

Often our Torah stories offer case studies in what not to do. This week, in *Parshat Matot*, we have a wonderful story which offers some role modeling that is actually quite functional!

[Story from Numbers 32 (Matot)]

We are at the end of the Book of Numbers, the end of the actual narrative of the wilderness. The Israelites left Egypt more than 40 years ago, and have been getting ready (and many dying out) for a very long time. Now they're about to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land!

The leaders of the tribes of Gad and Reuben look around, see really good land for their cattle and livestock, and put in a plea to Moses and Eleazar the Priest to see if they can stay on this side of the Jordan. On a very human level, their request makes sense – partly because it's what they know. Who wants to make a big change when we're in our comfort zone and things are pretty good?! My colleague Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg wrote, "We can see how this same dynamic plays out in our own minds and hearts. It can be very difficult to stay focused on the long-term painful personal and communal issues that need our constant loving attention on the other side of the Jordan, when in the moment, on this side of the Jordan, we get a sweet taste of the potential satisfaction of some other strong desire."

Well, Moses is floored, once again. He flashes back immediately to the incident of the spies which opened this book. 40 years earlier they were ready to cross into the Promised Land, but because most of the scouts broke faith with God, they've been

waiting 40 years! No chance will he allow them to abandon the rest of the Israelites to do their own thing.

Now here's where we see some growth, and even a case study for best practices on how to negotiate. The leaders don't get into a battle of wills over who has power (like Korach and his followers did). They stay focused on the specific interests of each party. And they hang in there until a creative solution is reached, which addresses each party's needs: The tribes of Gad and Reuven will set up camp and build shelters for their livestock and fortified cities for their women (yes, in that order). Then they'll not only cross over and fight with their people but do so as shock troops, on the front lines. And they'll stay there until the war has been won.

Moses, agrees, saying: "If you do this, if you go to battle as shock-troops at the instance of YHVH, and every shock-fighter among you crosses the Jordan, at the instance of YHVH until he has dispossessed His enemies before Him, and the land has been subdued at the instance of YHVH and then you return - you shall be clear before YHVH and before Israel; and this land shall be your holding under YHVH. But if you do not do so, you will have sinned against YHVH; and know that your sin will overtake you/find you/catch up with you (*u'd'u chatot'chem asher timtza etchem*). (Num. 32:20-23)

In other words – you have to show up for your community. If you don't, it will catch up with you. Moses calls out another specific negotiating principle – consequences for not fulfilling the commitment. He essentially takes it to God. This will catch up with you if you don't stay true to your vow and true to your people. What that meant was very clear in this story.

Today, what it means to fight the battle alongside and on behalf of our community, even when we're pretty darn comfortable not doing so, feels much more complicated.

I imagine that Justine Rusczyk ("rooscheck") of blessed memory is not far from any of our minds today, as Justine was murdered, by a police man, in our neighborhood. Heartbreak. Heartache. More violence can't be the answer. What sort of battle is this?! Do we let it be a one-off incident for which we grieve and move on? It's hard not to look at or for patterns. So, do we talk about race? "This is what people of color feel like all the time with regard to police"? Do we talk about police brutality? Do we talk about gun violence? Each of us will respond in our own way. We go back to our cattle or our air conditioning and our comfort because that's what we do, that's what we have to do – we can't live in a state of war endlessly.

Unlike most of our Torah stories, this one has a postscript in the book of Joshua. The Israelites conquer the land; the war ends, the Gadites and Reubenites are released from their vows and their service, and they head back over the Jordan to live their peaceful lives.

What if we take our cue about how to respond from the life that Justine R was living? It was a life of love and generosity. She was shot while responding to someone else's suffering. She led meditation and healing. The people who had the pleasure of knowing Justine Rusczyk described her as a beacon of light. Sharon Sebring, her fiancé Don Damond's mother said at the neighborhood solidarity gathering last night, "She lived a life where she would be right here with us. I would be serving no purpose if I spoke on behalf of the family with hate or anger, because our mission is to serve her purpose."

This Torah story illustrates how and why communities need to pull together through times of battle. My feeling today, is that our battle is against hatred, and that Justine's senseless murder ought to point us toward more love, and more generosity of spirit. Perhaps the battle part of it is, that's hard work in the face of all this fear and hatred. May Justine's memory be a blessing for all who knew her and know of her.