

January 28, 2022 D'var on Exodus 22:18

This d'var will likely not go where any of you might think it will go.
I got caught (as happens from time to time) on a particular verse of the parsha.

With so many verses to get stuck on,
so much juice in this reading,
a catalog of guidelines and teachings,

Where, out of this vast terrain, did I become the most curious?

Well you may ask.
I'll get to it in a minute and be done with the d'var in less than five minutes.

Years ago, I read a funny bit of graffiti that went something like:

“Archduke Ferdinand found alive! World War One fought for no reason!”

Besides being funny (and a century outdated), it caused me to think (as have others), what if we had the power to make a little tiny adjustment, and make things better, not only for ourselves but for millions of people?

I'd like to explore that wish – that desire to set things right.

1. What if you could indulge that wish to set things right – to repair an upsetting political event, to bring the pneumonia vaccine back to Jim Henson, or to prevent Hitler from coming to power?
2. Let's go further with that wish and say it was true. Abracadabra! You now have the magical power to do these kinds of things. That's wonderful! You can do some beneficial things for society.
3. You have the ability to set things right not only in the present, but you can go back in time to put your magical abilities to good use. Depending on your inclination, you could –who knows– get Pharoah to change his mind earlier about “letting my people go” so that all the first-born of Egypt didn't have to die because of his stubbornness.

1. Let's say you have now set a few things correct in history. Good for you. Events unfold a little more smoothly now perhaps. Some good has come to pass in the world thanks to you. Tikkun olam at its best.

2. Instead of needing the Golem to protect the Jews in the ghettos of Europe, and for that matter the Jews in temples here in the United States, all we need is you and your powers. The world could rest a little more easily because of you.
3. Where, I'm curious, would you stop if you have this kind of beneficial power? You could do a lot more good deeds in the world and for the world. What's to stop you?

I have one request to make of you and your magic and time-traveling abilities. Could you go back and direct your magical powers at the translations of Exodus 22:18?

You would save untold lives if you did.

Your better translation would help us all understand what Torah is asking us to do.

We would also have healthier attitudes about the marginalized people in our society, but mostly women.

This is the passage that captured me.

The verse in Sefaria reads:

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

The updated English of the New Revised Version reads:

"You shall not permit a sorceress to live."

The Hebrew for that noun is "mechashefa." It only occurs once in the whole Tanakh, which makes it a HAPAX LEGOMENON.

Some scholars have put forward the idea that the verb involves "cutting" or "muttering." It's questionable that it has to do with witchcraft or sorcery. In fact, no gender is indicated in the original Hebrew. The female gender was graciously added later, no doubt by male translators.

Because of this hapax, a lot of unhappy things have happened:

- 1) People made assumptions that only females did whatever Mechashefas did.
- 2) Countless witches (or simply wise women without a magical bone in their body) were murdered.
- 3) Worse than that, certain religious people have condemned watching or reading *Harry Potter*, because of ...well... witchcraft and sorcery.

Let's say that you were successful in my request to make my request true. The reading is now the more benign (but still gendered) version of the New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, which reads:

"You shall not tolerate a sorceress."

Countless biases about witches and sorceresses have been set straight.

No females are denigrated (at least not through that particular verse),

And we can all binge-watch Harry Potter without fear of reprisal from our pious neighbors and friends.

There may be one problem remaining, and I don't think time travel or magic will uproot it. We would love to have the kind of control, those special powers, the ability to set things right, but we have a limited view of what would, in fact, set things right. We are limited creatures, after all, and cannot see the whole picture.

It would seem to me that, at its root, this passage from the Torah is putting forth the command that we do not allow that "desire to control" attitude to have life. When we encounter that kind of muttering or cutting, we are to take note and not allow it to live.

That may sound pretty harsh to that aspect of ourselves that doesn't see the problem in controlling as much as we can. (Torah and its interpreters can sound harsh sometimes as they try to figure out the implications in praxis.)

But, in fact, I imagine most of you observe this "do not seek ultimate control" commandment most of the time without a problem. To illustrate, I'll share an anecdote from times when I would eat meals with my music history teacher (George DeVine) of blessed memory.

He would lean back in his chair, close his eyes and kvetch about something or other. He would then say, "When I am emperor," I will not tolerate [fill in the blank]." The improbability of his ever wielding that much power would cause us to laugh, And we would empathize with his attitude and go on with our meal.

This may be the only magic we need:

The magic of a community that kvetches

but only in a natural (not a supernatural) way.

The magic of friends that murmur

but do so in a way that permits humanity to go its blessed way.

And the magic of friends that can make an occasional cutting remark,

and then say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me --

That did not show the compassion that I really feel and want to have."

Kein y'hi ratzon – If the Eternal wishes it, may it be done.