

Parashat Bo - Exodus 10:1 - 13:16

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THE TORAH READING FOR THIS WEEK is chock-full of action, grandly dramatic scenarios, and mitzvot - commandments. We read about the last three of the ten plagues, swarms of locusts, deep, paralyzing darkness, and the killing of the Egyptians' first-born sons. God gives over the first mitzvah to be given to the people of Israel, which is to establish a calendar based on the monthly rebirth of the moon. We also get the mitzvot of the holy vessels: *tefillin* and *mezuzah*. And it's in this reading that the Passover story unfolds, including the commandment to eat matzah.

THE PARSHA OPENS with God speaking to Moshe, saying the words "*Bo! Come to Pharaoh*" (Ex. 10:1). The Midrash teaches that Moshe foresaw that the last three plagues would be the most difficult, so God assures him by saying, "Come with Me to Pharaoh; I am right here with you." (Otzar Chaim, Parashat Bo)

PHARAOH, IN THIS MIDRASH, IS SEEN AS "THE OTHER".¹ We got a very tragic perspective of what it means to be "the other" just this past week. On Sunday night, a troubled young man, born and raised in Quebec, shot and killed six innocent men and wounded 19 people during prayer at an Islamic centre in the neighbourhood of Saint-Foy in Quebec City.

IN RESPONSE, the outpouring of support for the Muslim community in Quebec City from the majority of Quebecers has been deeply reassuring. On Monday night, thousands of people across Quebec gathered for candlelight vigils. Today there were three more solidarity gatherings, and there will be another one on Sunday at 2 pm at City Hall in Old Montreal.

IN THE DAYS SINCE THIS TERRIBLE MASSACRE, there has been significant critical self-examination going on in the French and English press and in our communities. In my opinion, this is a heartfelt conversation, a positive thing. Yes, you will see an angry minority voice posting terrible comments online, but those voices are being drowned out by our leaders and citizens calling for a repudiation of violence against Muslims and *any* religious or immigrant group here. We've had a lot of practice confronting these issues. We know we have much work to do, but many alliances have already been built and we will keep building more.

AS WE WATCH what is happening in the US, we recognize that we must keep loving our neighbours as ourselves. Hate produces only more hate. But love is what will get us through, and I can tell you that there is still more love, tolerance, acceptance and building of relationships across communities here. Discomfort and hatred of difference may be very visible and on the surface right now, but that makes us all the more aware.

¹ The Broken Man, by Moshe Meir

THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY is Black History Month and Disability Awareness Month in Canada, and LGBTQ History Month in the UK. And need I remind you that it is also the month in which we celebrate Valentine's Day, the day of love and loving. Each of us is different, one from the other, in a remarkable range of dimensions of diversity. It could be that we are different because of our skin colour, or our ability or disability, or our sexual preference, or our education, or our income, or our religious or spiritual beliefs, or in other ways. But Valentine's Day, the day that reminds us to love and to allow ourselves to be loved, pulls it all together. We are called to open our hearts in the midst of this coldest season, pushing through the hardened heart of Pharaoh and entering into those soft and tender depths within.

WHEN WE DO THIS, when we open our hearts to ourselves and others, the blessing we receive is one of expansiveness, spaciousness, and, ultimately, freedom. We take that first step out of the narrow spaces of Mitzrayim, Egypt, and become conscious journeyers touched by the promise of freedom. Freedom in our tradition is not merely "freedom from" - freedom from oppression, suffering, or servitude. It is "freedom to" - freedom to be in direct relationship with whomever we want and with whatever it is we conceive of as holy and sacred.

I WANT TO BRING US BACK to our verse from Torah, where God says to Moses, "Bo! Come to Pharaoh." My teacher Rabbi Shefa Gold asks us to imagine that in this verse, God is talking to Moshe as the prophetic voice that is within each of us, saying to you: "Bo! Come on in! I am waiting for you inside the heart of Pharaoh. The heart of Pharaoh is that most human place which is inside you. It is the place that has grown heavy with the weight of life's experience. It is the place that has hardened - its outer shell cynical, and its fragile and soft inner layers made of fear and anxiety and yearning. Bo – come through this heart of Pharaoh if you are to find your freedom."

AS I WAS PREPARING FOR TONIGHT, I remembered a story that I learned from my dear friend Chaplain De Herman. This is a story about a special heart.

Long, long ago, in a village far, far away, lived a community of people who possessed a very unusual and special ability. Each of them could reach inside their chest and bring out their heart for anyone to see.

One morning, an old woman was taking a walk through the village and came upon a young woman standing on a corner proudly showing off her heart. The old woman stopped to make her acquaintance.

"Good morning! What a pretty heart, so pink and shiny and smooth!"

The young woman drew in her breath, taken aback at the sight of the tired and wrinkled old crone. But, not wanting to be rude, she answered, "Yes, isn't it beautiful!"

"It certainly is," the old woman said. Would you like to see my heart?"

Well, the young woman was not especially interested in seeing the old woman's heart, but not wanting to be rude, she said, "Alright."

So the old woman proceeded to reach into her chest and pull out her heart. The young woman drew back in horror, for the sight was ghastly: bruises, stitches, wrinkles and dark patches covered the surface. Who knew what else might be lurking in there?

The young woman wasn't especially interested in knowing more. Again, not wanting to be rude, she said, "Your heart doesn't look anything like mine. What are all those marks?"

"Well," the old woman began, "you see this bruise here? This only happened last week when I got on a bus to go home. There was only one seat left. A big and burly young man shoved his way past me and sat down. You can see that I am old and that it is hard for me to be on my feet for long. It just hurt my feelings to be treated like that, like I didn't even exist.

"And this scab over here? Well, when we were young, my sister and I had a falling out and we didn't speak for many years; it was so long ago that we forgot what started it. Recently we started to talk again, and some of the old hurts are healing, but it's going to take more time."

The young woman found herself drawn in to the old woman's stories. Then the old woman asked, "May I touch your heart?" The young woman hesitated, taken aback by the thought. But, not wanting to be rude, she said, "Alright."

The old woman lifted her gnarled finger and gently placed it on the young woman's hard and shiny heart. She drew her hand back rather quickly and said honestly, "Oh! It feels rather cold!" Before the young woman could respond, the old woman asked, "Would you like to touch my heart now?"

The young woman recoiled from the invitation, but, not wanting to be rude, said, "Alright."

So, she lifted her finger and gingerly placed it on the old woman's soft, round heart. "Wow! She exclaimed, as a delicious and warm sensation rose up her hand and arm, spreading to all parts of her body. She had never felt anything like this before and it gave her a delicious sense of well-being, acceptance, and love.

And from that moment forth, the young woman was transformed. The hard shell of her heart had fallen off, and she vowed to live the rest of her life touching and being touched by others.

FRIENDS, EACH OF US in every community across Canada, across the continent, and across the world, needs to look deeply into our hearts and examine the hard shell that is there. Ask the hard questions: When have I been hard-hearted? When have I treated someone unfairly because they are different than me? When have I been indifferent, treating someone as “the other”? Be honest, and allow your heart to gently break open, because as one great poet said, “that’s how the light gets in.”

IF YOU GO VERY STILL, and listen very intently, you might just hear, in the stillness, your opening heart whispering to you and saying, “*Bo!* Come on in. I have been waiting for you for such a long time.”

I TRULY BELIEVE that there is love and support to be found in this world, but sometimes, some days, we may just need to search a little harder. So, please, in memory and honour of the lives lost here in Quebec, in the next few moments, days or weeks, please reach out to a stranger — to someone who may look different from you, who may express their faith in a very different way, who goes about their lives wanting to live in peace, wanting the best for their world — and let them know that they are your neighbour and that they are safe with you.

I’LL CLOSE WITH ANOTHER STORY. This one is about some jealous angels who are asked to hide the spark of the Divine in the world.

"Let's put it atop the highest mountain," offers one.

"No," says another, "The Human is very ambitious; he will find it there."

"Well then, let's bury it beneath the deepest sea."

"That won't work either," another chimes in. "The Human is very resourceful. She will even find it there."

After a moment's thought the wisest angel says, "I know. Put it inside the Human heart. They will never look there."

Shabbat shalom.

Sources:

- Rabbi Shefa Gold, <http://www.rabbishefagold.com/Bo.html>
- *A Warm Heart* story as told by Rabbinic Chaplain De Herman, who learned it from Abby Weinberg at Elat Chayyim in 1995
- Facebook posting by Rev. Diane Rollert, Feb 3, 2017