

“When Words Elude Us...Move to Action”

A D'var Torah for Erev Shabbat

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I am usually not short on words. And yet, this week, I found myself grappling for a response - the right response, the appropriate lesson, the proper language for what we saw happening on live TV in Washington DC. Over the past few days, I have read hundreds of messages and statements -- from clergy, politicians, pundits, Jewish and secular organization leaders, friends and family -- about the events at the Capitol, and I have not been moved to join the rhetoric. It just seems impossible to be a part of the conversation without partisan overtones and without appearing to take sides. As a white, Jewish woman aware of my privilege, I simply cannot find the right thing to say without turning complex issues into simplistic explanations; without presuming to understand the social, political and racial overtones which run so deeply in the DNA of our country. How do we speak civilly about civility without getting lost in the details? How do we really listen to how others feel? How do we move beyond our limited perspectives in order to more fully and fairly analyze and synthesize incidents and events?

This was a week of ups and downs, wins and losses, glorious democratic moments and embarrassing and frightening assaults of lawlessness and intolerance. First, we must concur that no one person, party, or idea “won or lost.” The stakes are too high for such a binary judgment to be made by any of us. The rising numbers of those falling ill and dying from COVID19 humble us and remind us of our vulnerability. Did we actually believe that we would turn the page on 2020 and wake up to a new world on January 1, 2021? If so, we need to put a stop to fanciful and farfetched thinking based on fantasy and illusion. We need to stop being shocked and surprised and horrified by the current events, and instead focus on those things that are in our hands to do.

We have work to accomplish. There are people who need healing, causes that deserve to be attended to, partners who stand ready and willing to join hands.

So, I turn to words of Torah. Interestingly, this week in which we begin a new secular year we also start a new book of Torah. We begin reading the Book of Exodus. In this week's portion, *parashat shemot*, the Children of Israel are in Egypt. They suffer under the cruel rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh, who oppresses them, treats them with disdain, and embitters their lives. We all know the story. We tell it each year at our Seder tables. And yet, this week, one verse captured my attention. We read in Exodus 1:12: “*And the more the Children of Israel were oppressed, the more they increased.*”

What is the meaning of this verse and what is the connection between being oppressed and increasing? The plain meaning is that the Children of Israel -- against all odds -- continue to fulfill the very first commandment given to Adam and Eve and later to Abraham and Sarah. At its literal level, our ancestors in Egypt persisted in being fruitful and multiplying. Yet, I believe the meaning of “increase” goes beyond

merely the physical act of procreation, and comes to represent something deeper to consider. It is not enough to survive; rather, each day, each event, each opportunity we experience gives us the chance for individual self-improvement and growth as a community. Just as the Children of Israel pressed on and continued to bring children into the world in the face of cruelty, they learned from their experiences, and, in doing so, made themselves better.

There are only a few moments in our lives that call upon us to change the world. But there are far more occasions that invite us -- that demand us -- to *change ourselves*. The appropriate Jewish response to the events of this week is quite clear: We need to continue to model love over hate, to treat on another other with patience, to embrace those with different views, to speak truth to power, to seek compromise, to work together to find solutions, to resist disharmony, pursue unity, to eschew violence. That's it.

*"The more they were oppressed, the more they increased."*

The authentic Jewish response is that we be a light to the nations -- starting with our own. Our mandate is: To teach hope and to love our neighbors. It is our imperative to follow the instructions of our great Rabbi, Hillel, who more than 2000 years ago said: *"In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human"* (Pirke Avot, 2:5).

It is hard work. There are no winners or losers in this work. We often take small steps forward and then big steps backward. Our work is local -- so local. It begins in our synagogues, homes and neighborhoods. The real work is not about our lofty past, our sacred documents, our beautiful buildings, our grandiose ideas. Rather, the task at hand is about us and requires us to ascertain and then act on what is happening in our lives right now. It is for the sake of our children and our grandchildren ... and everyone else's children and grandchildren, because all children are our children.

Speaking of children: I must say that for me the antidote to this week's events at the Capitol happened yesterday during our online Religious School yesterday. We learned, we laughed and we shared with one another. It was uplifting. It reminded me of the "real work" that is so valuable and so accessible. We have a responsibility: to our synagogue community. To our children. To our teachers. To teaching Jewish lessons that transmit not only knowledge, but moreover, that instill in our children the message that they are valued, respected, and loved.

Yesterday's Religious School led directly into a meeting this morning with the Sudbury Interfaith Clergy Association as we discussed our preparations for a special program to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. next weekend. We have made a commitment to one another to pursue the difficult but necessary work of anti-racism by offering programs for the community to educate and engage others to be active anti-racists. We decided that we will commence a year-long initiative that will begin during MLK weekend, and that we will begin with ourselves. Next Sunday, we will offer a compelling program that begins with listening and results in understanding -- and perhaps action. It is a

small but sincere starting-point. The program will take place on Zoom on Sunday, January 17 from 1:30-2:45 pm. Everyone is welcome to attend. The program is entitled: *From Strength to Love: A Community Conversation on Anti-Racism ~ A Tribute to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

I hope that you will join me in this important work, and that through it, we will become better acquainted, and we will get to know others in our community, too. I pray that together, we will *increase* ourselves - by dedicating ourselves to the abiding values that we hold dear, and by continuing to focus on our deeds -- even when our words elude us.