

Balak 5777

Balak 5777

Numbers 22:2-25:9

Micah 5:6-6:8

In my adolescence my dad had a condo in Rocky Point. We would go there, hit up the fish market, buy incredible fish and produce, go deep sea fishing, and cook up a storm. Honestly, there is no better ceviche than the one that I can make from a trip to that beautiful city. And it is beautiful.

One day, I was maybe 14 or 15, we were driving down there and my dad was trying to find a new place, something one of his friends had told him about. This was when GPS units were large and expensive, not part of ubiquitous pocket sized computers, so we didn't have one. Heck, even if we had it was a dice roll for the destination in that town to even be listed.

My dad made a turn down an empty street, and I noticed immediately that all the parked cars were facing the wrong way. I knew this was a one-way street and wanted to speak up.

Now, I don't know if you know this, but I'm kind of a black sheep. I used to be ashamed of this status, though now I embrace it. When you're a shy early teen with a history of being bullied and a family so wrapped up in their issues that yours are consistently pushed aside, you keep your head down and your mouth shut.

Sure enough, right after he turned down that street, flashing red and blues from a motorcycle cop came on. Dad got pulled over in Mexico. I caught bits of the conversation – he didn't know it was a 1-way street, though that could have been posturing to get out of a ticket.

One harsh rebuke and \$40 later, we were back on our way.

Perhaps that's something I have in common with another Eddie – relating too well to a donkey. Balaam's donkey stopped when she saw a hinderance in the path, and was beaten for it. This isn't a *d'var Torah* about beating those with silent advice, though. This is about the majesty of the black sheep and the fear they inspire in others.

This entire portion is about the leaders of a people trying to curse the young nation of Israel about to enter their own promised land. They'd heard stories about their fierce and blessed military campaigns and about their esteemed status with a god above all others. Can you imagine that? The G-d of this people is one god, more powerful than the myriad gods of the polytheistic nations.

We were the original black sheep, the ones who transformed religion as this world saw it. And the leaders, Balak and Balaam, knew our power and our potency. Balak tried to curse us and stop us, working his way down to smaller and smaller numbers, trying to bypass and skirt the prohibition on cursing us that Balaam conveyed. Balaam became a mouthpiece of Hashem and conveyed blessings upon Israel and a curse on Balak.

Two leaders acted out of fear in this story. One acted with violence, the other curiosity. One acted with a lust for power, the other acted with a thirst for knowledge. Let's even look at Balaam's transportation: a donkey. Not a horse. He rode a work animal, not a majestic steed, a lowly pack animal. Balaam is a man of pragmatism, probably frustrated pragmatism, but still pragmatic. He knows what needs to be done and does it.

The biggest thing I've learned in my life so far is how to turn being a black sheep into an advantage. How it sets you apart from the rest in everything you do, so people come to expect uniqueness from the get-go. It keeps people on their toes, and expectations shift from typical to atypical. If you leverage yourself as a black sheep, atypical can become

extraordinary.

That's what I think we need to learn at this time.

"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!"

This isn't just a blessing put into Balaam's mouth. This is what we should aspire to. A tent is more than a place to sleep; it is shelter and it is protection. Our love of each other and acceptance of each other will protect us, shelter us, and keep us secure.

We live in an era where white supremacy is coming back, not silently, but loudly and with pride. New hate groups are emboldened and we, as Jews, are receiving hate from both sides of political parties. We need to remember that our few decades of peace and quiet in the US do not make us white – we are still a minority and we are still blamed for things not our doing.

We are not white. We are minorities. We are black sheep. And we are extraordinary. We need to be at the forefront of being extraordinary and we need to back each other up. Whether it's a small community of Lubavitchers in New York with their ultra-Orthodox ways or egalitarian ultra-Reform Jews with questionable conversions, we need to embrace Jewry in its vast, glorious, and extraordinary nature. We are a *nation* of people, which means we will have dissent, debate, and fights. We cannot, though, forget that we are still the other, so we must lift each other up and elevate what we have in common: belief in G-d, G-d alone.

My prayer this Shabbat is that we remember who we are. That we are not white. That we can acknowledge the glory of all our schools of thought, even those we vehemently disagree with. Each of us can be a different shade of dark in our wonderful flock of black sheep. Shabbat shalom.

On Kathy Griffin

A few days ago (May 30?), famed shock comic Kathy Griffin released a photo of her holding a mold of Donald Trump's head. The fake head was covered in presumably fake blood, and she had a 1,000 mile stare into the camera.

Basically, she had a Jon Snow moment.

The conservative leaning world had an incredible outrage, as would be predicted. Yet, I can't help but feel like it's mock outrage. Like it's just them complaining to complain and because some liberal woman openly thinks their losing (by almost 3,000,000 votes) President is crap.

I want to break this down into two areas:

Area One

The blood is so freaking fake, guys. If you decapitate someone, it bleeds from the neck, not from the implanted mink hairpiece.

Area Two

She didn't go to far.

Yeah, I said it. And if you want to stop reading here because you think I'm full of shit and don't anything, fine. Stay ignorant.

There are two directions humor can take: kicking up and kicking down. Kicking up is a peasant making fun of a king. It's a person at a disadvantage poking fun at someone who can take them down. Kicking down is a person in a position of

power making fun of those underneath them. It's a bully disguising their hurtful comments as humor.

Area two-point-three

Let's take a look at some evidence for this false outrage, as the news organizations manufacturing this controversy are playing into the fragile emotions of the GOP's base.

First: Barack Obama received actual lynching threats.

I will remind you, twice-legitimately-elected President Obama is black. And black people were historically (as recently as May 20, 2017) lynched. A lynching is a terrorist in-deed-but-not-name action which serves to warn an entire group of people – in this case black people, to remain underfoot.

Let's see some of the "art" pieces that came out during Obama's presidency, shall we?







Yeah. Pretty historically disgusting and racially charged.

But, aside from a few people I knew who quietly condemned these, there wasn't *any* outrage against this in the mainstream media, in the GOP or even on Fox News (they were too busy giving air to conman Trump's assertions that Obama wasn't a legal citizen).

But one (female) comic has a terribly made up and bloodied head of their beloved eggshell-fragile emotional leader and *she's a TRAITOR DON'T YOU KNOW!*

Area Two-point-six

Black people were historically hanged. This happened. It was a warning to other black people. This is as indisputable as the Civil War being fought for states rights to *own gah-damn slaves*. We do not, in this country, have a history of beheading white people who renege on paying their workers (I'm tempted to say 'maybe we should' but I don't feel like dealing with the hate mail – besides Bannon's no longer in power so I don't really want anyone...um...Iron Throned...).

Let me reiterate: the effigies of Obama have real, historical precedent and served not only as a message to the President, but as a message to all black people, and arguably all colored minorities.

The poorly cast head of Trump has no historical precedent, serves only as a message to fellow liberals and Trump's family of "screw this guy". That's all. It obviously wasn't a threat, as it meets no legal definition of it. It was just marketing for a message. Simple as that.

Obama's effigies in alleys and parks, in my opinion, went too far. Their effects dredged up recent history of white supremacy (and look, their daddy Bannon was in office for a few months!) and reminded black people of the danger they face daily. Anyone who doesn't understand that is ignorant, either

willfully or not.

Griffin's public photoshoot with Trump's poor-semblance (I just used "poor" and "Trump" in a sentence – that's treason!) is just effective marketing and branding. Trump knows a thing or two about that.

Area two-point-eight

Bonus clarification, before I wrap this thing up:

Look at the Obamas' reactions to the original effigies. It was silence.

Look at the Trumps' reactions. It's bullying.

Their actions lack as much class as their décor.

Area two-point-nine: the conclusion

Presidents have been having their image violated since we've had presidents. Period, end of story.

Obama was the first to have historical ties to his.

Trump is the thinnest skinned to be tied to his. And seriously, that blood was wack.

I think this whole thing is hilarious. The photos are pretty *meh*, though I found them hilarious because I knew exactly what they'd bring. And they delivered like Dominos to a college campus.

This outrage over a mediocre photo session is absurd, overblown, and hiding actual problems. So get over yourselves, pseudo-angry denizens, and go do something with yourselves.

Emor, 5777

Emor

Leviticus 21:1-24:23

There's much to ponder in this *parashah*. Whether it's the outlining of the festivals or the responsibilities one has when damaging another's property; whether it's the outlining of the priestly duties, or the suitability of animals for donations or sacrifices, there's much to sift through.

I'm going to focus on a few relations here, starting with chapter 22, verse 23. "As for an ox or sheep that has mismatching limbs or uncloven hooves you may make it into a donation, but as a vow, it will not be accepted."

There's much to learn from this, and I feel it's the crux of this *parashah* and a good tip for managing one's life.

We're looking at two different uses for the same animal under different circumstances.

The first is any ox or sheep in optimal condition: no blemishes, with matching limbs, and no problematic quirks, being used as a vow or a donation. This is an animal that can be used as a sacrifice offering or a vow.

The second is that an ox or sheep with physical problems can be used as a donation, something to help a synagogue or family, but not to fulfill a vow or as a sacrifice.

Let's talk about vows in Torah. Vows go beyond promises. A promise in Torah is not taken lightly, a vow is even stricter. We go so far as to have prayers during *Kol Nidre* to ask for absolution from broken vows. Some people add "*b'li neder*" to their promises to remove any insinuation that it might be a vow, rather than a promise.

Our vows are held to a standard even higher than our promises.

Let's look at this again: a sacrificial animal with physical deformities which do not detract from its healthfulness can be used as a donation, but not to fulfill a vow. Only the animals most desirable can be used to fulfill the oaths held higher than promises.

What does this mean? *We are not allowed to shortchange or skirt around our oaths.*

Furthermore, I believe this is why the *Kohanim* have so many stipulations. They are the ones who are allowed to mediate the tasks between Israel and Hashem that have been prescribed. They are the human vow of action to Hashem.

Let's look at this today. We can see times when leaders make promises and give leftovers. Whether it's promising to bolster education with a tax increase, and instead using that revenue to pay for contractors, or promising to support minorities and instead oppressing them: it's endemic.

I get produce every other week or so from a group that rescues produce which is slated to be thrown away. Sometimes what they put out is moldy, slimy, and otherwise inedible. Sometimes it is perfectly glorious, crisp and fresh. They take the minimal cost for each box of produce and give it to various causes – which is good. Their inconsistency is not good.

Is there any wonder we have so much cynicism toward charities, leaders, and even each other? It seems that we live in a time when our word is taken lightly and the people brokering transactional promises are beneath the quality of our neighbors. I'm not accusing any of these being bottom of the barrel, but simply not as good as what we know we deserve. Again, I make no specific assertions of a leader being the worst ever, I am just stating that we deserve better.

Whether it's cancer foundations cutting funds for companies that screen for their particular type of cancer, hate groups disguised as social movements, or companies looking to exploit

both their workers and tax code, we have been made aware of long-standing traditions of deceitful promises.

Are we at an impasse? Are we, as decent humans, as those who want to help each other up and bolster our communities, silly for expecting our representatives to be better than us? I don't want to be the smartest person in a room. I don't want to be the most successful person in a group. I don't want to be the best fencer on the strip.

I want to learn. I want to be better. I want to have someone to look up to.

This is why business coaches have business coaches. Vocal teachers have vocal teachers. Peer groups support and nurture each other with each member's individual strengths.

That was the point of the *kohanim*. They were a group of priests who were there not only to broker our vows. They built up our religion through service. Service of ideas debated. Service of promises kept. Service of oaths and vows respected. They were to be looked up to, though we are not to be subservient to them.

What do I want to learn from this *parashah*? It's not the minutiae of what we can eat, what we can offer, or who can take what. That's a different lesson for a different day. Today, I want to learn that we not only can, but should, expect to see what we wish to be in those who represent us.

We were made in G-d's image. Each of us is a tiny reflective iota of her being. Just as we put our best face forward in daily life to try and inspire ourselves to live up to our own desires, should we not do the same with those we delegate power to? Should we not demand our leaders be the icons we wish to, ourselves, be?

My prayer this Shabbat is that we find the wherewithal as a people to support our own potential by not shortcutting our

vows to ourselves, our community, and our planet. My prayer is to bring people into our fold who not only inspire us, they kindle growth. There is an idiom: be the change you want to see in this world. Why don't we not only embody that change, but demand it from the people we give the honor of representing us? Shabbat shalom.

Vayechi, 5777

Parshat Vayechi

Genesis 47:28-52:26

5777

1/14/2017

I read a lot about *Vayechi*. About the generational lines, about the blessings skipping generations, about the reversal of the hands during the blessings – again, about the potential irony of the name “*Vayechi*” which means “and he lived” when it’s about his death, and about the funeral processions including Pharaoh’s acolytes.

I want to focus on one thing, really: the skipping of the generation of the blessing. I feel this is one of the most critical points of our beautiful religion.

Israel, remember he’s not referred to as Yaakov at this moment, because he’s performing holy duties for G-d, asks Joseph, his son, to bring him his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh, for a priestly blessing. He states that his grandchildren will receive land like their father, and be counted as tribes, and he bestows a blessing on them.

Why is this so critical? Superficially, it’s about land ownership, property rights, and being counted as part of a

greater community while maintaining your own agency. That is all well and good, and it would work if he did this as Yaakov. Simple.

He didn't do this as Yaakov, though; he did this as Israel. He did this while under the name and tutelage of his, let's say, superhero alias. Yaakov was the everyday father, worker, and scholar – Clark Kent. Israel was his Holy alter ego that came out when Hashem needed to make things happen. Fitting, of course, that it means “wrestled or contended with G-d”.

Israel didn't just give tribal rights to his grandkids. He gave grandparents the precedent to adopt their grandkids as their own, both spiritually and literally. He also continued the precedent acknowledging the firstborn may not always be the right one to carry the torch for the family. Even more importantly, I feel he gave a blessing which transcends all generations, if we are open to it.

How do I mean?

By blessing his grandchildren as being as impactful as his own children, he is telling us that our impact as a people does not diminish through the generations. Let me rephrase: we, as people of holiness, thought, study, and action, do not lose our efficacy through our children.

Why does this matter? As you add water to soup, it becomes thinner. The flavor diminishes, and you need to eat more to get the same nutrition. You fill up on water alone. We are not water in soup. We are not empty vessels of knowledge repeating the same message verbatim. We are taught to debate, argue, and love. We are taught to enter studying with open minds, and question, and refine.

Look at the internet, it's a recording of human thought, almost anything you could think of and many things you probably wouldn't want to. It spans from the apathetic to the zealous and from the holy to the profane.

I feel, and I believe, that our books, our texts, our thoughts, and our debates are direct representations of Israel's blessing, that his grandchildren are as important as his children to him. That was Hashem speaking; that was the duality of humanity fighting with and accepting G-d speaking to us.

G-d wanted us to know that our effectiveness as a people wouldn't diminish with generations of growth. It is critically imperative we know this. We were to continue being enslaved. We were to be in exile. We were to be slaughtered. We were to be oppressed for centuries. We were to have our cultural identity endangered, both in ancient times and modern.

No, our strength does not diminish through time. It does not thin out through numbers. Rather our virility as a people compounds exponentially as we grow. If there are two Jews and three opinions, imagine how many opinions there are with three, or five, Jews. It compounds through thought, through debate, through *Shabbos* dinners, through accepting converts as our own blood, through fighting over every sacred rite we have.

Vayechi is not about his death. It is about the life of Israel. The life we carry on.

This *Shabbat* my prayer is that we, a people of fractured opinions and thought, stand as a mosaic of humanity and holiness. That we act on our G-d given orders to tend to our Earth and it's people. It's time we embrace and use the blessings Israel gave us.

Clippings

Clippings

Eddie Arriola

Alone in field stood a Rosebush
Its petals vibrant crimson
Leaves emerald green
Bees playfully rolled in its pollen

The Florist came upon the Rosebush
He loved the blooms as he knew how
"Trust me"

As he plucked them off for display
In their full glory he captured them
Soon they wilted and turned dark
The Florist celebrated them
"Look what this once was"
As he searched for a new flower
The bees moved on
And the husk of the bloom drooped
"What could I have been?"

The Gardener came upon the Rosebush
He loved the blooms as he knew how
"Trust me"
As he clipped off a bloom
He took it home
And nurtured it
Soon it grew roots
Soft and tender
Grasping for sustenance
The Gardener smiled and encouraged the Bloom
"Soon you will be ready for the sun
"You will have bees in your pollen
"And you will be whole again"
The Bloom pushed her roots out

She saw what the Gardener saw within herself
Soon she was in the soil
Drinking greedy gulps of sun
With bees playfully rolling in her pollen

Ki Teitzei, 5776

Ki Teitzei, 5776

Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19

This is not going to be a comfortable *dvar torah*. There are going to be parts of it that address some worldly ugliness which keeps rearing it's head. There are adult themes in it which I will endeavour to handle as delicately as possible.

This is a *parashah* which is short on narrative and long on laws. Laws of sex, laws of helping others, laws of libel, laws of war, laws of refuge, laws of protection, laws of charity, and many more. We're focusing, today, only on the first two I listed: laws of sex and laws of helping others.

Why? I could speak today about protecting current populations that are being turned into demagogues, though we have spoken out about that as a community. I could talk about giving to the needy and destitute, though I think we work well on that front and inspire others by our examples.

I want to talk about a shifting mindset in a fight that has been going on too long for too many people. I want to talk about how recent events should infuriate us and drive us to change how people treat something.

Deuteronomy 22:4 tells us that we should not pretend we don't see our brother struggling with their donkey after it has

fallen down. That we should help them out and pick up their load with them. Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz in Temecula, CA, who is restrained in his own body by ALS probably knows how hard it can be to pick up your donkey alone – he is forced to record his words of wisdom using only eye tracking technology. He wrote something profound: that helping lift one's donkey is a simple *mitzvah*, extending that to lifting one's fallen spirituality is a deeper one.

He writes: "...Realize that it is his animal that has fallen—not him. His *neshamah* [soul] is pristine. He is essentially holy and wants to be G?d's. It is only his 'animal'—his circumstances, nature and upbringing that put him where he is today."

This is simple: it is incumbent upon us to lift up our brothers and sisters who are are broken, who are weary, who are driven down. We get to determine who our brothers and sisters are: whether they're fellow Jews, colleagues, or people with similar struggles. The bonds of sisterhood and brotherhood are bonds which we know can transcend genetics and familial lineage.

Let's bring in the second part of this. Deuteronomy Chapter 22, verses 23-29 lists three very specific punishments for sex. The first is the death penalty for both a woman and a man sleeping together consensually if the woman is betrothed to another, the second is the death penalty for a man raping a woman betrothed to another, the third is a man being required to offer himself as a husband to a woman he rapes if she is not betrothed.

First, I'm sick of the word "betrothed." Let's go with "spoken for." Second, this could be the basis of a pernicious cultural phenomenon where men stop trying to pick up women only when they say "I have a boyfriend." "No" should be sufficient, though this is not even a *d'var Torah* about that.

This is a *d'var Torah* about believing women, about consent, and about that big scary F-word: feminism.

Before I dive into this, let's table the idea of virginity being a commodity and the one of the values a first-time bride brings to her husband. I have eight minutes, not an hour.

One of the most astounding things I see in almost every rape case is how much of an uphill battle it is for women to have their side listened to. People blame these horrific incidents on what these women are wearing, what they're doing, whether they've been drinking, what situations are unfolding, but each one has one simple thing in common: a rapist.

The very first example I listed is a consensual encounter. We know this because only in the second example does it mention that she was overpowered. I am not advocating putting two people to death for getting it on when they shouldn't; just drawing a distinguishing line of consent.

What strikes me is that our Torah, our truth, our book of life doesn't tell us the hurdles a woman must jump through to prove a rapist. Its silence on that front tells us something incredibly powerful: the elders of our ancestors listened to women.

Time and again we see, hear, and find that the one thing women want in situations where they are left unequal, such as sexual harassment at work, sexual harassment in social situations, casual condescension, and so much more, is just to be *believed*. To have someone say "I believe you" without a "but..." to negate the entire statement.

Our ancestors listened. Which is more than what our societal peers are doing today.

Something which strikes me as a sad irony is that women are believed to do 75% of the speaking in co-ed situations. That if a man and woman are talking, men and women both believe

women are speaking 75% of the time to a man's 25%. In fact the literal opposite is true: men do 75% of the speaking to women's 25%.

Is it any wonder millennial women are sick of this? They see the uphill battle their mothers and their mothers' mothers have fought, they see the social media bullying, they see the gross sexualization, they see unfair uniform and dress codes that seek to undermine their autonomy and agency.

In an age where "boys will be boys" is no longer an excuse for childhood sexual harassment; in a time where rapists are still being let off easy because they're star athletes; in an era where women still earn less than male counterparts, it's time to end it. This is oppression, plain and simple.

Since we've acknowledged these problems ages ago, since we have the data, we cannot say it is accidental any longer. Any company which is successful knows its numbers and can easily see their data. Any company which acts in this manner has been complicit in their oppression. Any man who has been presented with these issues and who still hurts these people is complicit in his oppression of women.

This is the fallen donkey of all of our sisters. This is the fallen donkey of *all* of our sisters. This is the load which must be picked up. This is the burden which we must bear together until the next injustice is brought to light, and there will be more. There will always be more.

So what can we do? We can call others out. We can make them uncomfortable when they reinforce these stereotypes or when someone thoughtlessly dismisses a claim of casual sexism.

We're all too familiar with what has come to be known as dog whistle racism, we experience it as Jews when someone talks about our people being cheap or thrifty. Our own Anti-Defamation League is excellent at calling people out and even gave a stern warning to a certain candidate who said he likes

the people “counting his money to be wearing yarmulkes”.

When a woman comes forward it must become habit to support her. It must become as reflexive to give her ear and credence as it is currently to dismiss her.

President Obama’s staff has an unprecedented number of women on it. The women who make up his top aides have started a procedure they call “amplification.” When a woman makes a key point another immediately repeats it, says it’s a good point, and then credits the original woman who said it.

We must all be the amplifiers for our sisters. Their minds, experiences, and knowledge only enhance everything society is and can be. Their struggles *must* be validated, believed, and supported. I have to repeat this, *their struggles must be validated, believed, and supported.*

Just as the man whose spirit has fallen still has a pure *neshama*, soul, that wants to return to G-d, our mothers, sisters, and daughters just want to be accepted as fully autonomous, fully capable, fully human people.

As I close out, remember our prayer came from sacrifice. Literally: our prayer is meant to take the place of the energy and pain of animal sacrifices. So this prayer will take energy, focus, and time. It will take intention. That said, my hope and prayer is that we can influence our own actions, mindsets, and those of others to lift our women up to equality. That our sisters struggling with this donkey that fell so long ago will finally be able to pick it up. Shabbat shalom.

Monique Alvarez – a rant, a warning, and an open letter

It's time to pull the curtain back on something.

A year ago I was approached with the idea of joining a mastermind group. Mastermind groups are a timeless idea given name by Napoleon Hill. They are a group of similarly minded people who can build each other up, help each other move forward, and coordinate business efforts.

Mastermind groups are about creating harmony and invigorating business. They're about helping each other.

Sometimes an exceptional businessperson will start a mastermind and charge people to join. These are situations where someone has achieved astounding success and is selling their expertise to attendants.

Monique built up a mastermind group, a fantastic one. We helped each other out through many things. We formed incredibly deep bonds, built each other up, and helped each of us through incredible insecurities. All this took place in my office, which I opened up to her.

While all this was going on, Monique Alvarez was working behind the scenes to monetize this mastermind group. She charged three new attendants, who we found out were being charged after the fact. .

Of course, she was charging these new people while using my office. So she was charging people for the use of my office.

On top of this, she moved from Tucson, AZ to San Carlos, Mexico out of the blue and started having us remote her in to what were in-person meetings

Our group came to an end on a Tuesday. She let us know the

associated Facebook group would be deleted that Friday as her business was evolving to support only female entrepreneurs. I'm cool with that – I'm all for minority support.

I asked if it would be cool with her (out of courtesy, because I'm going to do what's right for my friends and colleagues) if I started a second mastermind group. She gave me her blessing to do so. I immediately created the supplemental Facebook group and started to coordinate new meetings. I knew there would be some scheduling changes as there was some insinuation that some of the female members would be continuing with the new iteration of the group.

Fine, no problem. We'll take a break and coordinate plans to move forward. That's not a problem.

A couple days after doing all this, the Thursday before the original group was to be shut down, I let Monique know what we were doing. Again, this was out of professional courtesy. I expected a "Thank you for letting me know! Best of luck continuing with each other!"

Here's what was actually said. My text is in blue, her's is in green.

Me: I wanted to give you a heads up. We're continuing the Tuesday group with a few modifications. Thank you so much for your guidance and wisdom the past...three quarters? Year? I don't remember the length, but it's been amazing.

And happy anniversary. 😊

Monique: You realize that I'm continuing my Tuesday group right? Are you asking people to not continue with me in order to be in your group?

What do you mean? Everything we heard was that the Tuesday group was ending and the facebook group was being shut down Friday.

I said I am continuing Holistic Mastermind on Tuesdays. Two

changes going forward. 1. It's for women. 2. It's a virtual meeting.

I also outlined it in the group.

Once again thank you all for a spectacular journey for the last 10 months. I have created a affiliate program for Holistic Mastermind, Total Wellness Retreats and e~Courses. I pay 30% commission for referrals to all my services and products. Here is the direction Holistic Mastermind is going and when the next round will start.

<http://holisticmastermind.com/>

I'll close this group down on Friday so if you want to download worksheets etc please do so by then. Thank you for being part of my life and business. Here's to the next chapter! ❤️

The men felt left in the lurch and without any group, so we took the initiative to try and create something. We're not trying to hijack anything nor are we trying to compete. We're just trying to create something that works for us.

You only asked the men to join you?

I created a group with people I trust and have grown close to with plans to continue meeting.

I know.

I would have contacted you privately about this if the tables were turned. Out of respect.

I have no idea what you're upset about. The group is coming to an end, you're creating a new one, and I took initiative on a deadline to maintain some sort of meeting. As this meeting wouldn't include you, or any virtual connections, there wasn't really any reason to reach out. I wanted to officially let you know out of respect.

Who did you approach about the group? Did you approach<redacted>?

You approached my clients.

I approached my friends and colleagues, some of whom may be your clients. There is not a set meeting time, date, or format. As such, I shall endeavor to set it so there is no conflict with your continuing group.

Those of us who are not a part of your continuing group will be working to set that time.

This is where she unfriended me like a middle school drama queen. Yes, really.

She couldn't handle actual conversation about a misunderstanding so she disconnected, ran off, and hid. She told other people that I violated the terms of our group by creating another. She claims that I tried to get her clients to leave her.

Let me be clear: I didn't care one whit who her clients were. I just wanted to keep the band of colleagues we had together. We all knew that we were going to be finding a new time so those who wanted to stick with Monique Alvarez's "[Holistic Mastermind](#)" could do so. That they could stay with the group they wanted AND stay with us.

Did I approach her clients? Absolutely. I approached them because they were my friends and trusted colleagues.

Did I try to get them not to continue with her continuing group? Emphatically no. Let me rephrase that, if you don't understand "emphatically." *Hell no.*

Let me reiterate: *I did not try to get them to end their relationship with Monique's continuing group.*

We demanded no exclusivity whatsoever. We didn't even expect, encourage, or think about it. Group exclusivity had exactly as much space in our minds as the mating habits of seahorses (which, incidentally, is far more interesting than hoarding group members for yourself).

Okay, so let's recap so far: Monique charged people to attend an event at my office without asking me about compensation to build a business inside my walls and she then moved away and made us video chat her in.

What am I missing?

Oh. Right. She used our mastermind group, where we were incredibly vulnerable and open with each other, to recruit new clients for her husband's web design company.

Oh man, I'm sorry. I should have put it in quotes.

air quote "web design company" **air quote**

His websites are bad. However since I don't have firsthand experience and expanding on this more would violate the confidentiality of my group and colleagues, I'm keeping it there. But man, it's like WordPress and Geocities had a premature baby in the early 90's.

Recruiting for further services from a group of vulnerable people is the stuff of Scientology and Jonestown. Not business groups. Not masterminds.

So Monique built a business within my walls and didn't let me know she was using my office to generate actual revenue. She asked me to open up on Mondays so she could run a second group (which I was not part of), which I did because I'm like that – helpful to a fault. I just learned she was making money off that group, too. She then has the gall to say that I approached her clients.

Let me be clear: I now care who her clients are. I want her to lose every single one of them. I want her business to crash and burn, and it's not from spite. I want it to fail because she believes her wanderlust is due to a nomadic nature. It is not. Her wanderlust is there because she uses up her resources in one place, then moves to another. She is the personal equivalent of the logging company in Fern Gully. She moves

through area after area feeding on the emotional resources of everyone around her. Once she's exposed, she disappears and moves on.

She then posts triumphant blog posts about how life works in her favor and she makes the most of situations.

That's not untrue: she does make the most of situations. But it's as a narcissistic opportunist, not an adaptable entrepreneur.

So now she's told people that I violated my agreement with the group after I talked with *myfriends* and tried to find a new time to meet so we could continue boosting each other. She accused me of hijacking the group and poaching clients. She made money while using my space and didn't give a cut to the person who made it possible, even when they opened up for a meeting they weren't a part of.

So if you're considering doing business with this woman, let me illuminate what you're signing up for:

- She'll take your deepest, darkest secrets and use them against you to make a point
- She'll go after more than just your presence in the group and try to get you to use their sub-par webdesign and advertising services
- She'll cut you off as soon as you hint that your funds for her are limited
- She'll dismiss you after bringing up constructive criticism
- She'll listen only as long as it suits her own motive
- She's on your side only as long as your position helps hers

Look at her again. [Google](#) her. Check her [company out on Facebook](#). Look at her [website](#).

Take note of how there are absolutely no places to leave

unbiased reviews. The only reviews available are testimonials from her webpage. They're highly censored and wholly crafted.

I promised an open letter, here it is.

Dear Monique,

For the better part of a year I gave a lot of time, energy, and attention to the Mastermind Group. From the outset we came to decisions democratically, by popular agreement, and we soon decided to stop meeting at coffee shops and meet at my office. This was wonderful.

We expanded, and you apparently started charging new members. You brought someone in who somehow got inside information on each of us, and had her say extraordinarily personal things under the guise of "intuitive evaluations."

When you ended it and went against everything we started as, you hurt all of us. When we took the initiative to make things right and fix it, you went off and chastised us. No, you didn't chastise us, you unloaded on us. When we tried to give constructive criticism, you played the victim and dismissed any concerns.

We're tired of it, Monique. We're tired of seeing this crap and we're tired of the drama you keep injecting. We're tired of how you keep stringing along the people we're close with and have grown to love.

Yes, love.

As you gallivant around the Americas pretending to find yourself we're here working on our businesses. I'm lucky in that I never entrusted you with my operations, but those who have definitely regret it.

The great irony is that our businesses are built on honesty and service while yours seems to be built upon deception and empty promises. That's okay, though, because the fire of

deception powers the furnaces of strength and resolve.

Most of us (save for one former member – you know who she is) are better off for having been through the group. You started the group and made it feel like ours. At the beginning of the last quarter you revealed that you didn't feel like it was truly our group, but your group that we were all members of.

Monique, I would beg of you to change how you operate. The problem is that you don't see it as a problem. It'd be like asking a tornado to back off into a breeze or an adder to make its venom weaker. You are who you are, and that's unfortunate for the people who get trapped in your charming web.

I'm proud to be detested by you. You called many of us "your haters" when everything happened after the dissolution of the group. We never hated you. We loved you. We accepted you. It was only when you turned your fury against us and revealed yourself to be blind to our actions and reasons did we crave disconnection from you.

I don't hate you. I have no reason to. Hating you would be like hating the ocean for a tsunami. The only problem I have is how to warn the ships in the harbor about the impending inevitable storm.

You might actually read this someday. If you do, I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you'll get angry. I also know that the reason you'll get angry is because I have struck a nerve of truth within you.

What you do with that nerve is entirely up to you.

*With love,
Eddie*

I don't know how you, fair reader, will react to this. But I do hope you take some of these things into consideration

before considering working with her. There are better mastermind groups one can join at her price. There are better local ones you can join and, if there aren't, then you can easily make one.

You don't have to rely on her for her ideas, as she's really only recycled others' ideas and labelled them as hers. Be cautious of who you open up to, because there are vampires out there who want everything you have.

In the ending words of Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*. "I'm finished."



[VaYishlach 5776](#)

VaYishlach is Genesis 32:4-36:43

Many of the more important *parshot* of our Torah have a genealogy in them. Whether the portion is outwardly important, such as *Shemot* with the 10 plagues having Moses' genealogy in

the middle of it, *Bereshit* with the lineage of the very first people, or *Noach* with the listing of Noah's descendents and the consequences for the descendents of his sons which violated him.

Similarly, this *parashah* ends in a genealogy of sorts. This tells us that it is not a light *parashah*, like any of them, really. It indicates there is more to look at than just the texts and outward facing ideas. It tells us that the actions performed inside affect all our descendents, just as the actions of *Moshe* affects all his descendants.

So what is it that happened? What do we need to learn to protect our future families from our actions today?

The first lesson we must learn is how to make the difficult apology. The apology for transgressions we feel guilty about, even if they were made before we knew better or weren't fully our fault. Jacob knew Esau felt jilted from the favor he received growing up. He also knew of Esau's tendency toward displays of strength and obstinance as a hunter and not an intellectual. With both of these pieces of knowledge, he rightly feared for his people when his long estranged brother, Esau, responded to his apology with a force of 400 men.

Jacob panicked, and we know he's strong because of this panic. Not only was his life threatened along with his people, but his wives, children, and other loved ones were at stake. Yet he pressed on and did what he knew was right.

He did the most Jewish act of not only preparing for the worst by separating his camps into two groups so one could get away should the other be attacked, but by praying as well. Action combined with prayer is a wholly Jewish concept, just as the fledgling Israelite nation fleeing Pharaoh walked into the Red Sea before it split, just as Esther and Mordecai took action to preserve the people before they prayed for assistance. Jacob is a member in a long line of Hebrews who take action

along with prayer.

Of course, Jacob was well rewarded with his actions. Whether the prayer was needed, whether the additional gifts presented to Esau were needed, whether the preparations were needed is all immaterial. What matters is that he was rewarded for doing the right thing. By facing the hardest apology he ever had to make, the one where if it was refused, he and his people could (note: I said *could*, not *would*, as we don't know Esau's intentions) be exterminated.

So why did Esau come with so many people? The easy answer, and the one I'm inclined to go with, is because of family history. Any time Esau put himself out there, usually while hunting for the family, Jacob, through his own initiative or another's, took something from him. The most notable of this was the birthright of the first born. Esau received a message saying Jacob wished to gain favor from Esau and Esau, growing up the less intellectual and more gullible, feared it was a trap.

We know, through the narrative, that Jacob had no intention of setting up a trap. Esau did not have the luxury of two kinds of text (Hebrew and English, written down) to tell the story that we have. He was going into this blind, so of course he needed to take a protective detail. He wasn't stupid, just less politically inclined in his youth than his brother.

This is the first lesson we must learn from this *parashah*: not only must we face down our fears from our most humiliating transgressions – those we made before we knew better yet still cringe at when we think of them –, we must prepare ourselves from the fallout should that apology bring unintended consequences.

This is simple, though. And it's something taught to us constantly through our history, so much so that it's ingrained in not only our culture and heritage, but our literal DNA. Our ideals of doing the right thing, even if it might backfire,

has gotten us in trouble more times that we can count, yet we still do it.

So there's a second part to that first lesson: when someone who has hurt us makes an apology, we must hear it. That's the absolute minimum we have to do, listen. Only after we listen and observe are we able to determine whether we are able to bring them back into our fold and, if so, the degree we are able to do so.

That is the full lesson of this first part: we must make apologies when warranted and listen to them, despite the ramifications.

The second lesson is harder. It involves something none of us like to think of. What happens when we do something that's horrible, that we know that we shouldn't do. What do we do if it's not us, but someone we're accountable for who does that horrible act?

Of course, I speak of the rape of Dinah.

This is not an easy part to understand. Dinah is violated in the worst way imaginable, something far too many women and men deal with. Not only was Dinah violated, but Jacob's sons, in the lust for vengeance, performed the same violence, without the sex, to the villagers. Jacob, upon hearing about this, is upset only that his sons made him look bad.

G-d is silent through this ordeal. While the Torah makes it abundantly clear the rape is to be condemned, it doesn't comment on the violence brought by Jacob's sons. In fact, it doesn't even comment on the fact that Jacob's sons used Shechem's desperation to force the village to perform one of our most sacred *mitzvot*, the *brit milah*.

The first section of this *parashah* had G-d directly interfering, telling Jacob he was on the right path when the angel wrestled with him. This section has G-d being

suspiciously silent. Why? Is it implicit agreement? Is it resolute disdain? Is it embarrassment? Perhaps Jacob has seen enough that he no longer needs G-d to tell him when he's on the right track. Perhaps Hashem bowed out because Jacob either didn't pray or didn't earn favor with these actions.

I think, for the purpose I'm looking at this, G-d's silence is pensive acceptance. It's him standing back, letting us realize something profound. Out of the darkest moments, out of our deepest despair, we can still create something good. Even our lowest, most painful moments can lead to holiness.

It also shows us that we must make actions for transgressions we knowingly commit. The first part of this *parashah* is about the pain we cause others when we don't know better, this one is when we do know better, but still do it anyway. It's an apology which requires preparation, sure, but also a different kind of fire in ourselves. Instead of wanting to fix the past, it's wanting to face your current fear, the one that's fresh in your mind and dragging you down. The one that self reinforces and scares you, deep in your core.

Shechem circumcised himself, along with his village, because they knew that not only blood, but a punishment of their transgressions was the only way to move on. It was fitting, really, because what he took from Dinah, he had to take from himself and was ultimately taken from him by force.

Finally, we come to this genealogy. It's a significantly shorter genealogy than many of the others, but it's still a listing of the descendents. It tells us the names of the people affected by this – the amount of the people affected by the abusive violation of one single person. It tells us how much of the future was at stake simply with Jacob's apology to Esau.

It wasn't after wrestling with the divine being that Jacob was given the name Israel, "he who wrestles with G-d", but after

witnessing his daughter go through the worst moments of her life and how his sons came to her defense, how he wrestled with his own emotions and morals.

We weigh our fears against our comforts every day, every hour, every minute. We form our lives, our hopes, and our actions on our history and our wants. Overcoming those blocks and doing what's right, not only in the eyes of G-d, but in vein of what's true to ourselves is the divine fight we each deal with.

I hope and pray that we take this fight with enthusiasm and tact. That we humbly accept our wins and we graciously accept our losses, but that our measured end does not affect the passion and enthusiasm with which we engage the struggle.

[Shoftim 5775](#)

Today's *parashah* is crucial. It is the foundation of modern civilization, both in the US and in almost any government elected by and from its citizens. It also teaches that humility is not a weakness, and forcefulness is not strength.

A few highlights from *Shoftim* is Hashem instructing Moses to set up tiers of judges and enforcers, essentially policemen. It tells of cities where people who accidentally kill someone can flee to. It tells us to help someone with their ox if that ox falls to the side of the road. These, and many of the other laws in this *parashah* relate to the dignity of each other and our community. Whether it is disciplining a child for not obeying their parents, regardless of the efficacy of that discipline, or taking the impaled body of a capital offender down at sunset, it affords dignity in seemingly odd places.

That dignity, though, must be backed up by its leaders. My friend and colleague, Kristin Barnes, teaches in her classes on how to communicate more effectively that one must “live it to give it.” She means that in order to convey your message, you must embody it. Hypocrites are eventually found out and crumble under their misleadings. Look at the Duggar family, of the famous show 19 Kids and Counting – they preached a seemingly wholesome form of family values which, in the end was revealed to be completely hypocritical as their adult son Josh was outed as molesting underage girls when in his late teens. He, a community leader, was also recently outed as being a member of a social website dedicated to adultery.

This shouldn't be a surprise, as that very personality was a member of the Family Research Council. The Family Research Council, if you're not aware, purports to uphold strong family values based on Christian beliefs. In reality, their core mission is to defame, hurt, and denigrate gay people through their myriad policies and lobbying efforts. They are so dedicated to this task that the Southern Poverty Law Center designated the Family Research Council as a hate group in 2010.

But this isn't about the Duggars. This is about false prophets, like in chapter 18, verse 20 of Deuteronomy. This is about our kings being of our brethren, like in chapter 17, verse 15, and that king remaining humble, as in chapter 17, verses 18, 19, and 20.

Hypocrisy and opportunism are rampant in this world. I will be the first to admit that I am guilty of them, despite my best efforts not to succumb. It is a simple fact of life that we are driven to consume, to imbibe, and to take. We validate our existence in many ways, whether it's through seeking thrills, seeking money, seeking fame, or, as I do, seeking recognition. Yes, speaking up here is a selfish act which I attempt to justify by giving inspiration and hopefully new insights. Regardless, I would be lying if I said that I did this purely

to help others.

Speaking is a passion of mine. Leading people, inspiring them, and bringing joy makes me happy. Because that is my passion, people are drawn to it. Just as an enthusiastic artist will eventually find their audience given the proper exposure, a good leader, which I do not presume myself to be, will find their right team.

Kings and prophets are prime examples of leaders. They are people who can throw the entire balance of their followers into either prosperity or decay. They are people who, in a fit of anger, can ruin entire families or countries. Look at what happened with the sin of the golden calf: droves of people died because of the words of a few community leaders. Look at what happened with Pharaoh and Joseph: a country of people survived a famine because of the words of a prophet.

Shoftim, Deuteronomy chapter 17, verses 16 through 20, an entire four verses, tell us how that king is to remain in check. He is not to acquire or seek an excess of gold and silver, not to take up too many horses, not to take up too many wives, and not to send mercenaries to Egypt to pillage their villages. Even more, he is instructed to have his own copy of our Law, our Torah, written by the Levites. Heck, many commentators in the *Midrash* say that he was to write each letter himself under Levitic supervision. This Torah was to be with him always, and he was to study it daily so as to remain humble before all.

Humility is crucial. Without true humility, the kind where you realize that others build you up more than you do, one will get lost in their own bloviated ego. You can see this, today (preferably after sundown) with certain political frontrunners.

John Oliver recently exposed glaringly enormous loopholes in IRS code for churches, where televangelists bilked vulnerable

people out of millions upon millions of dollars, perfectly legally. They bought houses and jets worth millions of dollars, and those houses were not taxed because they were designated as places of worship. They convince their followers to ignore cancer treatments, to ignore mounting debt, and to ignore their families all to send more money to their church.

These televangelists are getting away with something that we all know, in our bones, is completely wrong. Our Torah, which their beliefs are supposedly eventually based upon, outrightly forbids it. Perhaps that is why we don't see Jewish televangelists – or perhaps it's just a numbers game. Regardless, this is yet one more example of a religious leader and supposed prophet turning faith into poison.

But let's look more into verse 20, in chapter 17. It reads "Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left..." Act haughtily. *Act.*

Studies show that behavior can influence thought and attitude just as thought and attitude can influence behavior. I could delve deeply into the studies, but talking about scandals draws people in more, mostly because we're opportunistic. Regardless, one study showed that the mere act of exercising influenced people to eat better. Another showed that after people shopped at a store which specializes in organic and sustainable foods, they were measurably ruder to others as they felt they had already done their good deed for the day.

Behavior influences action.

Study influences thought.

Thought, when lead by ethics, leads to decisions. This is the core of a good leader.

I participated in a workshop dedicated to strengthening our strengths and reducing our weaknesses, to eventually be able

to delegate our weaknesses to others on the team who specialize in what we don't. It's a brilliant idea, and you can build it easily into the very first line in *Shoftim*.

What we need for our leaders, whether it's the President of the US, the Prime Minister of Israel, the CEO of WalMart, the owner of Bangkok Cafe on Speedway and Tucson Boulevard, or any person who has someone look up to them is these three things: acts of humility, willingness to learn, and the proper implementation and delegation of their actions. In other words, they must live it to give it.

My prayer is that we can take what is prescribed for the kings we choose among ourselves and bring it into our own lives. That when our attitudes sink, we act until they rise again. That we study so as to better learn. That we administer so as to relieve our burden. I pray that, whatever each of us wants in our heart, we live it to give it. Shabbat shalom.

[Va'etchanan 5775](#)

Sometimes it's hard to get a bearing on why we have to do terrible things. It's hard to understand the necessity of conquering, killing, and destroying a city just for us to inhabit it. Much like Pinchas ending the plague by killing Cozbi and Zimri, Canaan needed to be wiped out for their iniquities. Their sins of sorcery and idolatry were far different than the Pagan religions of today, which exemplify kindness over harm. Their sins were of sacrificing children, of hurting others, and of sexual transgressions.

But this is not a d'var Torah of pain or even of Canaan. This is a d'var Torah of comfort and consolation, something we need after Tisha b'Av.

Last week we remembered the destruction of our Temple, and this week in the Torah we're watching Moshe look over the land his followers are about to take. He pleads with Hashem to go to the land and is continually shot down. In the end, his iniquities keep him from being eligible to enter Eretz Yisrael.

The problem is that the people love Moses. They've been following him through thick and thin; they've found communal peace through the government he set up; they've discovered levels of spirituality and connections with G-d they would not have otherwise had.

Moses was G-d's protege and deeply entwined with the development of the nation and the people Israel. Without Moshe's influence, the people would certainly devolve back into barbaric ways, so there needed to be a foundation for the government. Foundations for homes are usually poured concrete, the foundation for Israel was also to be stone. And we see these tablets of stone come into existence here.

It is with these tablets I want to build today's words around. There are three commandments I will be talking about: the first, the third, and the tenth.

In order to establish our nation, we had to completely break away from the polytheistic religions based on their senses. The old religions centered around what they could see, touch, taste, and smell. They were religions of objects and idols, of sensations and violence, of blood and fire. We are a religion of cerebral thought, of self sacrifice, and of discipline. This is one of the many reasons our sages believed we were always meant to be weaned off of sacrifices and why our prayers now take the place of the *karbanot*.

We've taken something physical and turned it into something cerebral. Something which requires a discipline.

This is the first commandment. It is often described as a

preamble or an introduction to the remainder of the laws. I feel it is not, though. It reads, in English, "I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." That is not a preamble. It is not "I, the Lord, in order to form a more perfect nation..." it is a statement establishing Hashem as the god of Israel. That statement, which tells us who G-d is, is commanding us to acknowledge who he is.

The only reason there needs to be the second commandment, "You shall have no other gods beside me," is because he has commanded us to accept him in his eminent position.

Our acceptance of him is the reason we are such a cerebral religion, who debate and expand our knowledge. In fact, Egypt is, only today, what we call the place we were taken out of. The Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*. The name, *Mitzrayim*, comes from the word *m'tzarim*, which meant "narrow straits."

The narrow straits was both geographical, a place between land and rivers, and metaphorical, a place where we were restricted.

Accepting Hashem as G-d, as our G-d, and allowing us to shed the history of idols and sacrifices brings us to new avenues of thought and knowledge. Instead of relying on something we can see, a statue, rock, or celestial bodies, we are allowed to rely on theories, ideas, and studies. Instead of relying on objects to sustain our spirituality, we are free to explore and find it ourselves.

Moses was fundamental in this. Had Moses died in Eretz Yisrael, he would have undoubtedly been interred and we would likely have revered him as we do G-d. We would likely have resorted to iconography by worshipping *him* rather than Hashem.

Clearly we needed to sever ourselves from these past habits and, since we were to take back Canaan, we needed to clear it of people who would lead us astray, especially considering the

plague from promiscuity we just overcame.

But Moses wasn't allowed to enter. As I said earlier, had he entered the Land, there was too strong a chance he would have been elevated to the status of a deity, rather than the most elevated prophet. He was not a deity, of course, and his humanity was shown many times, such as when he infamously struck the rock out of anger to draw water.

The third commandment is the prohibition on oaths. It tells us not to use G-d as a vehicle for perjury. On page 1,011 of our Etz Hayim, chapter 4, verse 21, Moses tells Israel Hashem was angry with him on the people's accord. As our *chumash* points out, this is seemingly inappropriate for a leader to do. Normally, saying that you were hurt because G-d was angry at someone else would be a violation of this commandment. It was necessary, though, as it set up his own sacrifice of himself for them. He let them know that not only was he not entering the land with them, but that if G-d would deny his best prophet access because of the iniquities of the people, then the foundation of laws to follow had better be adhered to.

Moses wanted nothing more to enter and see his people flourish. One might say he coveted the land they were receiving and their status of fulfillment in that land. In fact, I believe, since he was human after all, that he definitely did.

What's interesting about the commandment not to covet is that it's one of the few commandments that are about thoughts, rather than actions. We're told keep the Sabbath holy, not to commit adultery, not steal, not bear false witness, not do false acts in G-d's name, but these are all actions. Coveting is highly internalized. It's intangible and often unavoidable. To be completely happy with one's lot is an extraordinarily difficult mindset to obtain.

So why is this in here? I would argue that taking action on

those thoughts is what really needs to be avoided. Falling into a depression because you can't get what you desire is to be avoided. Wanton wanting, gluttonous or excessive thoughts of acquisition are what we must keep in check.

If you look at our *haftorah* this week, you'll see it's one of consolation. It is words from Isaiah telling us of how immense Hashem is. It tells us of all the good he creates, in stark contrast to the destruction we experienced last week. It tells us that we can be thoughtful, we can worship with our minds and hearts, rather than our senses and labors. It tells of all the good surrounding us that we are here to enjoy.

To covet is in our nature, it drives us as a species. But it must be checked and we must sometimes sacrifice what we want most for the greater good. As the *Shema* is in this *parashah*, with the binding of *tefillin* in chapter 6, verse 8, we can learn something. As Ashkenazim, we wrap our arm *tefillin* inward. While performing this extraordinarily holy act of *davening* with *tefillin*, turning our hands inward towards us only tightens our bindings, bringing us closer to *Mitzrayim*. Only by opening our hands to others are we truly comforted.

We were taken out of the land of narrowness and suffering and told to flourish and thrive. We were given a set of rules to facilitate thriving and to give us focus. The sacrifice of Moses was necessary, but we can show that same generosity by living well and opening up our hands to others.

Shabbat shalom.