

I'm Tired – Parashat Vaera 5781
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I'm tired.

It's a sentiment we've shared a lot lately. I'm sick and tired of the disruptions, the negative news, the fear inspired by the raging pandemic. I'm mentally exhausted from the divisiveness in our country, the feeling that we are living in different worlds and banging heads against the wall to try to bring other people into our reality. I'm tired of hearing about race. Why can't we just get along?

57 years after Dr. King delivered his "I have a dream" speech at the National March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, we have not yet realized his vision of a society where people are judged "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." I'm tired of hearing, speaking, walking, running, dreaming, doing ... and feeling like we are in the same place. Laws have been passed. Progress has been made. Things have changed from the darkest days of 1963 or 1968; and yet we are still in the same place. Race still matters. Injustices still abound. And I'm tired.

It's a sentiment I've heard from Black clergy, especially since I started reaching out more demonstrably in the weeks and months following George Floyd's murder. "I'm tired." Some of my outreach has been met with suspicion. "I'm tired of talking and talking and getting nowhere, and then having you tell me that everything is better because we talked." I'm tired of White people thinking that Blacks are going to do their work, that they have to be the experts, that there is no work for us because we aren't racist. Black colleagues have expressed to me: "I'm tired and I'm not going to get involved in more dialogue. I don't need you to validate my feelings. I don't want to hear that racism isn't real. I'm tired." We're all tired. We're tired, as one member put it to me, "of living in such interesting times."

When the Torah portion ended last week, Moses was dejected. His first audience before Pharaoh did not go well. "*Mi Adonai?*" Pharaoh said. "Who is Adonai that I should heed Him and let Israel go?" Pharaoh made the Israelites work harder, gather their own straw, make their own bricks; and they rebelled against Moses ... and he felt rejected and cried out to God: "Why did You send me?"

God responds this week with a pep talk: "I am Adonai. I appeared before Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ... I will **free you** from the labors of the Egyptians and **deliver you** from bondage. I will **redeem you** with an outstretched arm ... and I will **take you** to be My people ... and I will **bring you** to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ..." And Moses repeated those words to the Israelites.

"v'lo sham'u el Moshe, but they did not listen to Moses, mikotzer ruah ume-avodah kashah, on account of their shortness of spirit and difficult labors."

There's a comedy routine that has a football coach giving an impassioned pep talk before the big game. "We're gonna fight. We're gonna win. Let's go, go, go." And the players get excited and jump around and get ready to run on the field ... and the door is locked. The door is locked. I'm tired.

In the Midrash, Rabbi Yehudah ben Beteira asks, "וכי יש לך אדם שהוא מתבשר בשורה טובה ואינו ששמח, Have you ever heard of someone being told such wonderful news and not being elated?" Moses

brought good news. He was going to free the people and bring them to the Promised Land. Why didn't they listen?

Rashi and Rashbam, two of the most important medieval commentators, say the people were simply too tired. They needed a rest. The burden of their labors was weighing down on their necks. *Kotzer ruah* means they couldn't breathe. They could hardly fill their lungs with air, and so they didn't listen. That's oppression. Like the force of that knee on George Floyd's neck. Sometimes the pressure is physical, sometimes it's emotional, but it's hard to get excited just because someone promises that change is on the way. I've been down that road and I'm tired.

Now, should the Israelites be faulted for their feelings? We who know the story are tempted to read their inattention as a lack of faith. Indeed, it is only when our people are safely on the other side of the Red Sea that the Torah will say "*Vaya-aminu badonai uv'moshe avdo*, they believed in God and Moses."

In the commentary in *Etz Hayim*, Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that maybe the Israelites weren't capable. Maybe they weren't ready. Maybe "they sensed that freedom would require hard work, that it would not happen easily. Or perhaps they would not listen to Moses because he came from Midian and had not shared their labors and suffering. ... The generation that grew up in slavery ultimately would be unable to take advantage of their freedom, and it would perish in the wilderness. Only their children would inherit the Promised Land." Whether it was laziness or fear or mistrust of Moses, Kushner blames the Israelites for their inability to accept the path of freedom.

Now, Rabbi Kushner is a *godol hador*, a true giant of our generation, and there are traditional *midrashim* to support his view. But is he being fair? The Israelites are tired and he faults them for failing to see the light, failing to get exciting, not being willing to work ... or wait until the appointed hour might finally come.

I reflect on the struggle for Civil Rights in this country. In that speech in Washington in 1963, Dr. King told those who suggested he should wait for generational change, "This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time. ... Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

He addressed those within his movement who were tired, disenchanted, ready to give up. "I am not unmindful," he said, "that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. ... Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the victims of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive."

And he addressed those who were ready to part ways with Whites, those who felt they were getting nowhere and had to be more violent or more assertive or more separatist. "Their destiny is tied up with our destiny," he said. "Their freedom is intrinsically bound with our freedom. We cannot walk alone."

King inspired. People marched. People sat. Jim Crow ended. Racism became illegal. But almost 60 years later, we recognize that the struggle has not ended. People are still tired.

Robert Sellers, a professor at the University of Michigan, wrote a piece after George Floyd entitled "I am so tired." "How long must we wait, plan, work, march, agitate, forgive, and vote," he asked, "before we have a society in which all lives matter equally, regardless of race or color? In my bone-weary tired state ... I [ask] myself why I should continue to fight."

Or Leonard Pitts, Jr., a columnist for the *Miami Herald*: "To be an African American is to be perpetually exhausted by race. It is to be worn, worked, spent, and drained from the daily need to prove and defend your own humanity. And it is to be tired of [privileged people] telling you how tired they are."

You may not completely agree. It can be hard to hear. But these are their words. They are tired of being told everything is okay. Tired of being expected to be authorities on all things racial. Tired of feeling they are alone in this struggle, and yet suspicious of outsiders who may speak up now but back out later. Tired of being told to wait. Or, as Civil Rights Activist Fannie Lou Hamer put it, they are "sick and tired of being sick and tired."

So how do we respond? How do we celebrate Dr. King's legacy on this weekend marking his 92nd birthday? God's response to Moses is instructive. "The people did not listen to Moses on account of shortness of spirit and difficult labor;" and in the very next verse, before Moses could complain, before he could give up, before he could fault them for not being ready for freedom, "Adonai spoke to Moses, and said, '*Bo daber el Paroh*, Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from this land."

You are tired. The Israelites are tired. Pharaoh is powerful and persistent and mean. But you cannot stop. *Bo daber*. Go. Speak to Pharaoh. Speak to allies. Learn about their oppression. Think about your role as oppressor *and* redeemer. Go! Rest on Shabbat. Recharge your spirits. But go! Go! Go! For the redemption is not yet complete. Shabbat shalom.