

Juneteenth: What Really Happened

-- and Does It Matter?

Parashat Shelach Lecha

June 20, 2020

Rabbi Carl Perkins

Temple Aliyah, Needham

I hope that we all know when we Jews celebrate our freedom from Egyptian bondage. We celebrate it on the eve of the 15th day of the month of Nisan. It's on that evening that the Bible tells us that Pharaoh gave his final word to Moses: Be gone! Leave Egypt! (Exodus 12:31)

Everything that the Children of Israel had been yearning for for 430 years came to pass in the blink of an eye. All at once 600,000 Israelite men, and their wives and children, began to move. *B'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh*: On that very day. (Ibid., 12:41).

Fantastic.

But compare the joy and the exultation of that day with the mood of the people that's described in today's parashah! (See Ibid., 14:1-4)

It is very, very strange. Prior to the events described in this week's *parashah*, we might have thought that the children of Israel were about to get to the Promised Land. (After all, Egypt and the Land of Canaan are not far away from each other.) But by the end of the portion that we read today, we learn that not only won't they get there in a few days or weeks, but they won't get there ever. *Ever!!* Imagine if the Israelites knew that back on the 14th of Nisan! ...

Imagine: if they knew that they themselves were never going to get to the Promised Land, would they have been as joyous? Would they have left at all?



Judging from how **skeptical** they were of Moses while they were still in Egypt -- how **distrusting** and even **hostile** they were to his leadership -- I think we know the answer to those questions.

In fact, there is a tradition that the Exodus wasn't the first time that Israelites tried to leave Egypt. We have a rabbinic tradition that after they had been in Egypt for 400 years, a group of Ephraimites tried to escape. They made it partway up the coast but then encountered the Philistines. (Pesikta Rabbati 37) Three hundred thousand of them were killed. Only ten survived to tell the tale. They returned to Egypt and told their countrymen what had happened, which only reinforced everyone's fear of leaving.

Even during the Exodus, we have a sense that some Israelites left but others did not; and although most Egyptians remained in Egypt, some went with them. (Ex. 12:38)

So the story isn't as simple a story as it seems. Our struggle for liberation took a lot longer than anyone would have imagined. There were setbacks -- serious setbacks -- along the way. We can be grateful that the **people** -- the **people of Israel** -- made it, even though individual Israelites may not have.

* * * * *

Just yesterday, we noted "**Juneteenth**" on the calendar. Juneteenth has long been the name given to June 19th by African Americans who commemorate on this day a curious incident that is said to have happened on June 19th in 1865. As the story goes, a group of Union soldiers led by Major General Gordon Granger came along to Galveston Bay and informed some African Americans that they were free. Even though the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued on January 1, 1863, it wasn't until two and a half years later that this group of African Americans learned that they had been freed. And so, this day became, for them and their descendants, "Emancipation Day." It became the day on which they had actually been liberated and could finally celebrate their liberation.

There are two problems with that. The first is that history doesn't necessarily line up neatly with the story. Just the other day, I read an article that suggests that the notion that blacks -- or whites, for that matter -- didn't know about the Emancipation Proclamation for two and a half years is just implausible. (<https://talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/hidden-history-of-juneteenth>)

Much more likely is that everybody in Texas knew about it, but that the white planters who had settled in Texas, who had brought their slaves with them from Alabama and Mississippi, actively **resisted** it. They continued to treat blacks as slaves. And so it wasn't until the soldiers who rode into Galveston Bay (two months after General Lee had surrendered to General Grant at the Appomattox Court House in Virginia) **fought** the rebels and **imposed** the laws of the United States that these slaves were actually able to realize their freedom.

Note, by the way, that the Emancipation Proclamation didn't actually free all of the slaves in the United States. That Proclamation applied only to those states who were in active rebellion with the Union, and it specifically excluded blacks in some Union border states.

So all the blacks in the United States weren't actually freed when the Proclamation was issued in 1863. They weren't even free when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox. In fact, even though the 13th amendment to the constitution prohibiting slavery was passed by Congress in January of 1865, it wasn't yet in effect when Juneteenth came along. It wasn't until December in 1865 that the 13th amendment was finally ratified.

But still, you could say, Juneteenth, coming as it did during that critical last year of the war, and the first year after the war: surely that could signify the day of freedom, the day of emancipation, right?

Well, maybe yes, and maybe no.

Did 1865 mark the end of the resistance to the enslavement of black Americans in these United States? Did it inaugurate peace and freedom and equality between the races here?

Those are rhetorical questions. As we know -- as the story of the Exodus from Egypt demonstrates -- it can take a lot longer than we expect to achieve freedom.

After the War came Reconstruction. But then came Jim Crow. And then came the revisionist history of the Confederacy, the celebration of the nobility of the “Lost Cause” of those who fought the Union. To this day, we still have statues glorifying the heroes of the Confederacy. **Most of these statues were not erected during or immediately after the Civil War.** Most were erected during the first half of the twentieth century, coinciding with the era known as “Jim Crow,” during the time that the **segregation** and continuing **subjugation** of African Americans in the South was being enshrined in state and local law.

(<https://www.history.com/news/how-the-u-s-got-so-many-confederate-monuments>)

By the way, do you know how many states were in the Confederacy? The answer is **11**. Do you know how many states have statues glorifying the heroes of the Confederacy? **31**. Let’s not forget the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA in 2017. James Alex Fields, the man who drove his car into a counter-demonstration that day and murdered Heather Heyer, was from Ohio. And what was he protesting? The removal of two Confederate statues from a public park.

So it’s fair to say that the ideology promoting the subjugation of black African Americans and their descendants continued long after Lee surrendered to Grant; long after Juneteenth; and that that resistance has continued to this day.

However, neither of those objections is any reason not to celebrate Juneteenth. On the contrary.

After all, as we've seen, there are conflicting accounts even in the Bible regarding the events that we describe with the word "Exodus." It is the same way with every Jewish holiday. Hanukkah is a classic example. Like the Hanukkah story, how you tell, and how you understand the Exodus story very much depends on the lessons you want to draw from it.

And the fact that freedom was not won once and for all on June 19th, 1865? That's also no reason not to celebrate Juneteenth. Remember all those Jews in Egypt who celebrated on the 15th of Nisan -- yet who never lived to see the Promised Land. They had -- and we have today -- every reason to celebrate Pesach. Besides, it's nobody's business besides our own whether and when and how we want to celebrate our liberation; and the same is true of African Americans in this country.

So my feeling is this: I'm glad that we have a Juneteenth. I'm glad that we have a day that reminds us of an important stage in the struggle for freedom in this country, but also reminds us that the work of liberation is not behind us, but rather lies ahead, and that the struggle for freedom -- a struggle as old as the Bible if not older -- continues.

Shabbat shalom.