

There's a story about a young man I'd like to share with you.

Let's call him Norm. He lived among a particular group of people although his parentage was mixed. Norm's mother was a member of the in- group while his father was a member of an foreign nation. Because of his parents coming from different backgrounds, he was never really accepted in his mother's nation. He went around looking for someone to take him in but he was never accepted because in this group, affiliation came through the father. Since his father came from an outsider group, he was out of luck. He appealed this case, got rejected, and then got into a fight with another member of the group. Norm made a huge verbal faux pas during this fight and in line with the group's rules, he was brought before the leader. While he was put in lock up, his punishment was decided: death.

One part of the story I forgot to tell you was the backstory to this Norm's parentage. It turns out that his father had actually been killed by the very same leader of the group that had just rejected his appeal. When this man's mother was younger, she had actually been married to a different man who **was in fact** a member of the in-group. In that area, lived another man from a foreign nation. This other man took a liking to the woman and one night, sexually assaulted the woman which resulted in the birth of Norm. When the man who committed the assault realized that the woman's husband knew what happened, he attacked the man. Mid attack, the aforementioned leader came out, saw this happening, and ended up killing the assaulter.

If this story sounds too hard to believe or perhaps a bit familiar, know that you are right. This is the backstory in midrash form given to an event that takes place in next week's parshah where we read about the blasphemer, the man who cursed God. This blasphemer is Norm. Not much is told about what exactly happened in the Torah but Rashi and others fill in the narrative gaps. He, a child of an Egyptian father and an Israelite mother named Shlomit, ends up tribeless and sentenced to death.

Although this doesn't happen in this week's parshah, I thought it an important story to talk about this week. Specifically, it's his mother I would like to focus on: Shlomit bat Divri. We can't really talk about her because the Torah doesn't tell us anything about her. That can be the challenge with the Torah and later rabbinic endeavors.

Written at a time in which women weren't given much agency, their voices are missing from many of our esteemed texts. While there are clearly exceptions, the general way is that the men do the talking and decision making for the women. Even when stories are created around them, as they are in the midrashim about Shlomit, they paint her in a pretty negative light, playing on her being a character of dubious moral quality.

That is not the part I want to focus on. Instead, I think this beautiful contemporary midrash offered by Professor Rabbi Wendy Zeirler of HUC shines a different light: Shelomit bat Divri was a struggling ex-slave and single mother, who labored against all odds to raise her son and shield him from the prejudices of the surrounding community.

Alas, the son—whom the text presents as a בן, a “son” or “boy,” rather than an אדם, a “man,” hinting, perhaps, at his not-yet or barely emergent manhood—went out of his mother’s tent and discovered that the world around him was not what he expected. He saw that he was a second-class citizen in a society of former second-class citizens, that he was not wanted among his would-be brethren. His mother may have attempted to counter and to diffuse his youthful anger when it flared. Befitting her name, Shelomit—from *shalom*, “peace”—she may have tried on any number of occasions to bring peace and calm and to shore up her son’s bifurcated identity.

Rabbi Zierler's take here is a plausible one albeit with a modern twist. Filling in the lacunae of the Torah itself, she paints a picture of a resilient and gritty woman who produces this child who ends up living a complicated life that ends in tragedy. Although anachronistic, I wonder too what would Shlomit might have done had she had the options that we now know women have, at least some of them. After all, if the news that is rumored to be true is true, 36 million people who can get pregnant will lose abortion access. But back to Shlomit. After her rape, what might she have voiced? What fears might she have had? What desires might she have expressed? Unfortunately, we don't know.

This week, many of us have heard these stories from those who have carried children and have had to end those pregnancies. They are horrendously painful and heart wrenching. The truth is, it's awful that people had to share them. We shouldn't need to have someone bare themselves in the way so many have had this week to understand that, well, they should probably have the say over what happens to their body, without any affect on anyone else's body.

A few months ago, Rabbi Tucker shared a great teaching on Repro Shabbat on some of the bedrock sources that form the conversation around reproductive justice. So I don't want to reiterate all of them. Nor do I want to go into detail about the various major contemporary halakhic decisors who permit abortion in a case where the person giving birth's life isn't in danger:

R'Yosef Chaim, Rabbi Eliezer Waldenburg, Rabbi Gedalia Felder, Rabbi Shneur Zalman Fradkin, Rabbi Yaakov Emden, Rabbi Ouziel, Rav Elyashiv, Rabbi Chayim David HaLevy, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. Nor do I want to delve into how the Torah in Exodus 21 details the case of a loss of a fetus between two people and renders the (awful) loss of a fetus as a tort damage and not as feticide. Or, that the Mishnah, the base Jewish legal text classifies a fetus as viable when its head comes out of the birth canal. Or that Maimonides, according to some interpretations of his framing of a dangerous fetus as a pursuer, sees its viability in the same way as the Mishnah. I think you get the point.

As is often the case in Judaism, there is no **one** view on abortion. And the truth is, in the eyes of the Jewish tradition, fitting the conversation around the frame of pro choice or pro life doesn't totally work because it's a sort of a square peg, round whole issue. It's nuanced and complicated and really depends on a case by case basis. But one thing the halakhic conversation makes clear is how important the voice of the one carrying the child is. For all of the challenges our tradition has when it comes to hearing women's voices, in this case, it is uniquely different.

That is the most important part of all of this. Whose voices are we hearing, or not hearing in this case. If you're feeling frustrated and wanting to channel that frustration, there are a number of rallies coming up to make your voice heard, one next weekend sponsored by the National Council for Jewish Women. There are many different options of places to donate money to those who are on the ground fighting for reproductive rights. Please reach out to me and I would be happy to share those as well.

My head keeps coming back to Shlomit bat Divri and all the other Shlomit Bat Divris of the world. When I think about them, I think about the beginning of our parshah this week. Right after the Israelites are told “be holy because the Lord your God is holy,” we’re not surprised to start seeing a detailed breakdown of what “holiness” means. What we may be surprised about is what the first listing is. Namely, we are told **וְאָבִירְתִּי אֱלֹהֵי אִמִּי**, one should have fear/awe/ or in this case honor and respect for one’s mother and father.

The 2nd surprise about this verse is the order of the parents. Normally, we’d expect the father to be listed first in an ancient text, as it does in “honor your mother and father.” Here, we have the mother listed first.

A relevant teaching on this comes from the Chizkuni, the medieval French commentator who says as follows הזכיר האם תחלה לפי שהוא מכירה תחלה, “the mother is mentioned first because the mother has awareness first.”

The one giving birth has a different understanding of what is happening inside their body. It is a keen sense of self that only that person can understand. As Rabbi Moshe Leb of Sassov noted on the verse to love our fellow from this week’s parsha, “You cannot really love another if you do not know their secret pain. There’ve been so many secrets and so much pain. If we can let those who have felt it be heard, then we truly can live out being divinely holy.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Adir Yolcut