

Sermon
Parshat Shemot
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Moses approaches the burning bush, averting his eyes but inching closer, when a voice suddenly calls out to him:

אל-תִּקְרַב הַלֵּם

Do not come closer.

שֶׁל-נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ

Remove your sandals from your feet

כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמַּת-קֹדֶשׁ הוּא

for the place on which you stand is holy ground.¹

This place is different. This place is sacred. And in this sacred space, you must act differently.

One of the greatest pieces of advice I received from my mentor was that I should never stand on the *bima* and lie to my congregation. By this he meant that whenever I preach from the *bima*, it must be truthful, it must be something that I actually believe. Over the course of my years on the *bima*, I have always tried to heed that advice. I do not share messages that I do not believe in myself. I do not say things simply because others expect or want me to say it. I say what I say because I seek to uphold my spiritual integrity—speaking truthfully about how we might perceive and interact with the world through the prism of Judaism.

I say this because I stand before you today with a bit of discomfort and apprehension. Truthfully, I do not like to give sermons that can be misconstrued as partisan. I try to speak

¹ Exodus 3:5.

about Torah. I have tried to avoid politicking, even as many of my rabbinic colleagues in our movement and in others have entirely abandoned such pretexts. I have tried to keep my sermons focused on Torah, and on the intersection between authentic Jewish values and the way in which we can derive meaning from them in our lived experience of the world. It is a delicate balance, and I have strived to attain it. But after the events of this week, it would be inauthentic if I did not share with you my true and honest response. I share this with the hope of giving form to what I and many of you experienced these past few days, and with hope and aspirations for the future. Here goes...

Like you, I watched the events of Wednesday afternoon unfold in real time. I was horrified. I was speechless. And frankly, I was frightened. As a Jewish American, I am deeply appreciative of and grateful for the liberties and protections afforded me by the Constitution. I revere the sacred institutions of our democracy because they have given life to our people in this land. This democratic republic created the circumstances by which Judaism and Jewish life have flourished. As a student of history, as the descendant of immigrants who arrived on these shores seeking a better life, I feel indebted to and proud of my American identity.

Which is why I felt helpless and afraid as I watched a mob of violent white supremacists perpetrate an attack on the United States Capitol and the individuals gathered therein to uphold our democracy. I feared that our democracy was unraveling before my eyes. I feared that everything guaranteeing our liberties was crumbling. I have only witnessed such scenes in movies or in footage of violent takeovers in foreign countries. Never could I have imagined seeing it take place in Washington, DC, in the United States Capitol, after being cajoled by the Commander in Chief. Those hours were incredibly tense. I cannot imagine what they felt like for

those trapped inside. When order was finally restored and Congress resumed the work of certifying the electoral college votes, I watched with a dual sense of pride and trepidation. In the face of terrorists who sought to thwart the sacred operations of our democratic institutions, real patriots in Congress stood up to do their job, despite the harrowing experiences of their day locked down within the Capitol.

The United States Capitol, along with the White House and the Supreme Court Building, make up the triumvirate of sacred spaces in our republic. Within the walls of these hallowed edifices, the elected and appointed leaders of our federal government discharge the obligations of their offices. What happens in those spaces embodies the ideals for which our great nation has been lauded, celebrated, and envied by the other nations of the world. Wednesday's attack on the Capitol was a desecration of this sacred space.

Our Constitution enshrines our freedom to gather and to peacefully protest. Those are hallmarks of our republic. But protestors crossed the line. They inflicted damage on federal property, they invaded the hallowed halls of our nation's democratic institutions, and they sought to thwart the democratic process as it unfolded in the halls of Congress. These were not patriots. These were not protestors. They crossed the line. They trampled on holy ground.

We are all familiar with God's instructions to Moses in this week's *parsha*, Shemot. Moses sees the bush, burning but not being consumed, and so he cautiously approaches. But before he gets too close, God calls out to him, אל-תִּקְרַב הֵלֶם שֶׁל-נְעֻלְיָךְ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמִּקּוֹם "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, הוא

for the place on which you stand is holy ground.”² Moses nearly crossed the line. He almost trampled, albeit unwittingly, on holy ground.

This particular area was considered holy because it is the Mountain of God, Horeb, known more widely as Sinai, the place from which God would reveal Godself and the Torah to the Israelites in the future. Sacred space cannot be treated lightly. Sacred space must be honored and revered. Sacred space demands of us a different set of behaviors, an awareness of self, and a consciousness of our surroundings. Moses, seemingly caught off guard by this awe-inspiring vision of the burning bush, is reminded by God: In this space, you behave differently.

Professor Rachel Adelman, associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Hebrew College, notes that this is not the only biblical scene which requires the removal of the shoe. She draws a parallel between this scene and that of the *halitzah* ceremony. When a married man dies without children, his brother is obligated to perform levirate marriage, whereby he marries the widow of his deceased brother and seeks to produce an heir in his brother’s name. If the brother refuses, he and the widow perform *halitzah*, a ceremony in which a shoe is removed from the foot of the brother. According to Hittite legal documents, the foot was used as part of land transactions, whereby the former owner would lift his foot, and the new owner would put his foot down on the newly acquired land. The foot, and in our context, the shoe or sandal, was used as an outward demonstration of claiming or relinquishing ownership and responsibility. The surviving brother would remove his shoe (or have it removed from him by the widow) to demonstrate that he relinquishes his responsibility and his obligation to marry this woman and produce an heir in his brother’s name. According to Professor Adelman, “By having Moses

² Exodus 3:5.

remove his shoes, God forces him to acknowledge this as holy ground and effectively declare:

“No man may lay claim to this place.”³

Standing before God, on the mountain of God, one stands on holy ground. It is not your territory to claim. It is not your personal acquisition. It is not your private landholding. It is not a space in which you kick up your filthy feet on a desk, waive your traitorous flags, and spew falsehoods and insidious lies. It is sacred space. You act differently there because it cannot be claimed by any one individual person. It is not yours, personally, but ours collectively. It is a space in which we strive to be the best versions of ourselves. We stand there, humbly with shoes removed, acknowledging that there is something much greater in this space than the pursuit of personal interests. Moses removes his shoes. Moses recognizes that sacred power of holy space.

Moses held the line. On Wednesday afternoon, the mob crossed it. They desecrated that which is sacred to us as Americans. They acted with impunity. They acted unAmerican. I am not being partisan when I say this. Even Georgia Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler, a formerly staunch supporter of the President and the unfounded conspiratorial claims of widespread voter fraud, even she acknowledged that these people crossed the line. These are her words: “The violence, the lawlessness and siege of the halls of Congress are abhorrent and stand as a direct attack on what my objection was intended to protect, the sanctity of the American democratic process.” And we all know that she was not alone in changing her mind. If she could stand up and speak the truth, then so must I.

³ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-burning-bush-why-must-moses-remove-his-shoes>.

As I have said, I have tried to avoid being partisan. I have tried to be balanced and apolitical. But the rioters on Wednesday crossed a line. The Commander in Chief crossed a line. To be silent is to be complicit. To be silent is to cross the line with them. I will not remain silent when our greatest ideals, when the institutions and the people that work to guarantee my freedom and my protection, your freedom and your protections, are physically and violently attacked.

So where do we go from here? What happens when sacred space is made profane? We rebuild, we rededicate, and we re-engage. When the ancient Jerusalem Temple was desecrated by the Greek army, the Israelites did not abandon Judaism. Rather, they rededicated themselves to it. They cleaned out the desecrated space. They removed from it the images of sacrilege. They rededicated the holy Temple in order to continue with the requisite rituals of worship and celebration which bring God closer to us, and bring us closer to God. And in the face of distressing times, despite their fears, they had hope. They hoped for a better future. They hoped for a time when those who walked into the sacred precincts did so with humility, with awe, and with reverence. They taught this to their children, and to their children's children. Now, that task is incumbent upon each and every one of us. For the sake of our children, and our children's children, we must have hope, we must have courage, and we must have faith to rededicate the sacred spaces of our republic. We remove the metaphorical shoe, we appear before God and before each other as humble and dedicated citizens of this great nation, and we affirm the sanctity of this holy ground.