



TABLE TALK: Vaera

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At the Golden Globe awards on Sunday, Oprah Winfrey told the story of Recy Taylor, an African-American woman from Alabama who was on her way home from church in 1944 when she was raped by six white men. The attack was reported to the NAACP and investigated, but the rapists were never prosecuted, an all-too-common occurrence in the South at that time, when white man controlled the legal system.

Why, more than 60 years later, did Winfrey want the world to know about Recy Taylor?

“She lived, as we all have lived, too many years in a culture broken by the brutally powerful men,” Winfrey said. In other words, Taylor lived, and we all have lived, in a world in which justice has been unevenly applied.

This week’s Torah portion, *Vaera*, suggests that those of us who remain silent in the face of such injustice bear responsibility. In the portion, God sends the first of the plagues upon Egypt. One might reasonably ask why all the Egyptians were punished with such things as frogs, lice, and boils when it was Pharaoh refusing to let the slaves go. The Torah makes clear that God has decided to punish all of Egyptian society because their silence made slavery possible. As Elie Wiesel said: “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.”

The rape of Recy Taylor played a part in sparking the Civil Rights movement. A *New York Times* article about sexual harassment by Harvey Weinstein triggered the “Me Too” movement. The release of videos called attention to the police shooting of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald and forced Chicago to make reforms. But in these cases, and many others, one might ask, as Oprah did: What took so long?

God’s decision to punish all Egyptians reminds us that silence is not the same as neutrality, and silence is certainly not equivalent to innocence. When we fail to speak out against injustice, or when we wait until it’s popular and safe to fight, we share the guilt.

At the Shabbat table tonight, try these questions:

1. Twenty-five years from now, what will society look back on as the greatest injustice of our time?
2. Have you ever taken an unpopular stand to protest something? What happened?
3. Why do you think God didn’t strike the Egyptians with the tenth plague first?
4. Do you think it was fair for God to punish even the children?

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