

If you come to shul hoping for a break in thinking about the situation in Israel, in Gaza, I am sorry. Because even though part of me, too, would like a break, Torah keeps speaking to me about it. If you need a break, I encourage you to step out and take care of yourself.

What do you do when someone in your family, a non-combatant, is abducted into enemy territory? This is exactly Avram's experience in this parashah in Chapter 14, when his nephew Lot, who has settled in Sodom, is abducted by King Kedarla'omer and his allies as they put down a rebellion instigated by the King of Sodom and *his* allies, part of an ongoing geopolitical dispute over who should have power in the region. A refugee escapes the melee and reports to Avram what has occurred.

Now, it is worth noting that the commentary tradition is not neutral on the fact the Lot chose to live in Sodom. Back in Chapter 13, in verses 10 and 11, when Lot chooses to settle there and separate from Avram, Rashi comments that the midrashic interpretation is that "He wandered away from the Originator (מקדמונו) of the Universe, saying, "I want neither Abram nor his God."

Radak says, "Lot, although aware of the evil reputation of the people in the cities of that valley, had decided to ignore this, preferring to concentrate on the advantages of the land itself." Nevertheless, when Lot is abducted, his uncle Avram spends not a moment meditating on how Lot shouldn't have been in Sodom in the first place, or otherwise blaming Lot for his fate.

Immediately after receiving the news of Lot's capture, in Chapter 14, verse 14 Avram musters his household to pursue the invading kings. The subsequent verses describe how he pursues them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus, and does battle with them, and then returns with Lot and all of the other people and spoil that the invaders had taken from the cities of the plain.

*Pidyon Shevu'im* – the redemption of captives, is an incredibly important Jewish value. As Maimonides teaches in his Laws of Gifts to the Poor, “The redemption of captives takes precedence over supporting and clothing the poor. There is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives, for the captive is among the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and those whose lives are in danger.

A person who ignores the redemption of captives, transgresses “you shall not harden your heart” (Deut. 15:7), “you shall not shut your hand from your needy brother” (Deut. 15:7), “you shall not stand idly by the blood of your brother” (Lev. 19:16), “he shall not rule with vigor over him in your sight” (Lev. 25:53).” He even teaches that a community that has collected money to build a synagogue should spend it all for the sake of redeeming captives, although – good news for us, if the synagogue is already built, they do not need to sell it.

As in the Torah, in Maimonides law code, the mitzvah of taking care of members of our tribe, particularly when they are most vulnerable, extends even to those who make choices we disagree with. He does not say that we are obligated to redeem our fellow Jews, except if you can’t relate to the choices they made that led to their capture. He doesn’t say redeem your fellow Jews, except if they have different political stances. He says redeem them. Full stop. Because they are suffering, and because Jews should feel it in our hearts when our fellow Jews suffer.

Which brings me to a particular point of discomfort for American Jews in this moment. This is a moment when many of us Jews are particularly feeling Jewish suffering. And some of us may be surprised at this. A congregant asked me yesterday if she was “crazy” for being so upset to see how the leftist spaces she inhabits online had dismissed the mourning for Jewish dead. Many of us who identify with progressive movements tend to embrace a universalism that espouses an equal value to every life, a rejection of tribalism.

But we exist in circles of obligation. To use a less immediately loaded case, no one but the most extreme utilitarian philosopher – say, Peter Singer – would suggest that I ought to care more about a child I’ve never met in Wisconsin than I care about a child that I am raising. Clearly, I have more care for the children I’m raising, and more responsibility to their wellbeing. That doesn’t mean I have the right to hurt the child in Wisconsin, and if children in Wisconsin are in need and I have discretionary income to donate to the wellbeing of children in Wisconsin, I should give by all means – but I am just not as responsible for that child.

Could we, please, just allow ourselves to care a little extra for our fellow Jews, without it feeling like a tortuous thing to justify – not because we are better than everybody else, not because the rest of the world does not matter, but because we are family? Could we allow ourselves that, side by side with our lofty universalist aspirations?

Now, the shadow side of this tribalism is if we get attached to a narrative that we *are* better than everyone else, or that the rest of the world does *not* matter. And there is plenty of inherited Jewish trauma that pushes us to those narratives. But when get attached to those narratives, it becomes too easy for us to do terrible things, to justify terrible things in the name of our exceptionalism.

Which brings me back to Avram and his model. It seems clear that he would never have fought this battle if it weren’t for his nephew. And he stays clear that he is fighting a war to free his nephew. When he returns from battle, he is greeted by both King Malchizedek and the King of Sodom. Malchizedek, whose name means “My king is Justice” offers him a blessing, the King of Sodom offers him all of the spoils of war. And Avraham is clear where he stands. He accepts the blessing, and rejects the spoils of war. He rejects the idea that he somehow has the right to be the new high king, that is victory gives him the right to the spoil, even though he was in the right. He knows how far the justice of his cause goes, and no further.

May we be as wise in how waging war, and may we redeem the captives of Zion.