

# Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

## Abuse

Parashat Ki Tetze discusses a host of abusive behaviors, some sexual and others financial. In general, the Torah legislates against these aberrant behaviors, deeming them illegal. We have no particular difficulty understanding these laws; as a whole, the objective of Torah law is to create a just, healthy society. Abusive behavior of any kind runs counter to this objective.

We are all too familiar with the various outcomes of abuse: The abuser's compassion becomes dulled and often a downward spiral of self-loathing ensues. As for the victim, abuse often breeds abuse: the victim becomes oppressor, perpetuating the cycle, or internalizes the abuse and suffers the destruction of self-esteem that leads to depression or self-abuse.

Oddly, one case seems to break the rule. In the strange and disturbing instance of the female captive taken in battle, the Torah seems to allow abusive behavior rather than legislating against it. The text does not mince words; this is labeled as abusive behavior, but instead of legislating against "having one's way" with a woman taken against her will in a time of war, the Torah allows it – but adds one major "catch": Your captive will become your spouse. It seems that legislation in this case is aimed at limiting the abuse, not preventing it.

The Talmudic discussion of this topic attempts to frame and clarify the law, labeling it a concession to the evil inclination. This "clarification" actually makes things even more disturbing: If the sages understood that the desire to

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In the charged atmosphere of the battlefield, the normal standards of decency seem to be suspended: Behaviors even young children know are prohibited - taking things that belong to someone else, using force to the point of violence, even taking lives - become the order of the day. In circumstances such as these, the women on the enemy's side become vulnerable; they, too, are most likely a part of the war effort, either actively engaged or as the support system for the enemy's forces. Be that as it may, the Torah points out that abusive behavior - even towards this sort of enemy - is not without consequences: A woman taken captive in a time of war becomes a wife, and enjoys all the rights and privileges afforded by Torah law. Should her captor-turned-husband subsequently choose to send her away, she is not to be discarded or abandoned. She is not chattel; she is a free human being.

And yet, although this is certainly a far cry from the treatment of captives common to other societies and cultures in antiquity, the knowledge that the Torah is somewhat more "enlightened" is not entirely satisfying (at least not to modern sensibilities). In fact, the sages of the Talmud themselves seemed unsatisfied, and added one further point to consider: Following the discussion of the captive/wife, the Torah discusses the rebellious son. The lesson, then, is that the product of this strange and troubled union is destined to be problematic. An abusive relationship cannot beget healthy offspring. The damage goes far beyond the two people directly involved; spousal abuse destroys the children, as well.

The Talmudic discussion is intended to set off alarm bells: Abuse spawns a cycle of abuse. Violence begets violence; poor impulse control breeds another generation of poor impulse control. When passions are unchecked, when the need for instant gratification is allowed to override reason and prudence, when a person looks no further than the present moment, the consequences can be enormous.

This section of the Torah challenges us to consider the eventual outcome of one act of passion left untamed. Perhaps the sages of the Talmud hoped that pointing out the consequences would help potential abusers muster the strength to bridle their impulses: consider, they tell us, the effect of your actions on your unborn children and grandchildren.

In this context, we may take a more nuanced approach to the closing section of the parasha, the call to wage war on Amalek. This nation “abused” the People of Israel on the road when we left Egypt, when we were spiritually and physically vulnerable. On a certain level, the imperative to destroy Amalek is a call to eradicate the very source of abusive behavior.

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In concluding the parasha on this note, the Torah imparts a message that is both therapeutic and practical: Cycles can be broken. Abusive behavior need not be passed down inexorably from abuser to victim. The lessons of abuse can be learned; rather than creating a new generation of abusers, it can breed sensitive, empathetic souls. Pain is only irredeemable if it is random and meaningless.

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This is one of the most often-repeated imperatives in the Torah, especially in this particular parasha: Over and over, we are reminded that we, as individuals, as a family, as a nation, have known all too well what it is to be abused. We were slaves, we were downtrodden and abused, and we are therefore expected to have learned the lessons of that pain, and to live to a higher standard. Abuse transformed into kindness: this, indeed, is the cornerstone of an enlightened, just society.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/08/essays-and-audio-on-parashat-ki-tetze.html>