

THE SHOT SEEN AROUND THE WORLD

Dvar Torah For Shabbat and Day 8 Pesach

Do you know who Darnella Frazier is? I'm pretty sure that after this long week of the trial of Derek Chauvin, you know exactly who she is.

In case you don't, Darnella is the young woman who shot the iPhone camera footage of Officer Chauvin as he, with the complicity of three fellow police officers, pressed his knee to George Floyd's neck. Almost a year later, we have confirmation that he did this non-stop for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, causing Mr. Floyd's slow, tortured death on a Minneapolis street corner in broad daylight on May 25, 2020.

Did you know that at seventeen years of age, not even legally an adult, Darnella was savvy and courageous enough to shoot that footage up rather close, despite her young age and despite the danger she put herself in recording four armed officers engaged in that brutal act?

Did you know that Darnella is a young woman whose black skin could easily have put her in even graver danger, given what we know about interactions between officers who behave like Mr. Chauvin and people of color?

The first gunshots at the battle of Lexington and Concord came to be known as the shots *heard* around the world. They commenced the opening battle of America's revolutionary war with Great Britain, the defining conflict that allowed us to establish American democracy.

Darnella Frazier's graphic video of real-life torture and brutality was her shot *seen* around the world. It revived the as-yet unwon battle for freedom and

equality for all Americans, regardless of color, religion or ethnicity; a defining conflict that has tested the very same revolutionary American democracy whose highest ideals have always been stymied by its poisonous legacy of black slavery and color caste.

How pliable language is to allow words to contain so many nuances of meaning in different eras.

An American colonist *shoots* bullets from a gun in an act of revolutionary violence against a king seeking to suppress him.

A young girl, Darnella Frazier, *shoots* footage from an iPhone camera of men in authority carrying guns, who seek to violently suppress the life of another man.

Both “shootings” come out of entirely different historical contexts. In their fight for their own freedom, our revolutionary ancestors mostly refused to accept that this very same freedom must be extended to the slaves they held throughout the American colonies. Even centuries later, Darnella Frazier became an unwilling witness to the ruthless persistence of that racist refusal in her own American neighborhood in 2020. Nonetheless, in such a strange manner, those shots *heard* long ago around the world form a continuous, and developing, narrative of freedom with those shots *seen* just last year around the world. Both are salvos of defiance testifying to the supreme, unassailable right of every human being to live with dignity, in freedom, without fear.

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Well before Darnella Frazier and George Floyd, well before the American revolution when America shot out of the birth canal of European history and thought, a bloody, newborn mix of enlightenment and racism, 15th century English speakers did something amazing. They transformed the verb, “shoot,” meaning to hurl something with the intent of wounding or killing, into the noun, “shoot,” a branch or twig newly hurling itself into life out of an old tree stump. Who transformed this violent verb redolent of death into this verdant noun redolent of life, I do not know. But I suspect that in doing so, they were tapping into an ancient, paradoxical, inexhaustible faith that even from death, new life can shoot forth.

This very faith was expressed beautifully by the prophet Isaiah, many centuries before these medieval English speakers decided upon a new way to understand that old word, shoot. Living in the Judean kingdom, Isaiah watched the mighty Assyrian empire to its east threaten, attack, and devastate little Judea and its neighbors repeatedly. Reflecting upon the divine promise that a political savior would arise from the royal line of King David -also known by the name of David’s father, Jesse - Isaiah told his fellow Judeans the following:

V’yatza hoter mi geza Yishai//v’neitzer mi-shorashav yifreh.

A shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse//a twig shall sprout from his stock.

Isaiah would not have known the English word, shoot, which our modern translation uses to render the Hebrew word, *hoter*. However, the message of his prophecy aligns completely with this dual meaning of shoot in English: from violent death and destruction comes the promise of life and rebirth. Listen to

what comes next in Isaiah's prophecy, his description of this promised political savior:

He shall judge the poor with equity

And decide with justice for the lowly of the land

The wolf shall lie down with the lamb

The leopard lie down with the kid.

One way – not the only way, but one way – in which to read this passage is as a vision of fierce, unremitting hope that, in restoring justice for all people in the land of Judea, this descendant of the house of Jesse would transform the very nature of nature itself, even to the point that predators in the animal kingdom will live in peace with their prey. The restoration of justice in one place would bring about complete peace and harmony in every place.

Isaiah's hope was that real justice will be achieved when those with power cease savaging those without power. The power to shoot and kill others in acts of violent repression will be replaced by justice and peace. Justice and peace will shoot forward from the ravaged and savaged stumps of lives and communities left broken – even dead - by such violence.

This was the hope that Isaiah spoke to, as he watched his community crumble under the repressiveness of an empire threatening his world.

This was the hope that 15th century speakers of English might have clung to, as they shifted the meaning of the word shoot away from death and toward life in what was a rather dangerous medieval world.

This was the hope that the soldiers at that first battle of America's revolutionary war held onto, as they fired the shots heard around the world.

This was the hope that Darnella Frazier looked to as she watched George Floyd die under Derek Chauvin's knee and she bravely shot the footage seen around the world.

The struggle for justice, for freedom, for peace is so woefully far from over here at home and throughout the world. Still, with spring's emergence after a long, lonely COVID winter of death, green buds are shooting forth all around us. Nature, as it were, is coming back to life, vaccines are restoring us to life, and young people like Darnella Frazier, entangled in violent injustice and death too early in their lives, are nonetheless forcing us to continue to march – or even just lurch - toward justice, peace and life. Only with justice for every and all citizens can life shoot forth and redeem us from destruction.

Shabbat shalom and chag sameach.