

Yashar koach Millie and Rosie. You have offered such beautiful Torah here this morning.

Rosie, you explored the laws of the Nazarite and you asked whether all of these laws that they took upon themselves brought them closer to God or distanced them from God. Are these good laws with positive outcomes or are they misguided laws - perfectly legal, but with negative consequences. And you used this question to powerfully point out times in history when humanity has issued unjust laws that have led to the suffering of the most vulnerable. And you asked us to look carefully at how this practice has continued up until this very day.

And Millie, you looked at the laws of the Sotah - a woman whose husband had accused her of not being faithful. You talked about how truly horrendous it was that the accused wife had to go through the ordeal of drinking bitter waters simply to quell the jealousy of her husband. You noted how in this situation, the woman, who was the less powerful part of the couple in this patriarchal society, bore the full burden of this law and ritual. And this you told us made you angry and sad - because it seemed to you to be entirely unfair for the wife in question - as you traced a pattern of women's struggle all the way to today.

Now we might think these are two very different topics! But they are in deep conversation with each other. Where Millie zoomed in, Rosie zoomed out. How, they have both asked, (in curiosity and outrage) do we allow standing law to injure the most vulnerable in our societies - be that women, immigrants, we could add trans folks, Jews, Muslims. How do we understand laws and our general desire to follow them - when at times it is the law itself that is unjust?

Dr. King famously wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail: "One has not only a legal, but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to **disobey** unjust laws."

I appreciate how you both have challenged the law when the law itself seems to undermine our highest ideals. In fact, Jewish tradition has a long history of raising these same challenges as well.

The rabbis of the Talmud would sometimes come upon a law that had either become corrupt in its use or from the start was problematic, and when they saw it in action, and the pain that it caused, they understood that something needed to change.

For example, Millie, we learn in Mishna Sotah that in the first century, Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai **outlawed** the Sotah ritual because it became abundantly clear how unfair it was to hold women accountable for the jealousy of men, at a time when he saw male behavior so degraded. Without the Temple, he ruled, there could be no more Sotah ritual.

Or sometimes, the rabbis would see that a law was unjust and instead of ending it, they would find or create loopholes in it, and then establish those loopholes as law.

For example, in the case of divorce in Talmudic times - drawing on specifically gendered language in Torah, the law was such that a man could divorce his wife but a woman could not choose to divorce her husband. So if a wife wanted out of a marriage for any reason, including hard reasons like abuse, she was trapped if the man did not agree. This was the law. BUT - the rabbis of the Talmud realized that this was not a just law. It had evolved to be incredibly dangerous and unfair to women. And it was causing real pain for the people in their communities.

So you know what they did? This is so cool, really. They said - okay, when you two got married, you said a traditional rabbinic legal phrase that the man has to say to the woman. So, the rabbis said: when you did that, you were wed by our - the rabbis' - authority. So ... with that authority, we are saying that the ring that you gave her ... which was required as part of the wedding ritual ... at the moment that you gave that ring to her - it didn't belong to you. It was property of the court. Therefore ... you were never legally married in the first place and so this woman is entirely free to leave. They went back in time and retroactively annulled the marriage, creating a rabbinic loophole to free this woman. This was like 1500 years ago.

1500 years ago, Rosie, the rabbis were asking this question that you've raised. What do we do when a law itself is not just? Their answer: we change it. And 1500 years ago, Millie, the rabbis were seeing how the laws as written did not adequately protect women, and so they tried to correct that - at times.

Pretty radical for a bunch of law makers! And quite a legacy they have left for us.

But how did they know, and how do we know, what's right and what's just? Do we just go by intuition? An opinion? How do we set our moral compass to know what law is deserving of our critique and even maybe our own Talmudic activism?

There's a framework in the Talmud called "*lifnim mishurat hadin*" to go beyond the letter of the law - in order to fulfill the spirit of the law. In certain instances in which the rabbis document how the application of a law is unjust to a vulnerable person - a woman, a stranger, a poor person - they apply this idea - disregarding the letter of the law and upholding the spirit of the law.

What is the spirit of the law? Well, we could answer that in many ways, but in Torah, proximity matters. So right here in parshat Naso, we find Birkat Kohanim, the most ancient words of blessing known to our people. It has three parts that flow from Aaron, the High Priest, to the people. They are blessings: 1) that all people should be safe. 2) that a divine light should shine on each person and, we could say, that each person has an opportunity to shine their own unique light, and 3) that every person should live in peace.

When crafting our most primary blessings, this is what our people believed that every person should have access to.

The commentator Rashbam writes that God explains to Aaron: “you shall not bless in the manner people usually bless one another, wishing that certain individuals will experience blessings of a certain kind. Instead, the priests are to make it plain that they pray to God to extend God’s blessings to all the people whom the priests face at that time.”

Every single person - not just the most popular or powerful - has a right to be blessed with these.

So we could posit: a law that upholds these basic principles might be a just law. A law that does the opposite of these might be worthy of our scrutiny.

Millie, you mapped out a number of ways that our laws have not created equal opportunity or safety for women. And just this week, we learned that the Department of Justice has opened an investigation into E Jean Carroll, literally using the agency responsible for enforcing the law as a weapon on this vulnerable woman.

And Rosie, you made the connection between how laws in Nazi Germany effectively made being Jewish illegal - and how immigrants today are treated in this country. Whether it’s because of long standing immigration laws, or newly passed laws, presidential executive orders, or merely authoritarian threats that are treated as law - the consequences for immigrants in our country at the hand of the law are dire.

I want to tell you a little about what’s happening at Delaney Hall, an ICE detention center in NJ, right now, first because it’s related to the questions that you are raising and second because it’s quite urgent.

Over the past week, the ICE detainees inside of Delaney have led a hunger strike and a labor strike. They’re served rotting food, refused medical attention, and their cases don’t have a chance in front of what are called immigration judges. Elected officials who have seen the inside of Delaney corroborate the detainees’ reports. They’ve demanded that conditions inside of the center be addressed, that the sick, pregnant, elderly, and children be released, and that their court hearings and legal proceedings be taken seriously.

In an attempt to end these strikes by force, ICE agents inside the center have threatened the detainees, coerced them into signing self-deportation orders in languages they don’t speak, and in the last three days, they have beaten them, tear gassed them, and abused them. Several detainees, including a child, have gone to the hospital with broken bones.

I want you to know that our CBE Meet the Moment Team has been hard at work, in partnership with others and the detainees’ families, to file habeas petitions for those inside - using the law in a way that is just - to make sure that at least the detainees we are connected to cannot be transferred and deported in the night. Two of those have so far been successful, to our great relief.

I share this horrible information, though, to say that some of the government's actions fall inside the law and some outside, but we **are** currently functioning as a country **as if** all of this is legal because this administration has created the notion that it is, and that their agents can act with impunity, placing immigrants at the mercy of a legal system that labels **them** as illegal.

If it is our ideal that all people be safe, that all people's unique light has an opportunity to shine, that all people can live in peace and wholeness, AND that the laws of our land uphold these ideals - then we are falling egregiously short. But we, like the rabbis, and like these b'not mitzvah are so not giving up.

If you want to help out at Delaney Hall somehow, please see me after this service, but also, please see Millie and Rosie after the service and ask them more about what they want to do.

As you both become adults in the eyes of the Jewish people, I imagine that you will be part of doing this work. That you will join with others to live out the passionate convictions that you brought here today, through the lens of our sometimes frustrating Torah and our radically inspiring Jewish tradition to do your part to ensure that the blessings of safety and light and peace are within the reach of all human beings equally, even, and especially, under the law.

Yashar koach and Shabbat shalom.