

Va Yeshev 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 12/5/2015

Last week, Winston Mosely was denied parole. Again. It was the 18th time he's been denied parole. And while his name might not be familiar to you, others among us will remember the name Kitty Genovese. Fifty years ago, back in 1964, Kitty Genovese, age 27, was murdered in New York City by Winston Mosely. It was one of over 600 murders in New York City that year, but this one got special attention when it was publicized that 37 different people heard her being attacked and no one did a thing. It became a famous case around the world and even gave rise to a theory in psychology called "The Bystander Effect" which essentially says that the greater the number of people present in an emergency, the less likely people are to help a person in distress. And even though the murder took place in Queens at 3:00 AM, many people did in fact hear her screams, and as was widely reported no one got involved or even called the police. To this day the phenomenon has been widely studied and is part of almost every college freshman class in psychology.

But now, on the 50th anniversary of the crime, the full story is coming to light in a couple of new books by investigative reporters. It turns out that really the only reason this crime was so widely reported, in fact it was on the front page of the New York Times, was because of one man - A.M. Rosenthal. At the time he was the Metropolitan Editor of the paper, and he happened to be having lunch with the police chief 10 days after the crime. Rosenthal had come to discuss a different crime, but the chief was interested in the behavior of the witnesses of the Genovese murder. Sensing a good story, Rosenthal ran the following headline the next day: "37 WHO SAW MURDER DIDN'T CALL THE POLICE -- Apathy at Stabbing of Queens Woman Shocks Inspector." The following day, the Times ran a reaction story in which a procession of experts offered explanations of what had happened, or said that it was inexplicable. The March 27th story began "For more than half an hour 37 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens. . . . Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead." From then on, the story-as they wouldn't have said in 1964-went viral.

But here's the problem, as pointed out in the new books: The Times story was inaccurate in a number of significant ways. There were two attacks, not three. Only a handful of people saw the first clearly and only one saw the second, because it took place indoors. The reason there were two attacks was that a man named Robert Mozer, far from being a "silent witness," yelled at Moseley when he heard Genovese's screams and drove him away. Two people called the police. (And remember, this was before 911. You had to know the number of your local precinct to call the cops.) When the ambulance arrived at the scene-precisely because neighbors had called for help-Genovese, still alive, lay in the arms of a neighbor named Sophia Farrar, who had courageously left her apartment to go to the crime scene, even though she had no way of knowing that the murderer had fled. But still, people only remember that no one was willing to save her. No one remembers Robert Mozer, or Sophia Farrar and their good intentions. They could not save Kitty Genovese. To most people what matters most is the end result. But I think that is grossly unfair to the Robert Mozers and Sophia Farrars of the world. What they did in fact took courage and did make a difference, even if the end result was still the same.

I draw this all to your attention because something very similar occurs in this week's Torah portion, and from it we can learn a profound spiritual lesson about heroism and stepping up. Our portion, Vayeshev begins the story of Yosef, who appears as a kid with a fancy coat who acts arrogantly towards his brothers. They want literally to kill him and no one says a thing... But when the brothers grab Yosef, Reuven, the eldest brother, convinces them to cool their murderous rage and back away from their plan to kill him. Here is exactly what the Torah says:

"And Reuven went on, 'Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves' - intending to save him from them and restore him to his father." (Gen. 37:22). It's that last line that is so interesting to me. It's unusual for the Torah to tell us what someone is thinking; usually we just read what they said, or did. But I'm not the only one, of course who was curious about seeing into the mind of Reuven. The Torah Temimah, a collection of rabbinic texts which connect teachings of the sages to passages in the Torah explains why we are specifically told what Reuven was thinking: that he had a plan to save his brother's life. We learn his true intentions to do good and to save his brother to teach us that it's proper to praise people for doing a *mitzvah* **even when it's not entirely successful**. He didn't save his brother from slavery, but his willingness to stand up and challenge his brothers is still a *mitzvah* nonetheless.

Reuven wasn't able to return Yosef to safety but the commentators are willing to give him moral and spiritual credit for worthy actions even if the outcome was not what was hoped. To me, this illustrates an important point: that "success" in the spiritual realm is not the same as "success" in the external world. A spiritual success can be a moment of growth, perhaps the widening of moral vision or the discovery of previously unknown inner resources, while in the material world, success is usually quantifiable as projects finished and acknowledged by others. Some of the greatest spiritual successes we will ever experience are entirely inward. They result only in the transformation of one soul, your own. Perhaps Reuven had such a moment when he resolved to go against his brothers to do the right thing. Seen from a religious perspective, it matters less that Reuven prevailed over his brothers than that he prevailed over his own reticence and cowardice. And, according to our sacred Tradition, he does deserve praise for that.

Reuven in the Torah, Robert Mozer and Sophia Farrar in NYC, they did not change the world. In fact, by outward measures, they simply did not succeed. But from the spiritual perspective they were indeed successful. "Ayzeh Hoo Gibor?" "Who is a hero?" asks Pirkay Avot. "Ha-Kovesh Et Yitzro," which I will translate as he or she who fights the path of least resistance. Those are the kind of battles on the spiritual front that are fought every day. They won't make headlines, but they are where the measure of individual integrity can be found.