D’var Torah – Emor
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom - Vancouver BC
May 1, 2026

A number of years ago, I came across a story that has stayed with me ever since.

A man is sitting on a quiet subway. The car is calm, almost serene. And then a group of children bursts in, running up and down the aisles, shouting, disrupting the peace.

Everyone on the train is visibly irritated.

Their father is sitting right there. But he does nothing.

He seems completely oblivious.

Finally, one passenger turns to him and says, “Sir, your children are disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more.”

The father looks up, as if waking from a fog, and says, “Oh… you’re right. I guess I should do something. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to do… and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.”

In an instant, everything changes.

The behavior hasn’t changed. The noise hasn’t changed. But the meaning of it has.

What looked like bad parenting now looks like grief.

What looked like disrespect now looks like disorientation and pain.

All because we learned the story behind the story.

That same kind of shift sits at the heart of a strange and troubling episode in this week’s parasha.

In Parashat Emor, we read about a young man, the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father. He

tries to take his place among the Israelites, among his mother's people. But he is rejected. Tribal identity is determined by the father, and he has no tribe to belong to.

A fight breaks out. And in the course of that fight, he utters a blasphemy against God.

For that act, he is brought before Moses, and ultimately, the punishment is death.

It is a difficult story. A harsh story. One that already challenges us.

But then the Torah does something unusual.

We are never told the name of the blasphemer.

But we are told the name of his mother. Shelomith bat Divri.

In fact, she is the only woman named in the entire book of Leviticus.

Why her? Why here? Why does her name matter?

Our tradition notices this and refuses to let it pass quietly. The rabbis step in and offer a backstory, one that is as painful as it is illuminating.

They teach that Shelomith was the woman connected to the Hebrew slave whom Moses saw being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster. The story we know from Pesach and the beginning of the book of Exodus.

But they add something we do not see on the surface of the text.

They suggest that the taskmaster had raped Shelomith. That the child born from that act of violence is this very young man. And that the beating Moses witnessed was an attempt to silence the husband who had seen what had happened.

If that is the story behind the story, then everything begins to look different.

This is a young man born into trauma.

Raised with stigma.

Living with a past he did not choose.

He tries to find his place among his people.

And he is told, once again, that he does not belong.

And so we can begin to hear his voice.

Where am I supposed to go?

Who am I supposed to be?

If I’m not welcome here, then where? If not with you, then with whom?

We can feel the anger. The isolation. The longing to belong.

None of this excuses what he does. The Torah does not erase accountability.

But it does something we so often overlook, it gives context, the backstory.

The rabbis who tell us this nameless young man’s story refuse to let us see him only as his worst moment.

They insist that there is a story behind the behavior. A history behind the outburst. A human being behind the act.

Why? Because there always is, and so often in our anger, our judgement we forget that, or willfully ignore it.

But the backstory matters. The “why” matters.

In my experience, and in your’s as well, we know that most of the time, people do not act randomly. There is almost always something underneath. A wound. A fear. A loss. A story we do not know.

And yet, how quickly we judge.

How quickly we decide we understand someone.

How quickly we reduce them to a single statement, a single action, a single position.

We are living in a moment where people are sorted instantly into categories. One sentence, one post, one slogan, and we feel we know everything we need to know about them. We stop listening. We stop asking. We stop seeing. And we just judge.

But what would happen if, before we reacted, like the Rabbis we became curious?

If before we argued, we asked a question?
If before we judged, we paused long enough to wonder: what is the story I am not hearing?

Think about the conversations you've had this week. The ones that ended too quickly. The ones that became tense, or shut down entirely. The ones where you walked away thinking, "How could they possibly believe that?"

What if there is more there?

A backstory, a reason that might change how you see the person sitting across from you. Or the children acting out on the train.

I do not believe that everything happens for a reason. That's not my theology, and it's not Judaism's either.

But I do believe that there is almost always a reason behind what happens. Behind what people say. Behind what they feel.

And if we can learn to look for that, to listen for that, to ask about that, then we move from holier than thou, to “holy cow, I didn’t know that before I jumped to conclusions.”

A community that asks why before it judges is a community that makes space for complexity, for humanity, for each other.

And in a world that feels increasingly fractured, that kind of community is not just important.

It is essential.