

RABBI BASIK'S PASSOVER MESSAGE

Pesach 5778

INTRODUCTION

Maybe Biblical prophecy plays out all the time, yet we're not always cognizant. Or maybe it doesn't happen very often, and when it seems to be happening it's quite something and we take note.

On the very day of the "March for Our Lives," this past Shabbat, the *haftarah* from the prophet Malachi said it all. In a vision of a future redemption, when Elijah comes to announce it, Malachi says, "the hearts of the parents will be turned to the children, and the hearts of the children will be turned to the parents." Some translations offer, "He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents." The language is difficult and ambiguous, but the words literally mean "restore the heart," with or along with each other.

We are hearing the voice and cry of our youth, who live with a great existential anxiety and fear. And one sign of a redeemed world will be intergenerational reconciliation. Healing between parents and children is part of a general alignment with God/liness.

PART I — QUESTIONS

The Pesach Seder is a "night of questions," right? Different foods and customs are meant to generate some questions, so a story can be told. So I challenged the Beit Lev students to come up with good questions about the holiday. Besides the usual Four Questions (actually, four answers).

I want to encourage all the Kol HaLev/Beit Lev families to formulate some questions of your own, and we can collect them to share. Please send them in to me.

The first one...voiced by a five-year-old. He asks, "Who made God?" Brilliant question!

SO PLEASE NOTE: If there is interest, I would like to gather for an hour to discuss what we mean and how we talk about "God" with our children. Let me know and we'll make time during Beit Lev.

PART II — PRE-PESACH "SERMON"

The words were proclaimed on March 4, 1933, in FDR's first inaugural address, in the depth of the Great Depression. But the powerful and poetic declaration — "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!" — spoken to "a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world," resonates across time like a biblical decree, a divinely inspired utterance of Moses from atop the proverbial mountain, meant to

awaken and revive the potential in us. It pierces our ephemeral constructions of life, and has that ring of truth. FDR rose to the level of Torah, or Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, the Prophets or Rumi or the Buddha or... You really ought to look it up and read the speech.

The full quote is important. FDR says, it is “my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

The Pharaoh and the bondage of our Exodus/Liberation story is nameless, unreasoning and unjustified. This analysis, this diagnosis, and the prescription, speaks to our moment. The current state of affairs, in our nation and in the world, has everyone apprehensive and frightened — with our politics in chaos and serious threats weighing on us (climate change and natural disasters, nuclear weapons proliferation, domestic and international terrorism, population displacement, epidemics of disease, gun violence, debased institutions...). This is a kind of “Egypt.” We are in the midst of another episode in the human drama, globally and nationally, of “retreat” into a pervasive fear, and distrust, we are silo’ed and besieged, a psychological state that is nothing short of spirit-crushing, narrowing, confining, constricting and restraining, like Mitzrayim itself (Egypt: the doubly narrow place!). It compromises and jeopardizes our humanity! It is a profoundly debilitating burden and chore to carry. And it always comes down to a scarcity mentality, an un-fillable “hole” of seeming lack that emerges from a false, zero-sum perspective, a false narrative of winners and losers. Some try to assuage the fear and insecurity with displays of clumsy power and violence, making it all worse. Fear begets more fear. It’s a frightening world these days, and we are anxious.

The Passover story and Seder rituals affirm the possibility of triumph over Fear, the possibility of Overcome and Liberation. The holiday restores hope, and pride, dignity and respect — for ourselves and everyone. Another story can be told, a story of Redemption rather than Threat. Though we have been led down a path to the worship of false gods, by “self-seekers...with no vision,” FDR says, “we are stricken by no plague of locusts,” which is to say the issue (our “constriction”) isn’t material failure but a spiritual and ethical one, calling for wisdom and courage. Passover helps us develop strengths of insight, conviction and resolve, and reminds us to see through the delusions of power and privilege and oppression...falsities like “wealth leads to security,” or “walls protect,” or “stockpiling weapons makes you safe,” or, “denying others ensures my own.”

FDR continues to inspire his listeners with a description of “good neighborliness,” referring to the neighbor who “resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others.” The overarching message is one of interdependence as the basis of the moral and just society. All winners. All dignified in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. All, therefore, free from dispiriting fear.

Fear leads to just the opposite of an interdependence based on respect; rather, it leads to separate and competing corners of illusory comfort and safety, along with perpetual anger and vigilance and conflict with others. It is both the cause and the effect of a “hardened heart,” which is at the core of the Passover story. It seems to me that Fear causes all three characteristics connoted, with great insight, by the three different Hebrew verbs used for “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart. It can make one so “hard” (kasheh, or dense and difficult) that nothing penetrates, so “heavy” (kabed) that even if something did penetrate one is too weighed down to move off one’s position, and so “strong” (chazak) in the sense of rigid, that one cannot be flexible and compromise.

If the “hardened heart” is the symbol and salient feature of Pharaoh and the mindset of “Egypt,” then what in our Seder points to a way out of the bondage of fear and insecure vulnerability? The antidote is the charoset, which ought to be at the center of the table. A sweet concoction of mixed nuts and fruits, ingredients mentioned in the biblical love poetry known as the Song of Songs, it is evocative of the fecundity of spring and love, the “softened heart” yearning to flourish. The three big elements of the seder — matzah, maror (bitter herbs), and pesach (the paschal sacrifice) — help sensitize us, yes, and free us in their ways (humility, release of tears, sacrifice), but they don’t quite free us from the constraints of Fear. Moreover, self- and mutual respect is a good beginning of a Liberation saga, but also not enough. It is ultimately a matter of a softer heart that provides a way out of the bondage, a heart that allows things in, that is not stuck and unmoving, and is flexible and accommodating and compassionate, not hardened, on edge, defensive and therefore offensive. It is the difference between a closed and grabbing hand versus an open hand. As our prayer that is a meditation on happiness (Ashrei) tells us, the God-ly thing to do is described as: “Providing with your open hand, all life is satisfied.”

A concluding line from a recent newspaper column by Tom Friedman says it well: “To get rid of walls and ceilings, you have to strengthen the floors under every American.” He is talking about things like education and access to skills training, “wage insurance,” community reinvestment, and other public policies. But I read “floors” to mean foundations of safety, respect, justice, and the generous-hearted love that everyone needs in order to flourish, for spirits to rise, for people to thrive and flourish. It is Fear that is holding humanity back, causing our retreat and contraction, preventing our advance and expansion, at the root of a sinking feeling. Once recognized and admitted, we can begin to de-fang it. Eat more charoset! Be the charoset! Bind people together people, not bricks.

Onward, now, to cross the sea and on to the mountain!