

Kedoshim at 60

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Talk at Netivot Shalom, Berkeley CA

April 24, 2010

Shabbat Shalom.

The sages said that you should get yourself a teacher and a buddy to study with. That is excellent advice that I have not taken. I like to learn a little from this one and a little from that one. So, when it comes time to give a talk I look around for my teacher of the moment. This year I got two teachers, Rabbi Creditor asked me who is a Reicha—fellow, neighbor, whatever and then there was my other teacher.

It is twilight and we are pulling into West Oakland station. In walks Mr. Bad News. He holds a ripped cardboard box with neatly folded clothes. Two of his front teeth are missing—tapped out in a fight I would guess. He is really loud. NO REALLY LOUD. Up he walks to a fortyish man sitting in a seat. “Three guys beat me up and the cops wouldn’t do nothing. NOTHING.” Wait a minute, I’ve just been reading Kedoshim and it says something about equal justice. Perversion of justice in favor of the rich. He’s homeless and poor and one presumes that his assailants have homes and are rich at least compared to him and the law won’t do nothing, NOTHING for him. He goes on in that vein, but he is really close to the sitting guy and in my NY mind’s eye I can see a fight coming. This is why grandma Esther (z”l) told me not to look at other people on the subway. There are guys out there just looking for a fight and you shouldn’t get involved. No don’t do anything for your neighbor, don’t even look in the direction of trouble.

Mind your own business. 38 people minded their own business in 1964 while a madman took a good half hour to stab Kitty Genovese to death in Kew Gardens, Queens. Twenty years later Berhardt Goetz, another Kew Gardens native, shot four young men on the subway. They were either going to rob him or rough him up. But Bernie shot first.

I don’t pack heat and I’m a lot smaller and a lot less juiced than Mr. Bad News. I know that if a fight starts I’m going to have to pile my 60 year old body into it. What I would love for myself is a lot of help if Bad News came for me and so that’s what I’m planning to do for that fortyish reicha sitting opposite. But, I’m looking for alternatives.

Another passenger gets my wife to call for help on the train phone. Bad News sees that. I see that he sees that. We reach 12th street and pile over the platform onto the waiting Richmond train. I make sure that we move fast and in a different direction from Bad News. He's in another car. That makes him someone else's problem.

Doesn't work. In the car he comes, first sipping down the last of his liquid courage. A passenger moves away from him and opens the seat next to my wife. And into the seat he plops. Now I've got him closer to my wife and son than he was before and I'm a whole seat in the wrong direction. He's still loud. Goes on about his being jumped. He's yelling in my son's face. "They beat me up..." My wife is looking like a grizzly bear mother whose cub is being menaced.

Passenger across tells him to pipe down. He looks back at the passenger and he says. "I'm not afraid of you. I only fear God."

Strangely I feel better. This guys got one commandment going for him. He fears God. Now that I think about it, probably two. No idols either. And no gashes in his flesh either; other passengers have those nose rings and tattoos. So he's got some commandments going for him. But, right now it's that commandment about murder that is worrying me.

I give him my "tell me about that look." Roughly the look I use on students so they explain the appalling things they did that caused them to miss the exam. It works. He starts talking and Cyndi and Joe slip out to the other end of the car. He grows calmer. He says he is sorry that he scared the boy. I'm not worried anymore. He's falling into whatever category Reicha (your close neighbor, something closer than your countrymen and less close than kin) is and I'm beginning to think "love for thy neighbor like thyself."

To my wife, he is still Mr. Bad News. He menaced her cub and she is back on the phone bringing down the heat. Mr. Bad News is lucky that Bernie Goetz isn't riding this train.

We are stuck at 19th waiting for the heat. Where are the corners of the field that were left for this guy to glean? There are no corners anymore. He is a stranger in his own land and his countrymen hate him in their hearts.

There is another mitzvah from kedoshim that he has performed. He stopped and listened to me. I am z'kennah, the figurative white hair, and he has obeyed and shown respect to the old head. The score doesn't look that good. There are four mitzvoth in his favor and no mitzvoth testifying against him. And the heat is coming for him. Again.

He fears G_d. No evidence that he consorts with witches or those who tell the future. He doesn't have any money, so modern seers won't deal with him. I bet ancient seers wouldn't

talk to him either—take a look at Asterix and the seer. But lots of people perished because of these lines about witches. It's easy now to make fun of witch trials. "Burn her, burn her. Witches float..what else floats...lead...a duck...so if she weighs as much as a duck she is a witch...burn her. Now the Torah sets out stoning not burning and her Britannic Majesty would only go along with hanging by the early 1700's. If this were Salem of 1692, all that needed to happen was for a child to "cry out against" this man. His specter pinches me and taunts me. That's all the evidence that sent 19 people to their death for witchcraft. Today you have to go to Saudi Arabia to be executed for witchcraft. But, the score looks better for Mr Bad news. He consulted no witches or seers and is on the right side another mitzvah.

While I was rereading Monty Python and the Holy Grail, I came across an off hand insult. Fag. What was that doing there. How can you make fun of 1600's witch trials and then buy into the modern witch hunt. Fag. I once heard that when I was a little boy, but it simply made no sense as a taunt. Small boys aren't interested in what adults do—unless it involves ice cream or explosions. So what sense does it make for a 9 year old to call someone a fag? It's sometime in June in the 1970's and I'm in Edinborough. We are in an old bar with leaded windows so old you can see the drips in the glass. The point of the evening is to go from old bar to old bar in the midnight sun. But do I have to drink a pint of beer at each publ we visit? Can't I get a half pint? No. Only women and homosexuals drink half-pints and if you order one it will start a fight. You are kidding. We kid you not. That will be dram of scotch please. No fight.

So the burn witches and put to death gays merged. There were no more witches. No one can even remember who Molech was (though child sacrifice can still be found in Uganda.) The commies were vanquished. What was left. Gay men and women. There is this innate instinct to burn someone, someone a little different. In the case of killing males "who lie with a man as a man lies with a woman" the torah is particularly brutal. It says that if we don't do it the land will vomit us forth. So we have a choice. Life is choices. How are we to reconcile these lines with "love thy neighbor." We have many reasons to abandon the teaching on homosexuals: It is void because the prohibition stems from the need to fill the earth and it is full, teaches Rabbenu Jacob Milgrom. It is a nullity because a man can't quite do the same thing with a man as he can do with a woman. But think of homosexuality like witchcraft. Once it seemed everywhere and important and evil. In those times our unchurched neighbors who spent Sunday reading the NY Times would be witches. Now they are just neighbors. Same with gay people. Homosexuality used to be linked to hearty parties with golden calves. But the witchcraft, the calf, and the evil magic are long gone. Homosexuals are just Reicha—our close neighbors—who we love like ourselves.

Oh, and Mr. Bad News has 17 outstanding warrants, none of them for any sort of sex crime, so there is surely no reason to stone him for any of those prohibitions.

Speaking of sex crimes, biblical ones, there is a whole table of prohibited marriages. While Mr. Bad News doesn't seem to have fallen afoul of them, they certainly have made good movie scripts. If you were to sum up the work of Mr. Woody Allen, you could do it by just giving the verse in Kedoshim that each of his movies illustrates. Marry a woman and her mother...look it up, it's a really bad crime. The modern punishment is fame and money beyond your wildest imagining.

Here's another example of Kedoshim in the arts, Arlo Guthrie and Alice's restaurant: "Group W's where they put you if you may not be moral enough to join the army after committing your special crime, ... Mother rapers. Father stabbers. Father rapers! Father rapers sitting right there on the bench next to me!" Yup, the group W bench is filled with people who read Kedoshim as their crime playbook. Makes them too immoral to burn women, houses, and villages. Back in those days we had a draft to go along with our war. And the inductees and the press made it painfully obvious that we weren't winning a lot of hearts and minds.

But my Bart guy doesn't do any of these things. , all he does is strong drink, hop turnstiles, a little crack when he has the money and stupid pointless fights. ...

I know a lot of young men who may one day turn into Mr. Bad News. There are lots of things that get them there. Let's start with ATM machines. For the young and not so grownup, the machines are a snare. Overdraw your account by \$5 using an ATM. You get the money and a whopping big fee. Don't pay the fee. You are cutoff from the banking system and modern America. Suddenly you have no papers. The Rabbis of blessed memory would surely view this as "a stumbling block before the blind." And it would be great to see the bankers subject to the stripes of the Torah. Yes, the Rabbi's would have whipped the heads of our major banks and given them the 39 stripes. Reb. Bernanke and the Fed have ended this snare this August, but it will take years for the young who were caught in this and other credit snares to get out. The bankers will just invent another snare and still there will be no stripes. Perversion of justice by the very rich. Or get a jaywalking fine and don't have the money to pay it when you are fourteen. It doubles and they use it to get your license which kills your insurance, if you could afford insurance. Soon you are pursued by a warrant. This parking ticket pursues me, but none will listen and it grows up into a warrant and takes you out of school and sticks you in the cooler. Then they wonder why you didn't finish school and get your papers, uh diploma, and get a job. Or maybe Mr. News started a fight when he was 14 and they suspended him, so he failed, so he stopped trying and that's how he lost his place in society. There are so many ways out.

Let's remember that Mr. Bad news was not the Polish Paritz who enslaved his peasants with loans for alcohol. He is the figurative blind and deaf and the Torah prohibits one from misleading him nor can we curse him.

The cops came and had to explain the situation to my wife. "The trouble is he's lazy, the trouble is he drinks, the trouble is he's crazy, the trouble is he stinks. The trouble is he's growing, the trouble is he's grown, officer Krupke we got troubles of our own." Things don't change much, do they? Drink and craziness, homelessness, petty crime...

The cop said that they could take him in on her complaint or the 17 outstanding warrants, but they had nowhere to put him. He hadn't done anything that would let him compete for a jail cell with the murders, thieves, kidnappers, father stabbers and mother rapers. They couldn't work on getting him committed, but there weren't hospitals anymore. Do remember to thank our liberal legislators for abolishing the horror of mental hospitals. About all they could do was put him off the train, which they did.

But I know that he got on another train, maybe the next train. Trains wander from place to place but they are always warm and dry inside. Inside we sit and watch the ruins of the Bronx flash by and a woman selling peaches in the warm Colorado rain. Lyon at midnight patrolled by German shepherds with shot-gunned handlers. My son, George of the Jungle waking his compartment mates at 5AM. Deep snow, black tunnels, and green mountains. Stopping in Bayside, Douglaston, Little Neck, Skövde, Berlin, Treblinka, Warsaw, change for Ronkonkoma, Yaterketeringsberg, St Pancras, with connections Jokkmok and Capetown. Lovers escaping their parents and older lovers escaping their children; too thrilled with love and freedom to notice the man without the ticket in the last seat.

There is always that man in the last seat, sleeping, dozing hoping not to be noticed. He's going nowhere and going everywhere. And everywhere he stops they ask for his papers and he has no papers so he gets back on the train or shelters under the tracks. He pops up in a food kitchen and an emergency room. Sentenced to time served for stealing food. Then back on the train. He lacks the serious crimes of the moneyed class and the mental capacity ever to be really guilty. The man without proper papers lives forever in Sheol, the shady place we had before we invented a proper hell. But he has no job or home or papers and so he keeps on riding. And he has no kin, nor good neighbors, nor country men, who wish for him anything at all.