

**Who Are We Now?**  
**Reflections a Decade After 9/11**  
***Parashat Ki Teitzei***  
**September 9, 2011**

Imagine, astrophysicist Stephen Hawking asks of us, imagine a hypothetical gun-toating, time-traveling scientist, using a wormhole, a natural phenomenon which theoretical cosmology predicts does really exist, to go back in time not centuries, not decades, but just a minute. Now imagine that, peering through the portal of time, said scientist takes out his gun and shoots himself before he went through the wormhole. The question Hawking then asks us is: who shot him?

It turns out that such a scenario violates a basic assumption we have about the universe – I won't call it a law, and I won't call it a theory, because then some science-skeptic will claim it is "just" a theory, or that the jury is still out and more study is needed. The assumption on which we stake much of our lives, though, is this: that we cannot have an effect before the cause.

So strong is our instinct, our intuition about this, in fact, that we actually look hard for causes, for any effect we see. Connecting the dots. Making sense of the senseless. Imposing order on chaos. Adding two and two and sometimes getting five. It's who we are. It's what we do. At some level, it is what makes us human beings.

Let's look, for a moment, at the three laws with which this week's Torah portion begins. The first concerns a woman captured in a war, a warning that

we should give her 30 days to grieve for her family who, presumably, we have just killed, before marrying her against her will. (Presented as a humanitarian concern in the context of ancient times, our tradition suspects the real purpose of this law was as a cooling off period, so that such a marriage would not take place at all.)

The second law concerns an unfortunate man who has two wives, one of whom he loves and the other of whom he hates... each of whom have children and, of course, the child of the woman he hates is his first-born. The law commands us to not disinherit the eldest to favor the younger one (despite the fact that in the stories of Genesis, that's exactly what happens... every single time.)

The third law is one of the most uncomfortable pieces of legislation in the entire Torah. It is the law of the wayward and defiant son, instructing the parents to disclaim, disown and destroy such a child. (Later rabbinic tradition was itself so scandalized by this prescription that it claimed the entire thing was merely hypothetical, that it had never happened, that it's only purpose in being here was to scare us into the automatic habit of obedience to our parents.)

Three disparate laws open this week's portion, each with their own twists and turns and caveats, unrelated to one another.

But the rabbis can't resist. They can't be comfortable with a random list. What, then, they ask, links these laws? What is the connection between them? And so they come up with the following explanation: A man who marries a woman he captures in war... will eventually come to despise the woman. Any children from that marriage will sense this, and will behave accordingly.

And there, in two easy steps, *assuming* that sequentiality implies causality, a whole new story is born, out of what I suspect was originally simply a stream of conscience collection of rules.

We saw the instinct to add our own interpretation to events at work a couple of weeks ago. Not 12 hours after the earthquake, I was at my computer and followed a You Tube link to an ultra-Orthodox rabbi calmly explaining that this was divine retribution for homosexuality. I won't go into the details he gave about who was shaking what, but it's not just some lone voice on the fringe of society. A United States Congresswoman running for president said something similar, the same woman who not too long ago said that she thought it was not a coincidence that swine flu outbreaks only occur during presidencies from one particular party. (By the way, as wacky as the theory, the facts on that are wrong as well.)

Does this remind you of anything? I remember Katrina, and Pat Robertson's smug explanations for why it is all happening. And before that, of course... I remember Robertson, and Falwell, and so many others, in the wake

of 9/11, pointing fingers and counting causes and blaming it all on gays and liberals and probably left-handed people who go bowling on Tuesdays.

Cause and effect. There are the right kind of questions, asking how one thing does lead to another. And then there are the kind of explanations which force every fact into a preexisting framework, a set of assumptions you had before any event took place at all. Do you remember how hard it was to talk about 9/11 in actual rational terms, that even asking the right kind of cause and effect question – what might have led anyone to do such a thing – was labeled bleeding-heart liberalism, anti-patriotic treason and taken off the table? Actually, to be honest, I occasionally had a similar reaction myself – when the “what caused this?” question cut too close to blaming the victim. Against those who remained more angry at us than sympathetic to us, most of the people who tried to ask what American policies might have led to such attitudes towards our country never meant the question as a justification for the attack. An explanation is not the same thing as an excuse. But even asking the question was considered insulting, irrelevant and off-limits.

Here is how I want to approach the anniversary of 9/11. Here is what I would like to do, tonight, with the passage of time. I want to ask, at this point, not what led to it, but what flowed from it. And I want to ask you not where you were then, but who you are now. Let’s take 9/11 not as an effect, but as its own cause of what has followed. What are the effects of that event? How have we changed, from who we might have been?

How have we changed as a country? The shifting balance and angry arguments of security versus liberty are a permanent part of our lives now.

We know more about the world, all of us, I think... but whether we care more about others or view our new knowledge as surveillance against eternal enemies depends on our outlook, or even maybe our mood at the moment. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, perhaps, and I think not only of my students who now know far more about the differences between Shiite and Sunni and Sufi Muslims than they ever did before, but also of the burning of the Quran, the opposition to mosques not only near Ground Zero – never mind the fact that there was a mosque *in* the World Trade Center --but also throughout the country, the harassment of Sikhs who had nothing to do with radical Islam at all.

After a precious feeling of unity in the wake of horror, we are, I think, more divided than ever before, anger and rancor the rule in how we deal with differences, and we should know better by now.... that within some boundaries that should be broad and wide, the passionate defense of positions of dissent is its own form of patriotism.

One friend from Buffalo wrote:

We walk barefoot in airports.  
 We feel less welcome in Canada.  
 We look in awe and wonder at two sons who chose the military  
     in a time of war.  
 We realize the skyline of our home town will never look right again.  
 We know it is not uncommon for people to be willing  
     to kill themselves for a cause.  
 And hopefully we understand how fragile is civilization,  
     and how much effort is needed for its protection.

How have we changed as a community?

One woman, whose family came to this congregation for the service we held in the immediate aftermath of the attack, wrote that:

“We” [meaning her family] found in [the synagogue] what we were looking for in a greater 'we'. I think Temple has changed significantly: I see it has opened up, has become more tolerant and loving. I think we as Jews were forced to look inside and find ways to cope collectively with the grief of 9-11 in some similar ways as Jews did when they had to cope with historical tragedies: they opened up to be more tolerant and more accepting of difference and used lovingkindness to deal with the unknown--in attempts to try to diminish the possibility of it ever happening again.

Let us hope... let us pray that she is right, that this is the lesson we learn as a spiritual community, in the face of tragedy and loss, enmity and attack.

And how have you changed, in your own journey?

What do fear and anger do, over the long haul? Is it a toxic mix, poisoning the sweetness of the soul? Can we sustain trust, hold ourselves open to experience, rely on the basic goodness of most people, most of the time, with the images of twin towers falling and the tools of everyday travel turned into weapons of mass destruction?

Another friend wrote:

Aware that I am not as afraid as I once was, I have recently begun to wonder about people who grow up -- and sometimes live their entire lives -- afraid, waiting for violence. I don't think it makes people value life less, but what does it do to them? Does it make them provoke violence the way that abused children provoke their abusers because they are more comfortable with the abuse than with the anticipation of abuse? Does it make them adopt a self-concept as perpetual victim, a helpless person? Does it make them less motivated to achieve in school or work?

Ten years. A decade of our lives. Who would we have been, and what would the world have been like, had things gone differently? Who are you, as you sit here tonight? Who are we now?

And if you could travel through a wormhole, if you had one chance, one moment to make a change... is this the change you would choose to make?

There is a power we do hold in our hands, now and always. An important reminder, during this month of Elul, with another turn in time looming on our Jewish horizon. It is a power we forget to use, when we let the winds of the world blow over us, when we react to events instead of remembering to be our own cause.

Let us remember, and let us pray for those who never saw September 12, 2001. And let us remember what kind of people we *want* to be... on September 12, 2011... On that day, and for the rest of our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.