

Parasha Mishpatim, Exodus 21:1–24:18

“And a stranger you will not wrong, neither shall you oppress them; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20).” I mumble the last words of my parasha in English, then slowly shut my Torah, running my hands over the symbol of the tree of life set in at the bottom of the azure threads on the cover, grating ever so slightly against my fingertips. I have read my Torah portion at least a hundred times, so I know it practically by heart now. I chose this portion for this momentous occasion: not oppressing or brutalizing the stranger, the one who is excluded or pained, but rather understanding their difficult experience. Setting the book on my desk, I pace anxiously by the window. Why should I be worried? My bat mitsva is tomorrow, but I have practiced and rehearsed so many times. Above the rooftops, stretching all the way to the end of our street, interspersed with bright patches of pine-colored leaves from the tip-tops of the trees, is a splendid sunset. Soft lilac swimming into salmon and coral pinks, melting into a deep saffron. Then, white, tufty clouds gliding at the crests of those waves of color.

I feel a twinge of sadness thinking about my older brother, Daniel. If he was here, he would find some philosophical argument to start with me, or occasionally some insightful comment to make about my semesterly melodramatics which always landed me with a new best friend. One evening some Junes ago, as the sunbaked air permeated my room, he strolled in, wearing his button-down with periwinkle houndstooth designs. Outside the window, the sun had become a blazing jonquil sphere sliding down a palette of shimmering hues. He had been studying for his bar mitsva and was full of thoughts about it. “Amelia, doesn’t the shape of the sun remind you of an apple? Perhaps that’s why Genesis begins with an apple. But...what came first?” Nothing, I thought in that moment, could ever change Daniel, my sensitive intellectual. He would have loved to see the sky outside my window this evening, with the colors dripping into each other, disappearing behind the houses. A majestic violet now commands the horizon. I won’t see Daniel tomorrow in the pews as I

recite the Parasha Mishpatim during my bat mitsva. I never thought it could ever come to this, but it has.

Memories shuffle in. As a Jewish American family in New England, October 7th, 2023, shattered us from a distance. Daniel's righteous grief and anger soon, however, gave way to an icy glare in his eyes and a cold, indifferent voice. He began to spend hours on TikTok and Twitter, and then spew the insidious rhetoric of war criminals like Netanyahu and genocidal maniacs like Ben Gvir. Then there were his thinly veiled racist and Islamophobic jeers that disgusted my parents and filled me with anguish. For the first time, I was scared of him. There were other first times: the first time Daniel spoke back to my mother when she confronted him about coming home late, the first time I heard him slut-shame a girl, the first time I saw him watching a Clavicular short while trying to bulk up. My mother told me he was being radicalized like so many boys his age, and I grew increasingly hopeless watching him be devoured by the "manosphere".

"Mom," I asked one day after school, "Do you hear how Daniel speaks about Palestinian people? There are thousands of innocent civilians who are being murdered in Gaza right now, and he doesn't even care."

"I know, Amelia. I'm devastated by who he's become," my mother said gravely, reaching out with her hand.

"Your mother and I have brought you both up with Jewish values of the sanctity of life to make sure you understand that everyone human life has infinite value and must never be taken," added my father.

"Also, that we must treat everyone, regardless of who they are, to love and cherish difference across humanity. Doesn't your parasha say not to wrong the stranger?" said my mother.

"Daniel has wronged the stranger," I whispered.

Then came the last straw for me. Last year, I had begun a relationship with Nadia, a Muslim-American girl in my grade. I often to Nadia's house, where she would teach me how to

draw the beautiful Persian miniatures that adorned her room. Sleek, elegant Persian calligraphy streamed across the page from the tip of my pen. Then, we would close the door to her room and kiss while dancing to the immortal Ella Fitzgerald.

One evening, Daniel came home, furious about the Middle East and on the phone with a boy he always hung out with. After hanging up, he yelled, seemingly unaware of my presence, “The IDF is doing such a great job in Gaza!”

Somewhere, my anger rose, and I found the courage to shout at him. “Daniel, how dare you. You have turned into a racist, into someone you would have hated before.”

But he interrupted me before I could say more, burrowing his icy stare into my burning eyes: “You should think of getting rid of your terrorist girlfriend before talking about this issue.”

I began to cry as he left the room. I realized in that moment that my brother wasn’t my brother anymore.

After that moment, I vowed never to speak to him again.

For months we have not exchanged more than a glance.

Outside, ultramarine has invaded the sky. Daniel has wronged the stranger, has wronged the one who doesn’t quite belong, the one who is different but who is also suffering like he is. He has betrayed himself and his values and hurt me, my mother and my father too many times. Daniel, too, has been taken.