

Parsha Emor: Making Sense of the Non Sequiturs of Our Society

In these days of Covid 19 it is important to find reasons to smile; opportunities for laughter.

There are certain comedians that make me smile without even having to watch their routines. I just have to hear their names. For me, the Marx Brothers, the antics of Groucho, Harpo, and Chico, rank high on my immediate smile list. To me, Chico, the brother who plays an Italian immigrant, is the most underrated of the brothers, and his non sequiturs are comedic gems.

There is a scene in *Animal Crackers* where Chico recognizes someone he knows to be a fish peddler impersonating a respected art collector with the name Roscoe W. Chandler:

Chico: "How is it you got to be Roscoe W. Chandler?"

Chandler: "Say, how did *you* get to be an *Italian*?"

Chico: "Never mind—whose confession is this?"

Or, there is a scene in the film *Go West*, in which Chico attempts to placate a Native American chief whom Groucho has offended.

Groucho "Can you talk Indian?"

Chico: "Are you kidding? I was born in Indianapolis!"

The non sequitur can be a great device for laughter! As the Latin of the word Sequitur suggests, it is not sequential; it does not follow. The unexpected nature of the response is where the humor lies.

But what if the non sequitur is in the Torah? What if the Torah suddenly changes subjects without explanation? Needless to say, not every non sequitur is a joke. Not surprisingly, the Rabbis of our tradition had another view. For them, a non sequitur could be a source of great meaning, and, as we shall see this morning, a source for inspiration as well.

Our Torah portion of Emor includes a complete listing of the Biblical calendar, the holy days to be observed throughout the Jewish year. The Torah begins with Passover, the festival of the liberation of the Jewish people, and then tells us to count 50 days until the harvest holiday of Shavuot. Today, for instance, is the 30th day of the counting. But at the conclusion of describing the ritual offerings of the Shavuot holiday, and before continuing with a discussion of Rosh Hashanah, the Torah chooses to repeat a commandment previously mentioned, which has nothing to do

with the holiday rituals: “And when you cut down the harvest of your land, do not finish off the corner of your field when you harvest it; and do not collect the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them to the poor and the stranger; I am the Eternal, your Almighty God.” (*Lev. 23:22*)

Wait, I thought that we were talking about the holidays and now the subject is leaving part of our harvest for the poor? Why is this seeming unconnected law placed in the midst of the ritual laws of the festivals? What is the meaning of this non sequitur?

Rashi quotes the Sifra, a Midrashic work on the book of Leviticus: “This is to teach you that anyone who gives the harvest leavings to the poor as is proper – we account it for him as if he built the Holy Temple and offered his sacrifices within it.” The boldness of this teaching should not pass us by. A person who ensures that the hungry have food to eat; the farmer who leaves a portion of his harvest for the poor; has done something equivalent to building the Temple and offering the Shavuot sacrifices! Here, the Rabbis remind us of the prophetic message that God does not want our sacrifices as much as God wants us to care for the most vulnerable in our society. When we respond to our brothers and sisters in need, when we ensure that they are cared for, we will have made a place for God in the world; we will have rebuilt a symbolic Temple.

This is a lesson that societies must learn again and again, especially in a time of pandemic. The greatness of a society is measured in a variety of ways. From a Jewish perspective, one measure is how it treats those on the margins of society, especially when their fate hangs in the balance.

As we face the Coronavirus epidemic, here is another non sequitur, then; here is something else that does not follow. As we say in Hebrew, *Lo Hegyioni*, it makes no sense.

In the month of April, 20.5 million jobs were lost in this county and the unemployment rate is nearly at 15%. As a result, people who never thought that they would ever be in a line get food assistance are finding themselves in that exact situation with thousands of others. A few blocks from where we are standing today, at Wrigley Field, instead playing baseball, Lakeview Pantry will be handing out food to hundreds of people. All of us have seen the news footage of miles of cars lined up, all waiting for a box of food.

And the non sequitur?

At the same time, farmers are leaving not only gleanings on their fields; they are leaving their entire crops. Dairy farmers are disposing of milk. Thousands of pounds of perfectly good vegetables, hundreds of gallons of milk, are not going to those in need, but being left to rot! As we all know, the reason for all of this is the grim economic reality of the Coronavirus and the Shelter in Place order. Restaurants across the country remain shuttered and their orders for produce, or their orders for Dairy products, have simply stopped.

One story reported in the New York Times concerned a dairy farmer in Ohio whose orders from restaurants and coffee shops have simply disappeared. The solution was to dump 31,000 pounds of milk from the refrigerator into a nearby lagoon. Around the country, farmers have been forced to dig pits to dispose of tons of onions, zucchinis, produce of every kind. A chicken processor, Sanderson Farms, destroyed 750,000 unhatched eggs, or 5.5 percent of its total production, sending them to a rendering plant to be turned into pet food.

And on the story goes, and not far away, the recently unemployed are standing in line as our country's supply chain is being threatened. I believe that even Chico Marx would have a hard time making sense out this non sequitur. Certainly, there is nothing funny about it.

Now, there are sound economic reasons for the farmers doing what they are doing. They do not want to glut the market with the excess that would have been sold to restaurants and drive down the prices of what they are selling to individual consumers. They do not have a mechanism to move their crops or chickens to different vendors, or even to pantries and food depositories. In short, our country is not prepared for a situation such as this; the anguish that farmers are suffering watching their crops rot and being faced with economic ruin while those in need watch this happen around them.

Far from being arcane, the message of Torah as understood by the Rabbis offers us a powerful reminder of the priorities of a holy society. **Hold those two images up in your mind, that of the miles of cars lined up to receive food and fields of harvested crops rotting, and then ask yourself, if the economic mechanism of American capitalism creates unethical situations such as this, do we not have a moral imperative to fix them, to plan for such eventualities?** To do otherwise, to rush without addressing the myriad issues that we face, to get back to work without balancing the human cost of illness will only increase our moral quagmire. It leads us to chillingly repugnant statements like that of the Lt. Governor of Texas, Dan Patrick:

“THERE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THINGS THAN LIVING. AND THAT’S SAVING THIS COUNTRY FOR MY CHILDREN AND MY GRANDCHILDREN AND SAVING THIS COUNTRY FOR ALL OF US.”

To this immoral calculus, the Torah says no; the God of Israel says no; the founding fathers of this country say no. The choices that this country has faced are never as binary as he suggests, it is never either-or. As Voltaire once said: *Simple matters are either, or; complex matters are either and or.* A country that does not lead with a concern for the health and welfare of its citizens is not a moral country. If we are unwilling to place an ethical restraint on capitalism, unless we are willing to add the word “safely” to the slogan of Getting America Back to Work, we should prepare ourselves for more ethical non sequiturs!

Let us learn the lessons of the moment and plan carefully for a better future.

A future that has adequate testing across the country so that we can react with precision to this virus.

A future that has a better plan of how to manage the food chain of this country, where farmers have alternatives to letting their food rot and those who are out of work can eat.

A future that protects workers in meat packing plants so that we are not sacrificing people’s safety and their lives so that Americans can have the dinner of their choice.

In the end, we have a vital choice to make: either we can continue to create the type of tragic non sequiturs that cause us to wince and not smile, or fulfill an ancient Midrash and build a new Temple in our own times through the moral choices that we make as we go forward, as a country that fulfills the vision that we all learned to recite in school, *with liberty and justice for all.*