

We Cannot Walk Alone – Parashat Bo 5684

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Today is Day 106 since the Hamas attack against innocent communities in Israel. It is not the 106<sup>th</sup> day of fighting because Israel's offensive did not begin right away. It took time to organize a war plan, and several weeks more to launch a ground offensive. Remember, also, the negotiated-seven-day pause at the end of November, which led to the release of 100 hostages. But for the families of the 101 men, women, and children still in captivity, this is day 106. And one day would have been too much.

This is Day 106 since the Jewish world changed. Today is January 20, but it feels like October 113<sup>th</sup>. Citizens are still displaced. Reservists are still separated from their families. We continue to add special prayers to our liturgy, remember the hostages, and urge our political leaders to bring them home. For us, Israel is not just news. It is not political brinksmanship. We are connected and affected in deeply personal ways. I've heard more than a few Israelis quote a line from today's Torah portion: "*Ki ein bayit asher ein sham met*, No household was spared from the pain and agony of death." Ironically, that line in the Torah refers to the experience of the Egyptians on the morning after the last plague, but it speaks to us as well. We all know someone, or at least know someone who knows someone affected by this war.

In my first letter to the congregation on the evening after Simhat Torah, I warned that our road ahead would not be easy. We knew to expect people to question Israel's tactics and, indeed, its right to defend its citizens. It didn't take long for the images to shift from Germany's Brandenburg

Gate illuminated in blue and white, and hundreds of thousands gathered on the National Mall in solidarity with Israel, to Israelis having to defend our homeland against outrageous charges of genocide before the International Court of Justice and massive anti-Israel protests throughout Europe.

In some cases, the criticism came quicker. We were horrified by the open letter from a group of professors at Harvard in support of Hamas. And by the post from the Chicago chapter of Black Lives Matter of an image of a paraglider with the caption "I stand with Palestine." That one hurt. Our congregation has never had a relationship with the Chicago chapter, or any other chapter or organization called Black Lives Matter, but we have said the words; we've supported the cause. And for some, that has been enough to fuel feelings of pain, abandonment, and rejection amidst a climate of rising antisemitism.

I continue to thank President Biden and the majorities in both houses of Congress for standing strong against the criticism and affirming Israel's right to protect its citizens and defend its sovereignty. There is more at stake than the tactics of urban warfare, although those issues are important. The war between Israel and Hamas is one front in a proxy war between the United States and Iran. Iran is aligned with Russia. The war in Ukraine is another front in the same war.

And that is another reason it is so hurtful when our friends in the justice world, people with whom we stand in the fight for human rights and justice and democratic values, accuse us of standing on the wrong side of history. Many Jews are successful, but that cannot erase the reality that Jews constitute but 2% of the American population and .2% of the world population. It makes sense that Jews become sensitive when accused of causing some of the world's most intractable problems.

It hurts. But I want to caution against drawing the wrong conclusions. In two weeks, about 45 members of our community will be traveling to Georgia and Alabama on a Civil Rights Mission. After October 7, some asked if we should still be going. The answer is yes.

Through Sea change, we continue to work with partners on justice initiatives of import to our local community. Some asked if it is time to abandon that work. My answer is no. Because even in crisis, we still don't want to live in an unjust world. Even, perhaps especially in tough times, relationships matter. We need allies and the larger world needs us.

Even in Egypt, the world was more complicated than “us against everyone else.” The *Etz Hayim Humash* references a Midrash that divides the Egyptians into categories. Some Egyptians sided with Pharaoh. They hated the Israelites and wanted to keep them as slaves. These were the ones whose first born children died in the last plague.

Another group of Egyptians understood that the time for slavery had ended. They benefited from our labor and believed the slaves deserved compensation. Deuteronomy commands that when a slave is set free, he shall not go empty-handed. “*He-anik ta-anik lo*, Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the Lord your God has blessed you.” This group of Egyptians responded favorably when the Israelites “borrowed” their silver, gold, and clothing, as we read in today's portion.

And then there was a third group that not only appreciated the Israelites' labor but understood them and sided with them and wanted to walk in their shoes. These Egyptians joined their Israelite neighbors for the first Passover and then left Egypt with them. These were the *erev rav*, the mixed multitude that joined the Israelites in the wilderness. Our tradition has a complicated relationship with the mixed multitude. The commentators say it was the mixed multitude who led the complaining about the room and board accommodations in the wilderness.

Allyship is complicated, but that's not the point here. The point is that even the Egyptians, even the paradigmatic oppressors, could not be grouped into a single category of *Son'ei Yisrael*, Enemies of Israel. Many Egyptians understood our plight. They sided with us. They supported us. They walked with us on our journey.

I think about those righteous Egyptians when I remember how after October 7, our friends at the Scotland AME Zion Church in Potomac organized a fundraiser and collection to send gas masks to soldiers in Israel. They were grateful for the support we provided to help rebuild their church. And relationships matter. Justice matters.

I think about those righteous Egyptians when I recall the phone calls and texts I received from non-Jewish clergy – Black and White – who wanted to express support and solidarity after Hamas's savage attack. Some just wanted to know how I was feeling, while others wanted me to explain my connections. They don't all know the history and details of the Arab Israeli conflict; they count on friends like me to provide more background. It hasn't been perfect, I admit. I haven't changed every mind. There are certainly people who didn't reach out or otherwise disappointed us with their assessment of the war. We cannot be naïve. But in the face of rising antisemitism, we also cannot throw all our potential partners into the same basket of Deplorables.

We have visitors from the Greater Gaithersburg Youth Ministry. After the kiddush, Rabbi Berkowitz and I are going to be asked to tell them about the Passover *seder* and how we reinterpret the message of Passover every year. At my *seder*, it is common to ask who are the slaves, who are today's oppressed minorities yearning to be freed? How do we apply the lessons of Passover to the current social climate? We sometimes like to flip the script. If we were the Egyptians, into which of the Midrash's three groups would we fall? Would we be the ones who sought to oppress or exploit or

uproot the other, or would we be the ones who sought to find allies, make connections, and become partners in pursuit of justice?

I cannot say loud enough that I recognize that ours is a large and diverse community and that, particularly in a moment of crisis, individuals will disagree on the finer points. There are members of our community who want to get involved in committees and projects to further the universal causes of justice, and others who prefer to work to sustain more particularistic concerns like Jewish education, worship, and connections – particularly to our homeland in Israel.

All these causes are important. And however we choose to get involved, the important part is that we not give up hope. Hope, *tikvah* is the mantra of our people. On October 11<sup>th</sup>, as we read about the liberation of our ancestors from under the oppressive labors of the Egyptians, we must strive to maintain hope. As we remember the liberation from Egypt, we hope and pray for the future liberation for Israel, for the Jewish people, and for all God's children everywhere. Shabbat shalom.