

Parshat Aharei Mot-Kedoshim
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How many of you have heard about the TV series, "Thirteen Reasons Why" – based on the hugely popular novel by the same name?

"13 Reasons Why," is a fictional story, and meant to be a cautionary tale. The series revolves around 17-year old Hannah Baker, who takes her own life and leaves behind audio recordings for 13 people who she says in some way were part of why she killed herself. Each tape recounts painful events in which one or more of the 13 individuals played a role.

Producers for the show say they hope the series can help those who struggle with thoughts of suicide. However, the series, which many teenagers are binge watching without adult guidance or support, is raising concerns from suicide prevention experts about the potential risks posed by the sensationalized treatment of youth suicide.

The series not only graphically depicts a suicide death but also confronts other wrenching topics like bullying, rape, drunk driving, texting and shaming.

So, which is it? Is "13 Reasons Why" a good thing because it gets young people talking and confronting some important topics, or is it a bad thing, exposing them to ideas and feelings that they are not completely prepared to handle?

The answer of course is both. It is good to get our young people talking and confronting these very important topics and it is a problem that young vulnerable youth are being exposed to feelings and dramatic situations that they may not be equipped to handle. But, we are not debating whether to put this series on the air – it is already out there. The best we can hope to do, as parents and as a community is to maximize the potential and minimize the dangers.

Could a TV series, however emotional, actually precipitate suicide? Could a TV show cause a vulnerable teen to do something they might otherwise have not done without that stimulus?

All of us are a jumble of feelings and actions. Sometimes our feelings drive us to do things; and sometimes what we do, what we experience creates feelings, deep and significant emotions within us. In other words, emotions are sometimes the driver of what we do and sometimes they are the result of what we do.

Recently one of our parents spoke to me in a very harsh and disrespectful manner. She was frustrated by a particular synagogue policy. She had not gotten what she wanted and after speaking to several people of authority at the shul, she brought her problem to the rabbi. As I patiently tried to explain the why's and wherefores' of this policy – she grew increasingly angry and frustrated and began taking that frustration out on me. When I called her on this and said, "look we can disagree but I am treating you with respect and I expect the same from you." She quickly apologized and said: "rabbi, I'm sorry, but you have to understand how I am feeling, how angry I am, how frustrated I am!"

Do I? How important was it for me to understand her feelings? What exactly is the relationship between feelings and deeds? By understanding this woman's frustration does it make her disrespectful words more acceptable? Being more aware of someone's feelings certainly explains why they are doing what they are doing, but does it justify them doing what they are doing? Sigmund Freud was one of the first thinkers to help us understand how deeply our inner life affects our outer life. His writings opened a whole world of psychology that has dominated much of Western thinking for the past 150 years. Words like the subconscious, the ego and the id, depression, paranoia, neurosis – are no longer tools in the professional's kit but part of our everyday vocabulary. Perhaps the pendulum has swung too far; maybe our understanding and sensitivity to feelings and the role they play in our everyday choices has shifted from being an important insight into the nature of human behavior to becoming a justification for that very same behavior. It is a long way from saying: "You have to understand I was abused as a child..." to say, "yes, I beat my children but that is due to the fact that I was abused as a child myself!" The first is an explanation, the second is a justification. That woman who asked me to understand her frustration was not providing me with insight, she was seeking absolution for inappropriate behavior.

Many of us play this game. Many of us have a double standard. When judging others – we demand accountability and focus on their behavior alone. When judging ourselves – we expect consideration of our feelings – and as a result, we are far more understanding of ourselves, much more forgiving of ourselves than of others.

What is the relationship of feelings and actions? How dangerous is a TV Show that explores in great depth the feelings surrounding teen suicide, rape and bullying? Should we be grateful for the artistic insight the TV Show provides or should we be worried about the instigation and motivation it may provide?

Today's Torah reading of *Aharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* contains several interesting Biblical Laws such as the prohibition against eating blood, against immorality and forbidden relationships, against theft, against lying. But in all the annals of legal literature, one of the most interesting statutes is contained in today's reading when it states: *Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha.... v'ahavta l'rayecha kamocho, ani adonai.* "Don't hate your neighbor in your heart...but you should love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord." That, my friends, is a very strange law. But, it is one that may in fact provide precisely the insight we seek, the understanding we need.

The Torah seems to be commanding us *how* we should feel! It seems to be telling us what is the appropriate way we should feel about our neighbor. When it comes to the other guy – and how we feel about him or her, Leviticus 19: 17-18 could not be clearer – it is wrong to hate them, it is right to love them.

"But rabbi, it is important that you know how frustrated I am!" Yes, it is important for me to know that, but it does not change the fact that however much understanding it may give me – it does not entitle you to be disrespectful.

We are told that until we address the frustration of the Palestinians, there will never be peace. We are told that until we resolve the sense of injustice that many Muslim's feel we will not eradicate radical Islamic terrorism. I say no! Understanding their frustration and their sense of

oppression is an important insight into who they are and why they are doing what they are doing but it is not and cannot be used as a justification for murder and mayhem.

One of my favorite Elie Wiesel stories is the one he told about the day American soldiers liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp and the war, for him was over. He had survived. He had survived Auschwitz and he had survived Buchenwald. He had survived the greatest inhumanity that man has ever perpetrated against his fellow human beings. Unfortunately, not the only such inhumanity – but certainly an example of the worst. Those who survived were near death. They were exhausted and near starvation. Elie Weisel relates that on the day the camp was liberated the Jews and the Poles who were set free reacted in very different ways. The Poles marked their liberation by getting drunk, and then they went into town wreaking havoc and taking revenge on any German they could get their hands on. The Jews in the camp, says Wiesel, reacted to their liberation. They gathered together, davened *Maariv* and said kaddish for those who had died.

I have long wrestled with this story. Like so many of Weisel's stories he does not explain them, he merely tells them and we are left to try and understand them. Didn't the Jews feel anger, rage and the desire for revenge – just like their Polish counterparts? Of course they did. But they did not permit themselves to act on those feelings. According to Weisel – of the many deep and conflicting feelings they had on that remarkable day of liberation – the one they chose to act on was a need to sanctify the memory of their loved ones who had not survived. They felt but did not act on their desire for revenge. Would we not have understood, if they had chosen the path of revenge? Yes, definitely – but Elie Weisel and the survivors who were with him on that fateful day knew that understanding is not the same as justification. Had they killed Germans that day it would indeed have been understandable – but killing innocent people because innocent people had been killed while understandable, is not justifiable.

So, if your child is watching “13 Reasons Why” – here is what I suggest. Talk to them. Make sure they are not processing these all important issues without the benefit of adult input. Make sure they understand the relationship of feelings and actions. Feelings are always understandable, no matter how outrageous they may seem. There is no such thing as right or wrong feelings. But while feelings are always understandable, actions are subject to a stricter accountability. There may be no right or wrong with feelings, but actions must be constantly subjected to a different kind of calculus – one in which right and wrong is always relevant.

So, if there is no such thing as right or wrong feelings – why does Leviticus 19:17-18 try and legislate how we feel? *Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha....v'ahavta l'rayecha kamocho, ani adonai.* “Don't hate your neighbor in your heart...but you should love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord.”

Because some feelings make it easier to behave well. And while all feelings are understandable – all actions are not. Simply put: I am not allowed to hit another person – period. Which of the following will make it easier for me to observe that rule? If I hate them or if I love them? It is possible to hate someone and not hit them – that is what the Elie Weisel story teaches us. But, it is much easier when we love them. **As a result, the Torah suggests that we should struggle with our feelings, so we don't need to struggle with our actions.**

Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha....v'ahavta l'rayecha kamocho, ani adonai. “Don't hate your

neighbor in your heart...but you should love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord.”

One last point. Why does the verse end the way it does? “Don’t hate your neighbor in your heart...but you should love your neighbor as yourself, **I am the Lord.**” Why does it end – “I am the Lord?”

According to Rashi – no earthly court will enforce this law. If you hate – others or yourself, no judge will subpoena you, no court will summon you. A policeman can sit by the side of the road and with a radar gun he can determine if I am violating the speed limit. What is used to measure the heart? How does one determine the level of hate? Those last two words, “Ani Adonai – I am the Lord” – seem to answer this very question. We can’t detect a hate-filled heart. There are only two who know the recesses of your heart. You and God. Before God alone are revealed the dark and mysterious paths of our hope and our fear and our lust and our intent. What the Bible seems to be teaching us in those simple words: *Ani Adonai*- “I am the Lord!” - so carefully placed at the end of this injunction is that in love and hate of our fellow human being, love and hate of ourselves; in our affection and contempt of our friends and neighbors and ourselves, the only conversation that matters, is the one between you and God.

So how does one help a troubled soul, especially when that soul belongs to a child? How do we enter a conversation that exists only between the child and God? That is why God gave you parents.

The first commandment of the Ten Commandments is the affirmation that there is a God. The parallel commandment, number six, the first commandment of the second five – is Honor Your parents. Just as God sets the standards for the world, parents set the standard for a child’s world. Just as God knows the heart of His people, a parent needs to know the heart of his/her children. If your children are watching “13 Reasons Why”, you must watch it with them, and if you don’t watch it with them you must discuss it with them.

If a child feels lonely, depressed, abused, unwanted or unloved – it is the job of the parent to know that heart and what it is feeling. It is the job of the parent to make a child feel loved so it will be easier for them to act out of love rather than hate and resentment. It is the job of the parent to make sure their children know that all feelings are understandable, but all actions are not. It is never ok to hurt another – regardless of how you feel. It is never ok to hurt yourself, regardless of how you feel.

This is the job of a parent – and if you do not feel that you are up to the job and you worry about the thoughts and feelings your child is having – we are here to help. Reach out to us – there are professionals who have the skills that are needed to guide a young person who is drowning. And that is why you have a rabbi – to help you whenever you need help.

And to the children who are still listening to me – know that we love you. Your parents love you, your teachers love you, your rabbi loves you – and we will be there for you day in and day out. We want you too to have a heart filled with love rather than hate. We want you to see a world of possibility rather than frustration –

V’ahavta l’reyecha k’mocha – we want you to love.