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Once upon a time, there was a man who owned a donkey. He would offer a ride on his donkey to those who were looking to cross the hot desert. One day, a man purchased this service and the customer, the owner, and the donkey took off across the desert.

After a few hours, the customer who was riding on the donkey decided he wanted to take a break. So, he dismounted and, seeing that the donkey cast a nice shadow, sat down in the shade of the animal.

The owner of the donkey was not pleased at this, as he now had to sit in the blazing sun and wait, while the other one napped comfortably. The owner decided that he wanted the shade of the donkey- after all, it was his donkey! So, waiting until the customer fell asleep, the owner moved his donkey a few feet over and sat down in the shade of his donkey, which left his customer burning in the hot sun.

Sensing the heat that was now barreling down on him, the customer woke up and yelled, "How dare you. I paid for this donkey." To which the owner replied, "You paid for the donkey, but not the donkey's shadow. If you want the shadow as well, you will have to pay more." The two men began to argue and the argument got so heated that the owner of the donkey slapped the customer. The customer slapped him back and they began to fight. The fighting got so loud that the donkey became frightened and ran off leaving the man and the customer with no donkey and no shade. The two men sat in the burning sun and suffered – all because they were fighting over a shadow. And in the end, their argument left them both with nothing.

Isn't that the way it goes with arguments? Usually, it is over something small, nitpicky and not very important. But then the ego gets involved, and the littlest issue gets blown way out of proportion... and next thing you know, both sides are left with nothing! Even if it is only one ego, it can still be enough to cause total chaos. And even when it isn't over something small, even when it is over something big and important, when we let anger and ego lead the way, everything really is lost.

In fact, it's when anger and ego lead the way, that we usually become susceptible to the most dangerous thought of all: I can only win if the other person loses. It's a dangerous thought, because it's a very slippery slope that leads us to believe that we need to push the other person down, in order to become the winner. This story comes to remind us that we are all interconnected, and we need to help each other. If we focus only on winning, only on what we ourselves want, only on our own ego's need, only on justifying ourselves and proving that we are right- then we wind up all losing.

The rabbis explain that this is why the Torah commands us: Tzedek, tzedek tirdof: Justice, justice shall you pursue. The medieval commentator Rashi says: The word justice is repeated twice to say- justice for you and justice for me. It isn't justice if it is only just for one party. Justice requires moving beyond the ego's need to be right and the other person to be wrong.

You can't force someone to accept injustice. History comes to teach this to us. Think of countries that were subjugated in a war, and forced to accept defeat. Sooner or later, they rise up to reclaim what they believe was rightfully theirs. It has to be fair for everyone for peace to last. Resentment can only be squelched for so long. Justice requires moving beyond the ego's need to be right and the other person to be wrong. True peace requires a peaceful process, where each party can feel heard and respected. The journey will define the destination. If we are fighting and yelling over the shadow of a donkey, then very

soon, we will all be left with nothing. Sadly, this reflection is all too timely- we are a country divided, and we have to learn to find a way for no one to feel like they lost, if we want a lasting peace for us all.

This week's Torah portion reminds us of the dangers of letting our egos get the best of us. First, we begin with the story of the flood... where the world was so filled with injustice that G'd decided that the only way to make things right was to start with a clean slate. It turns out that this did not do much to make anything right... the process will define the outcome... and in this case, the Torah is teaching us that destruction and violence can only lead to more destruction and violence... 40 days and 40 nights of rain and storms...

The flood was a reminder to humanity that their claims of power were based in illusion... Of course, this reminder is very unwelcome by us humans... It may indeed be true, if we pause and thinking about it, that we truly have no power... and yet, this message is so quickly forgotten... even now, storms assail us, both metaphorically, and in reality, and still we forget that we have been charged with stewardship of the earth's resources... still we have been charged to serve as our brother and sister's keeper... Sadly, there are far too many of us that forget... Too often, we yearn for the seemingly quick fix, thinking that violent solutions can somehow make for peace...

Immediately after the story of the flood, comes another equally disturbing story in the Torah... only further reinforcing the lesson that violence can only yield to more violence. Noah gets drunk, and his youngest son, Ham, walks in on his father while he is naked. It is not clear in the text what happens between them, but whatever it was, leads Noah to curse Ham and all of his subsequent generations, a curse which some have used as a prooftext for slavery.

This story has many gaps in it, and it is not fully clear what exactly happened between Noah and his son Ham. The only other story in the book of Genesis that describes someone getting drunk is Abraham's brother Lot. Following another act of complete destruction, namely the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot gets drunk and winds up having sex with his daughters. In both situations, the text blames the children for the parent's act of drunken sexual impropriety and incest.

Sadly, in our own day, we have not evolved much further. As a society, we still blame the victim, especially in situations of sexual exploitation. Scholars suggest that this is a defense mechanism to counter the feeling of helplessness that comes with the recognition that any one of us can be a victim, at any time. We are far more powerless than we are comfortable acknowledging. Whether it is global catastrophe or senseless acts of violence, our egos cannot tolerate the idea that at any moment, all could be destroyed... that at any moment, any one of us could die or be killed. In response to the feeling of utter helplessness, the ego invented a very unfortunate defense mechanism: blame.

Blame puts distance between us and others. If the victim is deemed "wrong", then we don't need to worry about being victimized, because we know what to do to stay safe. The biblical account of the flood is a perfect example- they sinned and so they were flooded. In the response of modern floods and storms, there are still those who cast blame, such as those that saw Hurricane Sandy a fitting punishment for alleged acts of sin. Or, let's take those poor human beings displaced by natural disasters or wars, who society would rather label than feel compassion for... Or, for example, let's take the fallacy of "she was asking for it"... if we can blame the victim of rape for the clothing she wears, or for any other reason, then we can comfort ourselves with the idea that we will be able to stay safe, by making different choices. Similarly with disease, as a society, we focus on the idea that not smoking, exercising and eating healthy will protect us, and too often we look down on people who make different choices. But disease did not read our rule book, and we all know people who did everything "right" and still wound up sick... Those

are the ones that shake us so profoundly... because they disrupt the ordered and logical world that we create for ourselves, in order to reassure ourselves that we can have control over our fate.

This illusion of control is not new. Our Torah portion for this Shabbat describes humanity's unending quest for power with yet another story: The children of Israel wanted to build a tower that would be tall enough to reach the heavens. Our midrash comments that they were so focused on their ego needs that, if a human being fell while they were building, they didn't notice. All they cared about was making sure that their bricks remained intact. They cared more about money, power and bricks, than they cared about people. Instead of trusting their hearts, instead of trusting G!d, they sought to dominate- to build a tower tall enough to displace G!d.

Their egos blinded them. And this how misunderstandings start. They stopped being able to listen with their hearts, because all they could hear was their own desire for power. And this is how their speech became babbled. They couldn't understand anyone but themselves. Really, they couldn't even understand themselves. They couldn't understand that their quest for power was really insecurity. They weren't tapping into the true Source of Power and Strength. Rather than turn to G!d, they sought to become G!d.

And then, when the words stopped being rooted in Truth, all that was left was the babbling appearance of communication. They flung words at each other, hard attacking words of lies and blame. They became so numb to what really mattered that they didn't care if someone else fell. The midrash even relates that they forced pregnant women to give birth while still building, and then tied their babies around their waist, so that they didn't lose a minute of productivity. The story of Babel is the story of the misuse of language and power; the triumph of the ego and the hardening of the heart. This account, of pregnant women being forced to work, to such an extent that their babies were tied to their waist so they did not miss a second of productivity... this account is not very different than some of the stories of labor trafficking that we encounter today, where people are forced to work in inhumane conditions for 20 hours at a time, despite repetitive use injuries, in order to make profit for someone else. According to the early rabbis, this story describes the destruction we create when we value money over human beings... this story relates how the trafficking of humans began.

We are just, as a society, beginning to wrap our heads around the world-wide tragedy of human trafficking, which is estimated to be the second largest trillion dollar global industry, right after drug trafficking. Human trafficking and slavery is not new... it is as old as the Torah. There is a saying that prostitution is the oldest profession in the world...

The challenge is that when we call it "profession" we put a mask on what it really is- the exploitation of human beings, against their consent, for the profit of others. Victims are created in very purposeful ways... Right here in this city, and in the cities where each of you live, there are hundreds of men and women, and more frequently, young girls or boys, chained to beds, being rented out by the hour... Or they are chained metaphorically.. through addiction, or through the withholding of their passports and documents, or through threats of violence... and they are forced to sell themselves for the profit of others...

It is estimated that within 48 hours of running away from home, a child will be approached for the purpose of trafficking. Once they are lured into a traffickers' web, they are frequently transported across state lines, following large events such as the Super Bowl or the Derby, as peak trafficking moments. The internet has found new ways of hiding this activity, and perpetrators have developed a special code language to identify where under-aged victims can be "acquired", and how to avoid the undercover police officers who can't keep up with the pervasiveness of the demand. But, sadly, we don't just have to look to the internet, or the parking lots of cheap motels, the problem of human trafficking is often right in front of

our eyes... too many nail salons and massage parlors and cheap buffets rely upon indentured servitude... often rotating their “staff” so that they can’t get too attached and ask for help. The problem of human trafficking is far more prevalent than we want to admit... Slavery exists thanks to one of our ego’s favorite defense mechanisms: denial. Denial and blame are the mechanisms by which we, as a society, inadvertently perpetuate this injustice.

Accurate data about current statistics is challenging as this is a very hidden population, and much of what we know is from survivors who managed to escape. A few months ago, the National Human Trafficking Resource Center reported that it received 21,947 calls from victims, and it was able to help 1,600 survivors, a 24 percent increase from the previous year. But the numbers of those who are enslaved continues to grow faster than we can rescue them. The more people realize the pervasiveness of this tragic reality, the more victims are being identified.

It is estimated that globally, \$32 billion is generated through 27 million human trafficking victims with more than 100,000 that are in this country. Data indicates that far too many of them are in rural areas near truck stops, tied to a stained mattress in motels off of the interstate. The Polaris Project estimates that 13 is the average age of victims, but our local work, here in Kentucky, the youngest documented victim was two months old.

Catholic Charities, which provides support and training on this issue locally, has begun to see an increase in children who are being trafficked by their parents or caretakers in order to pay a debt related to drug use. Children get “rented” for commercial sexual exploitation or labor. Despite popular misconceptions, only 35 percent of victims of human trafficking in Kentucky are foreign nationals. As the heroin and opioid crisis is reaching epidemic proportions in this country, more and more people are being forced into this “business”, and the age of victims is getting younger and younger.

The problem of sexual violence and the exploitation of women continues to be a very real threat, one that has only become more divisive over the recent months. It takes each of us to take action, to reclaim our power and our voices, and to mobilize together to work to prevent it. As women, and as Jews, we have a special responsibility to take a stand against this issue. We were liberated from bondage in ancient Egypt, with a mandate: to fight against slavery and injustice wherever we see it.

The Women of Reform Judaism have taken up this issue from an advocacy and policy perspective, but there is far more that needs to be done. My hope is that, this weekend, each of you will be renewed in your commitment to working for the justice of all human beings, and that you will go back to your respective communities and get involved in this work. Survivors need justice, resources, mentoring and kindness, as well as a society that no longer demonizes them.

In my current role as Vice President of KentuckyOne Health, I have been given the opportunity to lead our state in this work. We have developed programs to try to help victims of domestic violence and human trafficking, increasing their access to resources and improving health care workers’ ability to identify the lethality risk of victims. We are also working in partnership with local researchers to develop more accurate data to guide our interventions.

But, we are also working on prevention, not only for victims, but also for perpetrators. The predisposition to violence is developed in early childhood, so we have banded together with nonprofits across the city to create “the Bounce Coalition” which works to create resilience in children who have had adverse childhood experiences, to provide them with the skills that will help ensure that they have healthy relationships, and the self-confidence to know that they deserve healthy relationships.

One in three teens reports being a victim of dating violence. One in three women experience physical and sexual violence, and one in five are a survivor of rape. We can't allow the status quo to continue. We at KentuckyOne Health have supported PACT in Action, which works with teens in high schools and middle schools in West Louisville, to train them to teach each other the skills of healthy relationships, and we connected them with BBYO teens so that we could bring together teens who might never get to know each other, so that they could build connections and realize that they are all in this same boat together. We are currently working on a "break up summit" where we bring together teens across the whole community to learn the important skills to not only have healthy relationships, but end them in healthy ways. The only way that we can stop the scourge of violence is to work together to build up the next generation, both boys and girls, and to arm them with the resilience and skills that they need to be the voice of change in a world that desperately needs it.

May this weekend that we celebrate together, as women of Reform Judaism, be the weekend when we reaffirm our commitment to peace and healing for all people. May our time together teach us how to let go of the illusions of the ego. Let us focus on those things that unite us, and let us work toward justice for everyone. Let us remember the words of Emma Lazarus, who reminded us: that "Until all are free, none are free".

It is like the old story of the two men who were in a boat. Suddenly, one man pulls out a drill and begins to drill. The other one starts to scream- what are you doing? We're going to drown!!! You have to stop!!! And the other says: don't worry. I'm only drilling on my side. This is the illusion of the ego- we forget that we are all on the same boat. We are all part of the same Unity that we recite in the Shma.

Shma: we are all One. And the we really have only one command that ensues from this: V'ahavta. Love. Compassion. To learn to listen with our heart. This is how we will fulfill the commandment: tzedek, tzedek tirdof: Justice, justice you will pursue. Justice for one's self and justice for those around us... until we have justice for all people, our world is still unjust, and each of us, if we are not fighting for justice, are perpetuating a system that is unjust.

This weekend, we read the story of the Noah's Ark. We are reminded once again that in moments of crisis, we all need to get on the same boat. Today, as we gather together, strong and determined women from around the world, gathering together to focus upon what unites us, to remember our collective power to heal and to bring hope, when those around us want to focus on how divided we are... we have the ability to change and transform.

May this be the weekend when we can learn to listen with our heart to one another, and to recognize that we are all One... we are all in the same boat, and we will sink or sail, depending on how we work together, and show compassion to those who need it. May we return to our respective communities energized with new ideas and new connections, and a vision for healing that will make tzedek for all- men and women, and tikkun olam for our broken world.