

Exodus and the Roots of Civil Rights

Parashat Bo 5779

Every person has a story, and surely, so does every nation.

Our national story begins in the sands of Egypt, under conditions of terrible oppression, of genocide, of deep moral and spiritual assimilation into the cauldron of Egyptian paganism and debauchery.

This week's parshah not only speaks of our redemption, spiritually, and physically, but of a radical new concept that was introduced through the process of our redemption, one that continues to reverberate until this very day.

Pharaoh, who repeatedly had refused to allow Moshe to take the Hebrews for a religious festival in the desert, is finally willing to have a more serious negotiation at the beginning of this week's parshah. He makes the concession, 'go and serve your God', **לכו עבדו את ה' אלוקיכם, מי ומי ההולכים**, but who will be going.

Moshe's response reverberates throughout Jewish history, and beyond. **בנערינו ובזקנינו נלך בבנינו ובבנותינו...נלך כי חג ה' לנו**. We will go, young and old, our sons, and our daughters. Pharaoh is incredulous to the point of being offended. His conception of religious ritual was reserved for male adults; what possible contribution could women or children make? And thus, he dismisses Moshe summarily, **לא כן, לכו הגברים ועבדו את ה' כי אתה**, **אתם מבקשים ויגרש אותם מאת פני פרעה**.

How wrongheaded and narrow minded was Pharaoh. He had apparently failed to note that the entire story of the Exodus, until that point, had been the story of righteous women, the נשים צדקניות that our Sages identified as being the catalyst, on the one hand, and the source of merit, on the other, through which our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt.

Yes, Moshe and Aharon were in the public sphere, but had it not been for Shifra and Pu'ah, the courageous midwives who feared the Lord more than he who pretended to be the Almighty, Pharaoh; Miriam, a brave little girl who stood watch over her brother when things looked bleakest, ותתצב לו; The daughter of Pharaoh herself, who did not yield to her father's systematic process of dehumanization of the Jewish people, so that, when she heard a child's cry, she was moved, ותחמול עליו; Yocheved, who had the fortitude to nurse Moshe in his early years knowing full well that excruciating pain that she would have to surrender her beloved boy; Tziporah, who when Moshe is very near the end even before his mission has truly begun, acts with courage and skill, and circumcises her child, saving her husband's life, חתן דמים למולות.

What Pharaoh could never grasp, and what we introduced to the world, was that it did not matter if you were young or old, male or female. The Lord welcomes the service of all those who approach him with a pure heart and sincerity, קרוב ה' לכל קראיו לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת.

The message transcends discrimination on the basis of age or gender, of course, and extends, to race, and to religion. It is not mere happenstance that the black slaves looked to our very story, to Sefer Shemot, to draw strength in their hours of darkness. This, too, is a profound fulfillment of the Almighty's promise to Avram at the very inception of our own national

journey, ונברכו בך כל משפחות האדמה ובזרעך, the entire world will be blessed through us, and will draw strength for our story, and from our values.

And, at the very core of those values is that our own particular suffering must, in absolute terms, sensitize us to all those who are the current victims of discrimination. ואתם ידעתם את נפש הגר, we know, the Torah teaches us, the fright and the fear of the immigrant and the stranger, and therefore, וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו, כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים.

II.

We know the absolute irrationality of bigotry and anti-semitism and prejudice from our own experiences. My grandfather was admitted to medical school at the University of Cincinnati, where there were one hundred seats in the class. The dean of the medical school told him that two were for Jews. He was fortunate enough to get one of those seats, but we are not talking about something that happened a thousand years ago, in some distant land, but right here, and not all that long ago.

When my grandfather approached the dean of the medical school regarding a conflict between a course he was taking and Shabbat, the Dean told him he could not be exempted, because, ultimately, he would have to choose between being a doctor and being Jewish.

My grandfather, of blessed memory, for whom Joey is named, refused to choose. He defied the darkness in the heart of that man, and he became one

of the first, if not the very first, observant Orthodox Orthopedic surgeon in the country, and he founded a Jewish day school that enrolls well over one thousand students, who will never have to choose between being Jewish and being a doctor, or anything else.

III.

And, as the Torah requires of us, our own suffering should sensitize us to the plight of others. And, as we prepare for Martin Luther King Day, and for our communal event tomorrow with the Attorney General, we should think about our fellow citizens who have faced similar struggles and obstacles.

Blacks were told, based on forms of pseudoscience, that they could not fight effectively in combat with white soldiers. And then the Tuskegee airmen came along, whose flight record of bomber support far exceeded any comparable white unit in the European theater in war.

Well, the bigots said, perhaps they could fight, but they are not suited for command. And then came General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who presided over the most decisive military campaign our nation has wages since the Second World War.

The bigots said, the black man might play basketball, but he could serve as the point guard, the one who is responsible for calling plays, and determining on court strategy. And then came Oscar Robertson and Magic Johnson and LeBron James.

Same thing in football- sure he can run, so he'll play wide receiver and running back, but he could never master the complexity necessary to be the

quarterback, and decide where to throw the ball. And then came Russell Wilson, who led Seattle to the first championship it ever had.

The bigots said, medical school was no place for African Americans, certainly not ones who would treat white patients. And then came Dr. Ben Carson, who performed unprecedented surgical procedures on craniopagus twins, conjoined at the back of the head.

The list goes on, in every sphere of human endeavor. And it does so, predictably, because claims that certain groups of people are incapable, based on their gender, age, race or religion to do certain things tell you almost nothing about the group in question, but, unfortunately, a great deal about those who believe these things.

IV.

The great struggle for equality in this country, rooted so deeply in our sacred texts and traditions, continues.

As we prepare for the great privilege of hosting the first Sikh to ever hold the post of Attorney General of any state in this country, Gurbir Grewal, in this very room tomorrow, who is asked in public settings if he is Osama bin Laden, we know that there is work to do.

When anti-semites march in Charlottesville chanting Jews will not replace us, we know there is work to do.

When Israel is repeatedly singled out by the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement, by people who are only too happy to do business with China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Cuba or Venezuela, we know that there is work to do.

When a group studying bible with their pastor in Charleston is gunned down by a young man filled with unimaginable hatred, we know there is work to do.

When a President's place of birth is challenged, whatever one thinks about his policies, not based on fact or reason but simply on the basis of the fact that he is a black man, we know that there is work to do.

When an honorable member of the judiciary of Mexican heritage is deemed incapable of doing his job because of his ethnic background, we know that there is work to do.

V

Long ago, Moshe told an ancient dictator that all of God's children were welcome in His service. More recently, Dr. King reminded us that we should never despair, for the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice. But, there, my friends, our responsibility lies. For, as President Kennedy said, in this world, God's work must truly be our own, and it is we who must seize that moral arc and bend it in accordance with justice and righteousness.

If we are to remain the nation at whose gate stands a mighty woman with a torch, who continues to beckon to a troubled world for those tired, poor, and huddled masses yearning to breathe free, for those homeless and tempest-tossed souls. than there is surely work to be done.

Friends, I implore you, let it never be said of us that, with success only made possible by the grace of God in this Land of Opportunity, that we have forgotten from where we have come. Everything that is now said of certain groups, who look different than we do, was said of us, and worse, by those who felt we had no place on these shores. Let us never forget that it was the America First movement of the 1930's that targeted world Jewry for endangering this country, and keeping the quotas in place that kept the doors to this country closed when European Jewry might have otherwise found salvation from the Nazis on these shores.

Deep in our hearts, in a place where even the potent rhetoric of fear and incitement does not touch, we know that the child, scared and bewildered, clutching her mother's arms, can grow one day into a soldier, a doctor, a teacher, and a proud and grateful American, if only given the opportunity. We know this because, not all that long ago, we were numbered in those poor, tired, huddled masses, dreaming, in a language other than English, of opportunities in this Land of the Free. That scared and bewildered child was our mother or father, or grandmother or grandfather.

The day will yet come of which our prophet Amos spoke, and which Dr. King was so fond of reminding us, when 'justice will flow like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream,' when all of God's children will be judged for the content of their character, and not for the color of their skin.

