

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Shoftim

"Absalom, o'Absalom!" The wail of King David over his son's death echoes across all pages of the Bible, finding its common theme repeated over and over - a parent desperate over the tragic loss of a child. Certainly we see too much of this nightmare in the real world, as well. In some instances, the loss is occasioned by a government that sends our children out to war. Other times, we watch our children succumb to illnesses that modern medicine is, as yet, unable to cure. This tragic loss is not always about death. As a parent I can tell you that watching a child suffer aches beyond any imaginable pain. Frequently, we watch our children suffer due to emotionally charged choices that bear no semblance to rational decisions. As I used to call it, children think they are "bullet proof." For David, the suffering over Absalom began long before his son's death. After leading a revolt against his father's throne, Absalom vowed to kill his father. En route to this battle, Absalom's trademark flowing, beautiful hair (and source of ego) got caught in a tree, ripping him from his horse, hanging him to death. Absalom was beautiful. He was charismatic. He was a great leader and warrior. Likening him to a tree; his trunk was strong, his branches were powerful, and his foliage was more beautiful than any other. Ultimately, though, what cost him his life, was that his roots lacked substance. In this analogy, the roots that keep a tree grounded, nourished, and healthy are akin to a person's faith. Roots have no glory, no beauty, and sometimes they get in the way of immediate gratification, but the most beautiful trees cannot stand without strong, deep roots. Even the great and beautiful Absalom failed, for he lacked roots, and with his lack of faith died the hope for his next generation.

In this week's Torah portion, we are commanded to protect food bearing trees, even in the midst of battle. We are not to chop them down, burn them, or in any way harm them. They are the source of our sustenance. Some will read this text and draw a distinction between fruit bearing and non-fruit bearing trees. In truth, there is no greater "food source" than the trees which provide the air we breathe. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel protested the Vietnam War on behalf of the trees. First he acknowledged that people can depose governments that entangle them in wars in which they did not belong. With help from other people, they can flee from the horrors of an inflicted war. The trees cannot argue on their own behalf, nor could they protect themselves from the environmental nightmares that we cause in battle. If we can learn to pay attention to the trees at this level, certainly we should have the clarity of vision to see what we were doing to each other. He also argued for the trees to protect us from ourselves. In our lack of concern for our environment that we were chemically destroying, he reminded us to think past the war. What good is winning a war if we die from lack of oxygen? In killing the trees, we condemned ourselves to die alongside them. For Heschel, this facet of war provided the ultimate demonstration of humanity's lack of faith. In war, we lose faith in the power of humanity in return for the glory of the immediate victory, seeking to wield power and control over humanity. That search for power is antithetical to faith; it costs lives without reason and serves only to bring about more and even greater conflict. One cannot win a war any more than one can win a hurricane. One cannot save the Earth from the "enemy" while destroying the earth at the same time. We cannot destroy each other and live with each other at the same time. I am not a tree hugger, but I know that saving trees is sacred work. It reminds us to save ourselves while preserving life and hope for tomorrow. It roots us in the victory of the pursuit of faith over the pursuit of power.

As a student of Heschel's teaching, I cannot help but apply his fear and concern to the greater picture of society. People are arguing over the political state in the world, giving greater priority to personal wealth than to individual human life. As citizens, we indiscriminately sacrifice human lives to fight wars all over the world – burying our children for other people's causes. Here at home, with far greater passion and scrutiny, we "bloody" each other over political power and personal and corporate profit margins that put the health of family, neighbors, schools, workplaces, and our government at risk. The rhetoric over the dollar screams louder than any voice calling to save human lives from war, famine or disease. People are bringing guns to the President's speaking engagements. I have to wonder whether we have lost faith in the values that made this country strong – the roots that built a nation wherein we put each other first; "...for the people, by the people." On the surface, our "foliage" looks healthy, but I fear our "roots" are rotting. We have violated the Torah's command against destroying the trees. I fear that we are going to have to watch our children suffer as they struggle to exist amidst all that we have destroyed. It is time to fortify our roots and reengage each other without the weapons of war and partisan rhetoric, but with the compassion that demands that we see each other as neighbors – brothers and sisters. We are more than politicized objects. We are beings – one heart created each one of us. We cannot win this war to save the world as Democrats, Republicans, Communists or Libertarians ... only you and I can do that. Shabbat Shalom.