great grandchildren, helping feed them, bathe them, change them, brush their teeth, tell them bed time stories, put them to bed, do the dishes, do the laundry, and then ask, after all that, what else can I do to be helpful? She was 83. She did this for years, until both great grandchildren grew up.

Roll the film forward, she passes at the age of 101, and this granddaughter not only sits shiva for her grandmother, she is saying Kaddish for her every morning and every evening. Again, not required by Jewish law. A gift of the heart.

Her grandmother had created a counter world of love, and that counter world did not end when she left the world.

At work and at home, for our physical selves and for our spiritual selves, what counter worlds of love and healing will we now create? Toxic is so 2018. In 2019, let's create a better word for a better world. Shabbat shalom.