

Fake Tears? Parashat Bo, 5777

Rabbi Michael Safra

Ripped from the headlines. *The Washington Post*, Saturday, January 21:

While reading the Jan. 4 editorial ... about House Republicans' vote on an independent ethics watchdog, I was deeply disappointed to see the word "emasculate" to describe how the House had reduced the ethics office's powers. ... Perhaps the [editorial] board could consider the harm in using language that suggests only the most masculine among us make effective leaders.

Talk about nitpicking. Allison Cox used 214 words to criticize one poor word choice 17 days earlier. But that's not all. Because on January 28, another perturbed reader complained about the complaint. I quote: "Allison Cox must have brass ovaries to try to rid The Post of the word 'emasculate.'" I don't know what brass ovaries are, but I woke up early this morning to see if the debate might rage on.

Of course there are plenty of matters of larger consequence to debate as well: The White House statement remembering and condemning the Holocaust, which failed to mention Jews; the Executive Order on immigration that sparked protests at airports throughout the country; and plenty of debate about the debate. Of course it is wrong to ban Muslims from entering the US, but is this a Muslim ban? Was the controversy overblown by the opposition? I have opinions, but I want to stick to this question of manhood and sensitivity, strength vs. weakness.

It came up again in the president's remarks on Monday to a group of small business leaders. Commenting on Senator Schumer's impassioned condemnation of the Executive Order, the president offered: "I'm gonna ask him who is his acting coach, because I know him very well. I don't see him as a crier. If he is, he's a different man. There's about a five percent chance that it was real, but I think they were fake tears."

Can real men cry? I was reading an article about Walter Mondale for fourth grade current events when I learned that "real men don't eat quiche." But what about crying? Are we experiencing a contest between the resolute, alpha-strong who want to protect our country; and the emasculated, spineless weak who want to protect our values? I want to offer a different perspective.

The opening words of today's Torah reading: "The Lord said to Moses, "*Bo el Par'oh*, Go to Pharaoh, *ki ani hikhbad'ti et libbo*, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them." It is an interesting play on words because the word *hikhbad'ti*/hardened/*kaved*/heavy, shares the same root as *kavod*/glory/honor. God helps Pharaoh to harden his heart in order to increase God's own honor and glory. The Torah also uses another word for hardening the heart, which is a theme throughout the narrative: *hazak*/strong. "*Vayehzek lev Par'oh*, Pharaoh's heart was strengthened and he did not listen to Moses and Aaron." When Pharaoh hardens the heart, he makes it stronger, he makes it heavier, he glorifies himself by resisting the urge to give up when the going gets tough.

Literary scholars of the Bible point to leading words – words that recur with some frequency – as a way of understanding what is important in a particular narrative. And there are two more such words for the story of Israel in Egypt. In the first ten chapters of Exodus, the word “*mi/who*” is repeated seven times, and the word “*yada/to know*” is repeated ten times. The hardened heart is the heart that doesn’t know or doesn’t see or doesn’t care who is affected by its decisions. When did the oppression of the Israelites begin? When “a new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph, *Vayakom melek hadash asher lo yada et Yosef,*” when the king failed to recognize the humanity, the contribution, the history of Joseph and the Israelites in Egypt. And it continued when Pharaoh refused to recognize God. “*Mi Adonai,*” he said. “Who is the Lord that I should listen to Him?” Or when he tried to control the Israelites. “*Mi va-mi ha-holkhim?* Who is it exactly who would want to leave Egypt with you?” The hardened heart doesn’t know suffering, or at least looks past suffering in order to preserve honor and glory. The decimation of the crops, the destruction of the livestock, the lack of water to drink. ... It is only when the suffering hits Pharaoh’s own house during the tenth plague that he finally acts. He is strong, his heart is heavy, he doesn’t know ... or he looks past the consequences of his actions.

On some level, I can understand the logic of wanting to tighten the hinges on the doors into this country. Terrorism is a real threat and we all want to keep it out. This was a promise and elections have consequences. But Executive Orders have consequences as well. Real people’s lives are affected.

- Fuad Shareef received death threats for having worked as a translator with American officials in Iraq. Having received the necessary paperwork to come to America as a refugee, he sold the family home and car, told his wife to give up her job, pulled his two daughters out of school, and spent \$5000 on flights. The family was on a layover in Cairo when they were told they would have to return to Baghdad.
- Seyed Soheil Saeedi Sarvai is an Iranian scientist who had been awarded a fellowship at Harvard to study cardiovascular medicine. Upon hearing that the visas for Mr. Sarvai and his wife had been suspended, his supervisor, Professor Thomas Michel wrote, “This outstanding young scientist has enormous potential ... and he has already been thoroughly vetted. This country and this city have a long history of providing research training to the best young scientists in the world, many of whom have stayed in the USA to make tremendous contributions in biomedicine and other disciplines.”
- An unnamed family of six escaped Syria and have been living in a refugee camp in Turkey. Arrangements were made for them to settle in an apartment in Cleveland with another refugee family, but the plans were abruptly cancelled.
- And the numbers are disputed, but we’ve heard about the detentions in various airports as well.

Is it wrong to cry upon hearing these stories? Is crying reserved for actors and the weak of heart?

I can’t tell you who to vote for or whose policies to support, but I can tell you to cry. If you believe that ours is a nation of immigrants, that we Jews know from our history what it means to be turned away and denied entry, that refugees who have been vetted are not terrorists, then you have to cry! And if you believe that a temporary suspension of immigration is the only way to make our country

safe, then you have to cry, too! Because the suffering is real. Even if there is a reason, even if there is justification, it is still tragic. We have to cry because we are not heartless. And we know that “the world as it is” is not “the world as it should be.”

I reached out to Muslim friends this week. It had been a long time since I had spoken to Sabir Rahman, the kind man from Pakistan who worked so hard to form a relationship with our congregation, invited us to tour his mosque and its clinic that provides medical and dental care to some of the poorest residents of our county, who brought members of the Muslim Community Center to my Sukkah and described the challenges of preserving his Muslim heritage for a new generation that feels so home in America. I told him I was thinking of him and I value his contributions to our community. And I was relieved to hear that mine was not the only call he had received.

I also spoke to Imam Mohammed Abdullahi. He didn't want to talk politics. In his thick accent, he wanted only to describe the outpouring of support that makes him so proud to be an American. He pointed to the mosque in South Texas that burned early Sunday morning, cause still unknown. They raised more than \$1 million in two days to rebuild; and the first of the 21,000 donors was a rabbi. I didn't see that in the newspaper; Imam Mohammed told me that little snippet, proudly. Yes – it's manly to cry. It is manly to care.

I have commented before on the plague of darkness. What's so bad about darkness? It must have been uncomfortable, but how can sitting in the dark compare to boils, or losing your crops and cattle? Said the Polish Hasidic Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger: The tragedy was that the Egyptians were not able to see one another, “*v'lo ra'ah ish et ahiv.*” They did not see when their neighbors were suffering, and they were unable to help. That was the tragedy – that they were unable to care for other human beings. It was a measure for measure punishment against a pharaoh who had hardened his heart and refused to empathize, refused to acknowledge the contributions or the suffering of the strangers in his midst.

Which leads to my prayer for this Shabbat. Oh God, give us the ability to see, to soften our hearts, to connect with individuals who are different from us or who suffer in our midst. Give us the strength to cry, the courage to hope, and the stubbornness to believe in a future where all the world's tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to be free can be welcomed to our shores. Shabbat shalom.