

ROHINGYA JUSTICE SHABBAT 2018

TEXT STUDIES AND SERMON SPARKS

Introduction

As a Jewish community, we bear witness to the ongoing humanitarian crisis plaguing the Rohingya people in their quest for safety and human rights. Since August 2017, almost 700,000 Rohingya people have fled violence, rape and murder, in what the UN has described as the fastest growing refugee emergency worldwide. The persecution of the Rohingya people echoes Jewish experiences across time and place and compels us to take action.

On Shabbat April 13-14, 2018, the Jewish Rohingya Justice Network* invites you to join together as a unified Jewish community to stand in support of the Rohingya people and share their story.

Your participation in this important Shabbat could take many forms. You may include a liturgical reading in your services, give a sermon, or dedicate a Shabbat text study to the topic.

Because there are many possible “hooks” to relate the Rohingya crisis to Jewish text, tradition and history, we have compiled two text collections for you to choose from.

The first text study focuses on this week’s parasha, Sh’mini, in which we read about Aaron’s response to the death of his sons, Nadav and Avihu. Aaron’s response is described with simple yet powerful words: “וַיִּדַם אַהֲרֹן” – And Aaron was silent.” Indeed, in the face of a tragedy so vast and horrifying as the persecution of the Rohingya people, we too may find ourselves inclined to respond with silence. We have an obligation to both honor that silence as a natural response to incomprehensible suffering and to challenge ourselves to transform our mourning from silence to vocal outrage. The first text collection below explores Aaron’s silence in relation to our response to the Rohingya crisis. You can use the resource as a text study, or you might consider using any of the discussion questions as a prompt for a liturgical reading or sermon.

The second text collection focuses on the Jewish obligations to the stranger that are born out of our people’s exodus from slavery and oppression in Egypt. As Rohingya Shabbat comes on the heels of our Passover observances, this topic may be especially resonant.

***Jewish Rohingya Justice Network Members include:** American Jewish Committee, American Jewish World Service, Anti-Defamation League, HIAS, JACOB, Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, Jewish World Watch, Rabbinical Assembly, Reconstructing Judaism, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, T’ruah and The Union for Reform Judaism. **Allies:** Foundation for Ethic Understanding, Hebrew College, The New York Board of Rabbis, The Shalom Center and Uri L’Tzedek

Of course, we hope that as you incorporate this pressing humanitarian issue into your prayer and study this Shabbat, you will also invite your community to take continued action. We invite you to visit www.ajws.org/Rohingya to learn about the latest ways to join together, as a Jewish community, to support the Rohingya people during this harrowing time.

Aaron's Silence and Our Silence: Responding to the Rohingya Crisis Through Torah

From Parshat Sh'mini: Leviticus 10:1-3

1 Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before God an alien fire, which [God] had not enjoined upon them. 2 And fire came forth from God and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of God. 3 Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what God meant when [God] said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." **And Aaron was silent (*vayidom*).** (Translation: NJPS*)

(א) וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן נְדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵישׁ מִחֶמְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם וַיִּמְתּוּ לִפְנֵי ה': (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֶהֱרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדֹשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכְבֵּד וַיִּדָּם אֶהֱרֹן:

Discussion Questions:

- How do you understand Aaron's silence? What do you think it signifies?
- In what ways is the death of Aaron's sons similar to the violence perpetrated against the Rohingya? Where does the analogy break down?

Connections Within Tanach:

Psalm 115:17

The dead cannot praise God, nor any who go down into **silence (*dumah*)**. (Translation: NJPS*)

לֹא הַמֵּתִים יִהְלְלוּ יְהוָה וְלֹא כָל יְרֵדֵי דוּמָה:

Discussion Questions:

- In this psalm, the dead are "those who go down in silence," using the same root, *dom*, as in the verse about Aaron. What is the connection for you between silence and death? How does this relate to the crisis facing the Rohingya people?

Joshua 10:12-13

The Ba'al HaTurim (Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, 13th-14th c., France and Spain) points out that, fighting the Amorites at Gibeon, Joshua uses the same word, dom, to ask God to stop the sun.

12 ...Joshua addressed God; he said in the presence of the Israelites: "**Stand still (*dom*)**, O sun, at Gibeon, O moon, in the Valley of Ayalon!" 13 ...And the sun **stood still (*vayidom*)** And the moon halted... (Translation: NJPS*)

(יב) אָז יְדַבֵּר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לַיהוָה... וַיֹּאמֶר לְעֵינַי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַשׁ בְּגִבְעוֹן דוּם וְיָרֵחַ בְּעֵמֶק אַיָּלוֹן: (יג) וַיִּדָּם הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וַיָּרָם עֲמָד...

Discussion Questions:

- In your opinion, is the Rohingya crisis a disruption of the natural order, or part of it? How has silence contributed to any disruption you perceive?

A Talmudic Interpretation: BT Bava Metzia 6a

Discussing the first mishnah of Bava Metzia – about two people who appear before the court with one garment, each claiming it is theirs – the Talmud offers the following:

Rabbi Zeira asked: If one snatches it [from the other] before us, what [is the ruling]?

[The Talmud responds] What are the circumstances? If [the one it was snatched from] is silent, he is admitting [that he is not the true owner]. If he cries out, what else should he do?!

בעי ר' זירא: תקפה אחד בפנינו, מהו?
היכי דמי? אי דשתיק אודויי אודי ליה,
ואי דקא צווח מאי הוה ליה למעבד?

Discussion Questions:

- How does the Talmud interpret the silence of the one who had the garment snatched? Can you think of other interpretations that might be equally valid?
- What does this text say about our silence?

Modern Reflections

Blu Greenberg, writing in *The Women's Torah Commentary* (p. 633)

Aaron responded with a profound, shattering silence, a stunning silence, a shocked silence. He does not justify the cruel decree by blaming his sons and accepting their fate as punishment for their sins. Yet, neither does he revolt or protest God's action. Total silence.

Aaron's response is the profoundest human and religious response to the reality that there are times when good people die unjustly or are consumed in tragedies that seem to be arbitrary, shocking, without justification, and with nothing to ameliorate the pain and loss of those who love them.

Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, writing for JTS: <http://www.jtsa.edu/aarons-silence>

Perhaps Aaron's silence was a form of disengagement, in at least two senses. The first may have been an emotional reaction beyond his control. The horror of what had occurred was so great that Aaron's mind may have shut down, thereby blanking out what had befallen his sons. Perhaps it was only in this way that he could bear the pain of his loss at that moment.

It may also be, however, that Aaron's silence was a means of disengaging from his persona as priest. How difficult it must have been for Aaron to serve God in the very place where that same God had taken the lives of two of his children. Aaron continued his holy work, but there was some part of him that was now silent, that did not turn to God in prayer and praise as it did in the past. The fire that killed Aaron's sons had wounded him profoundly as well.

Discussion Questions:

- How do Ms. Greenberg’s and Rabbi Diamond’s reflections shape your understanding of Aaron’s silence? Of our silence in the face of the crisis facing the Rohingya?
- To what extent do you feel engaged or disengaged with the Rohingya? If you wanted to change that, what might you do?

Back to the Tanach: A Possible Inflection Point: Isaiah 23:1-2

In a single verse in the Tanach (Isaiah 23:2), the verb we have been following (dom) is interpreted to mean “moan” or “wail,” because of the parallelism with “howl” in verse 1 (though others translate it as “be still,” in keeping with its more common usage).

1 The “Tyre” Pronouncement: Howl, you ships of Tarshish!
For havoc has been wrought, not a house is left; As they
came from the land of Kittim, this was revealed to them. 2
Moan (domu), you coastland dwellers, You traders of Sidon,
Once thronged by seafarers, (Translation: NJPS)

(א) מִשָּׂא צָר הִלִּילוּ אֲנִיּוֹת תַּרְשִׁישׁ כִּי
שָׂדֵד מִבַּיִת מְבוֹא מְאָרֶץ כִּתִּים נִגְלָה לָמוֹ:
(ב) דָּמוּ יִשְׁבִּי אֵי סָהָר צִידוֹן עֹבֵר יָם
מִלְאוּדָּ:

Discussion Questions:

- What would it mean for us to turn our silence into wailing? What might that look like?

Reflections on Jewish Obligations to the Ger—Stranger

Background

On the heels of Passover, we have once again experienced our liberation from the enslavement of Egypt. At the very least we have re-enacted the tears, the bitterness of slavery, and the joy and gratitude of becoming a free people. So we may be singularly disposed to recognize the plight of another people who are oppressed and at risk of annihilation—the Rohingya people of Burma (Myanmar).

So, how can we think “Jewishly” about the crisis of the Rohingya people? In his book, *The Heart of Torah*, [Rabbi Shai Held offers a powerful teaching](#) about the Biblical גֵר (*ger*), stranger—which he translates as a refugee or immigrant in our communities.¹

As Rabbi Held points out, the following three sources, which all conclude with the words כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם—“for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”—can be understood to convey a subtle development from one to the next.

¹ Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion, Genesis and Exodus*, Jewish Publication Society, 2017, p. 175

Torah Texts on the Ger

Exodus 23:9

You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. (Translation: NJPS)

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחֹץ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר
כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Leviticus 19:33-34

33 When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. 34 The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am your God. (Translation: NJPS*)

(לג) וְכִי יִגֹּר אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאֶרְצְכֶם לֹא
תִּזְנוּ אֹתוֹ:
(לד) בְּאֶרְצְחָ מִמֶּךָ יִהְיֶה לְכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר
אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבֵתָ לּוֹ כְּמוֹדָּ כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

17 For your God is God supreme and master supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, 18 but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves strangers, providing them with food and clothing. 19 You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Translation: NJPS*)

(יז) כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים
וְאֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנִים הָאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא
אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד:
(יח) עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוּם וְאֶלְמָנָה וְאֹהֵב גֵּר
לִתְתּ לּוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה:
(יט) וְאַהֲבֵתֶם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Discussion Question:

- Why do these texts cite the experience of being “strangers in the land of Egypt”? In what ways might that experience *obligate* Jews to act? In what way might it *inspire* Jews to act?
- It seems that Exodus starts with a negative commandment, “don’t oppress the stranger”; Leviticus starts with the negative, “you shall not wrong them” and then introduces the positive “you shall love each one as yourself”; and Deuteronomy describes the positive commandment as an imitation of God’s actions. What do you make of this progression? Why might the Torah present this commandment in these different ways?
- The text suggests that the stranger, the outsider, the people without a country, are to enjoy a special, even protected status with God and, because of that, with each of us. Does every Jew take on this obligation individually, or is this a communal obligation? What do these texts suggest about how the Jewish story of slavery and freedom should shape our response to the Rohingya crisis?

Midrash Tanhuma Mishpatim 7

Anyone who was able to protest the wrongdoing of his or her family, but does not, becomes culpable for the (deeds of their) family; for the wrongdoing of his or her city, becomes culpable for their city; for the wrongdoing of the entire world, becomes culpable for the entire world. For R' Hanina said, What is the meaning of (Isaiah 3:14) "God will bring this charge against the elders and officers of His people"? If the officers sinned, what sin did the elders commit?! (They sinned) because they did not protest the actions of the officers.

דאמר מר כל מי שאפשר לו למחות
באנשי ביתו ואינו מוחה נתפס על אנשי
ביתו, באנשי עירו נתפס על אנשי עירו,
בכל העולם כלו נתפס על כל העולם
כלו, דא"ר חנינא מאי דכתיב ה' במשפט
יבא עם זקני עמו ושריו (ישעיה ג) אם
שרים חטאו זקנים מה חטאו, אלא
זקנים שלא מיחו בשרים

Discussion Questions:

- According to this text, what is the scope of our obligation to address misdeeds in the world?
- How do we manage that in an era where media makes us much more aware of what's going on in the world?
- How might the biblical texts above influence which global crises we respond to?
- When we think about how to take action on behalf of the Rohingya people, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the peril and the distance of the victims, and to decide that it isn't our problem. How might we combat that feeling so we can take action?

**Translation has been slightly altered for gender neutrality.*