

The Wrath of Rage

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Friday, April 1, 2022 – *Parashat Tazria*

This past Sunday, just a few miles up the road, a monumental, Earth-shattering, never-before-seen-in-the-history-of-the-universe event - some even claim it was on par with Armstrong & Aldrin's moon landing of 1969 - took place.

Yes, I'm talking about The Slap.

I'm talking about the strange, surreal moment - in the middle of a live broadcast of the Academy Awards - when one performer slapped another.

I'm talking about an act of violence - an unprompted physical assault - that left Hollywood's elite shaken ... on its most venerated, celebratory night.

Yes, tonight I'm talking about the thing we're all **so** sick of hearing & reading about, the same thing *we can't stop talking about*.

But tonight ... my goal is **not** to pass judgment on either actor. Or to offer my own take on what precisely happened between those two men, or what I believe will come next in their careers or personal lives.

Instead, I want to talk about **why** we can't stop talking about The Slap. I want to talk about **why** that one moment shook many of us, and **why** it's continued to latch itself onto our collective conscience. I want to talk about **why** The Slap captured something I've been struggling to articulate for over two years - a feeling, an energy, a vibe so unlike any feeling or energy or "vibe" I certainly knew pre-pandemic.

I want to talk about **why** The Slap felt so familiar.

But first, I want to tell you what Josh and I did a few weekends ago.

Now, my husband and I haven't gotten out much over the last two years. Between, you know, a *pandemic* and being pregnant through multiple Covid surges and just trying to survive the immediate postpartum period - in addition to genuinely preferring to melt into sweatpants and collapse on the couch at the end of a long day - well, let's just say Date Night has fallen by the wayside.

But - a few weeks ago, we brought back Date Night. Oh yes. The triumphant return of "just the two of us" saw us at an upscale restaurant in Downtown LA, followed by a romantic stroll down Broadway and - finally - ending up at a "**Rage Room**" ... so that I could don protective gear, grab a metal baseball bat, crank up some heavy metal and spend twenty minutes essentially smashing random stuff to bits. Empty glass bottles, used plastic canisters ... they even gave me an old, broken printer from the late 90s, God bless them.

Yes, this is a real thing you can pay to do.

And let me tell you - it was absolutely worth it. There was something deeply spiritual about the twenty minutes I spent in my "Rage Room," a controlled environment with multiple safety precautions. A business whose tagline is "*take it out on us.*"

And when I walked out afterward hopped up on adrenaline, I felt exhilarated. I felt a lightness ... that I cannot remember feeling for a long, long time.

(pause)

I spent a lot of time processing that Rage Room experience. Evaluating why I felt drawn to go there to simply "break stuff." Analyzing what it said about me that a Rage Room could give me a sense of release I did not realize I'd been craving.

I thought about the Rage Room this past week, as I combed through continued analyses of The Slap. I thought about **why** witnessing such a bizarre event felt so traumatic. I wondered - *why does this feel so monumental? Why can't I - who has no connection whatsoever to any of these celebrities - shake this off?*

The truth is, I think every one of us sees a little bit of Will Smith's impulsive, brazen, out-of-line behavior in ourselves.

Especially after all we've been through since March 2020.

In a piece published this week in The Atlantic aptly titled, "*Why Are People Acting So Weird*" the author Olga Khazan writes, "during the pandemic, disorderly, rude and unhinged conduct seems to have caught on as much as bread baking and Bridgerton. Bad behavior of all kinds has increased. Americans are driving more recklessly ... early 2021 saw the highest number of "unruly passenger" airplane incidents ever, according to the FAA ... health-care workers say their patients are behaving more violently, leading Missouri hospitals to consider [outfitting nurses with panic buttons]. And, of course, schools, too, are reporting an uptick in disruptive behavior."

Forget for a second the facts and statistics. We **know** this. We **feel** it. We **see** it in others and in ourselves. We **experience** it out in the world and on our social media news feeds. And we can absolutely **explain** it: we're all stressed out. We're exhausted by the constant chaos. We're feeding off one another's energy, even when we're forced to stay physically apart.

Jewish tradition has a name for this - "*yetzer ha'ra*," evil inclination. Despite our best efforts, we've each felt our *yetzer ha'ra* bubble up, out and over the top throughout our lives and especially the pandemic.

But even as we "return" to a version of pre-Covid life ... rage, frustration and stress are simply coursing through our society right now. Keith Humphreys, a psychiatry professor at Stanford, notes that even now "everyone - **everyone** - is teetering slightly closer to their breaking point."

But what happens when we actually meet our breaking point? And what's the consequence of a verbal or ... especially ... a physical outburst? It's one thing to "lose it" in private, to unleash a torrent of **words**. It's quite another when we reach our limit in public; when we use our **hands** to strike another. When our *yetzer ha'ra* leads us to physical violence.

In this week's Torah portion, *Tazria*, we find the rituals of purity and impurity related to disease & infection. It's a Torah portion we've read through new eyes since the onset of Covid.

In chapter 13, we read: “*as for the person with a leprous affliction, the clothes shall be rent, the head shall be left bare, the upper lip shall be covered over; and that person shall call out, “Impure! Impure!”*” In the commentary on this passage, we learn that this “Impure! Impure!” proclamation is seen as a warning for others to avoid the ill person so they will not become sick themselves through breath or touch. It is **words** - shouting “impure! impure!” - that will, presumably, keep you safe.

Elsewhere in the Torah, the actual **onset** of leprosy is **connected** to words. In Numbers 12, Moses’ sister Miriam is left with scaly, white skin after **gossiping** about Moses’ wife. A *halachic* midrash from *Sifra M’tzora* tells us that “*tzaraat* is the quintessential punishment for slander. Miriam’s contraction of the disease was the result of her [verbal] denunciation of Moses.”

(pause)

We know that words **matter**. We also know that word and action are interconnected, often dependent on one another. The daily dance we each do between head, heart, mouth & hands is an elaborate one. And we’re taught from a young age to use our words, not our hands; that violence is never the answer.

But here is what I know:

What scared me most about The Slap was not The Slap itself. The Slap felt almost comical, like a pre-rehearsed bit. What scared me most was in the moments afterward, when Will Smith had returned to his seat, and he shouted at Chris Rock to leave his wife alone with an intensity and ferocity that made my bones go cold.

It was *words* - and the **rage** pulsing through them - that made the whole situation stunningly, shockingly, real.

It was *words* - and, to be specific - the *tone* of said words - that have stayed with me this week.

It was the *yetzer ha’ra* that lives inside each and every one of us revealing itself in a sudden, violent way, broadcast to millions around the world.

That's why The Slap won't leave us.

(pause)

And so, what do I leave you with? The world is nuts, we're all losing it, we're constantly brushing up against our breaking point, violence is never, EVER the answer. YES. All these things are true.

And also.

We still live in a world that is filled with magic. And kindness. And goodness.

We still live in a time where we bear witness to miracles great and small.

We still belong to a community of good-hearted human beings. Folks who have behaved heroically and courageously throughout the last two years especially.

Folks like volunteers from Isaiah and Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills who have worked together to sponsor a refugee family from Afghanistan, the Rashidis, getting them settled and situated into a brand new life in Los Angeles.

Folks like our preschool parents who spent their week running a workshop in the preschool, teaching each class about *mitzvot*, helping our littlest Isaiahs assemble care packages for children experiencing homelessness through the efforts of Jewish Family Services.

Folks like our doctors, our nurses, our therapists and social workers; health care professionals for whom we once cheered on rooftops and balconies. Incredible humans - *healers* - whom we will have the pleasure of honoring at a special Shabbat service on April 22.

For every story of the *yetzer ha'ra* there are a dozen more of the *yetzer ha'tov*, the goodness and grace of everyday humans.

So on this Shabbat, on this first day of April, just a few weeks shy of our holiday of redemption and freedom, Pesach, I charge us with this:

Let us amplify the voices and the stories, the words **AND** actions of the good folks.

Let us use our own words for goodness and uplift.

Let us seek out **healthy sources of release** so that we might process and heal from the legitimate, very real trauma of the past few years.

Let us rest when we are weary. Lean on our community. Speak words of encouragement and empowerment. Learn to step back when it all feels like too much.

Let us lead with love.

We won't solve every problem, fully rid the world of its *yetzer ha'ra*, nor completely eradicate violence from our existence.

But we **will** inspire joy and light, hope and healing capable of radiating outward, beyond these walls, beyond this Sanctuary, bringing forth an energy of "shalom," peace, wholeness, to all of us so desperately in need.

Shabbat Shalom.