

HOUSING SABBATH AND BO

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Rabbi Laurence Kushner tells a beautiful story.

Years ago, at his synagogue he met with a group of preschoolers in the sanctuary.

He asked the children to think about what they would see

when he opened the ark. The kids had a heated debate

about what was inside the ark.

One child, who apparently had watched too many game shows on television,

claimed that there was a “brand new car” behind the curtain.

Another child argued that there must be a Jewish book inside the ark.

Still another, young existentialist said that the ark was empty.

But the most interesting answer came from the child who said that

there would be a large mirror.

As Rabbi Kushner tells it, this last answer was probably the closest to the truth.

We know that a text is holy when we can find ourselves in the narrative.

The Torah can help us take a closer look at our own lives

in order to find our own story and it is through the sharing of our stories

that we build communities of obligation and responsibility.

This week's Torah portion, Bo, launches the 10 plagues in Egypt that finally force Pharaoh to "let our people go."

You are, of course, familiar with these plagues from your Passover seders:

blood, lice, frogs, darkness and the like...

Lest you think this story is a quaint tale of a time long ago,

I think that it holds a mirror to our own society

because today, we have plagues of our own:

1) A crisis in health care with over 47 million people in this country uninsured.

As more and more people lose their jobs, an increasing number are losing their health insurance as well

2) The pollution of our land.

3) Global warming

4) Genocide in Darfur and Congo

5) Terrorism threatening not only this country but most countries around the globe

6) Israel's security threatened

7) Greed that has led to the mortgage crisis

- 8) A global recession and an economy teetering on the brink
- 9) Hunger and malnutrition
- 10) And a housing crisis.

Tonight, we celebrate and welcome our new members
who have found a Jewish home at Temple Beth El.

In conjunction with other faiths in the city of Riverside,
we are also taking some time this Shabbat,
to reflect on those whose residential homes are in jeopardy.

You have all read the news. Foreclosure filings —
including default notices, auction sale notices and bank repossessions —
were reported on over 2 million properties last year,
an 81 percent increase over 2007 and a 225 percent increase over 2006.¹²

The Riverside-San Bernardino metropolitan area ranked
the third-highest in the nation in foreclosure activity during 2008.

In Riverside County, over 61,000 properties slipped into

² RealtyTrac® (realtytrac.com), the leading online marketplace for foreclosure properties. 2008 U.S. Foreclosure Market Report™,

some stage of foreclosure during 2008.

That compares to almost 29,000 properties in 2007.

In December alone, the number of Riverside County properties

falling into foreclosure increased by more than 50 percent

over December a year ago. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands more homes are threatened in the years ahead.

We have watched the wrenching effect this housing disaster has had upon the spirit of our community.

As our congregation and our community's families lose their homes, or worry about that possibility, they also lose their dreams.

We know their pain, it is our own.

What does our Torah portion have to teach us about responding to this plague?

How does Pharaoh respond to the plagues that befall his country and his people?

In the face of the first five plagues, we learn that Pharaoh hardened his heart, insensitive to the suffering of the Israelites,

stubborn in his refusal to hear their cries of anguish.

Then, in the face of the last five plagues,

we learn that God hardens Pharaoh's heart.

This has disturbed many readers and rabbis.

What does it mean that God has basically taken away

Pharaoh's free will?

Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish³ explains that God is merciful and just.

While three chances for change are considered generous,

God grants Pharaoh five. So, with regard to free will, even evil Pharaoh has it.

However, when Pharaoh allows stubbornness to rule him,

his heart is eventually sealed off from the will to change,

locking him into a course that will bring about his doom.

As the rabbis tell us, mitzvah goreret mitzvah, averah goreret averah --

one mitzvah leads to another, just as one transgression leads to another.

The more we close off our hearts to the pain of others,

the more incapable we are of hearing their cries.

That is why the rabbis tell us that if we see a beggar on the street,

we should give him or her something lest we end up

not noticing beggars at all.

³ Exodus Rabbah, 13:3

This is a cautionary tale.

We must not harden our hearts to the distress our fellow congregants and citizens are experiencing during this terrible economic downturn.

Last week the paper announced that unemployment in Riverside has reached 10 %. These are tough times.

With unemployment come loss of health care coverage and the very real threat of losing one's home.

If you are in danger of having your home foreclosed,

I would like to make two suggestions:

One, please come talk to me and two, please take a look at the Handout on Foreclosures for resources to help you.

We also need to respond on a policy level to the modern housing crisis plague.

We need to fight for affordable housing for low- and middle income people.

We need to demand accountability on the part of banks who have been receiving billions of dollars from the federal government.

We need to lobby these banks, as well as our representatives in government, to renegotiate loans.

Please also take a look at the Handout with contact information

for some of our civic leaders.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to help one another,
providing each other with moral support and understanding.

Two weeks ago, we inaugurated our first African American president.

The country rallied – Blacks and whites, Christians and Jews,
Republicans and Democrats. A new era of hope was born.

Hope that we CAN come together as a nation to fix our problems.

No question about it, the task is overwhelming.

But we cannot give up hope.

As President Obama said in his inaugural address:

“Now there are some who question the scale of our ambitions,
who suggest that our system cannot tolerate many big plans.

Their memories are short, for they have forgotten
what this country has already done; what free men and women
can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose,
and necessity to courage.”

Or, to quote another president, as Obama did,

George Washington who was speaking about

another seminal moment in our history, the American Revolution:

“Let it be told to the future world that in the depth of winter,
when nothing but hope and virtue could survive,
that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger,
came forth to meet it.”

The great Chassidic Rebbe, Nachman of Bratslav, was once asked:

"What is the antidote for the person who feels so heavy, so depressed,
that no words of encouragement or advice have any effect?"

In response, the rebbe told the following story:

There was once a poor man who earned a living digging clay and selling it.

Once, while digging clay, he discovered a precious stone
which was obviously worth a great deal.

He took it to an expert to tell him its value.

The expert answered, "Go to London, the capital,
and there you will be able to sell it."

The man was so poor that he could not afford to make the journey.

He sold everything he had, and finally he had enough to take him as far as the sea.

He then went to board a ship, but he did not have any money.

He went to the ship's captain and showed him the jewel.

The captain immediately welcomed him aboard the ship with great honor.

He gave the poor man a special first class cabin, elaborate meals,
and treated him like a wealthy person. Then one day, he sat down to eat,
with the diamond lying in front of him on the table where he could enjoy it. He
dozed off. The mess boy came and cleared the table,
shaking the tablecloth with its crumbs and the diamond into the sea.

When he woke up and realized what had happened,
he almost went mad with grief.

Besides, the captain was a ruthless man who would not hesitate to kill him
for his fare. Having no other choice, he continued to act happy,
as if nothing had happened. The captain was not aware that anything was wrong.
One day, the captain said to him, "I want to buy a large quantity of wheat and I

will be able to sell it in London for a huge profit.

But I am afraid that I will be accused of stealing from the king's treasury.

Therefore, I will arrange for the wheat to be bought in your name.

I will pay you well for your trouble." The poor man agreed.

But as soon as they arrived in London the captain died.

The entire shipload of wheat was in the poor man's name and

it was worth many times as much as the diamond.

Rabbi Nachman concluded, "The diamond did not belong to the poor man,

and the proof is that he did not keep it. The wheat, however, did belong to him,

and the proof is that he kept it.

But he got what he deserved only because he remained happy. *

This is not to say we should have a Polyanna attitude about our situation.

But it does mean that with faith and optimism, and community,

we can weather this storm.

Remembering always the deliverance of people of faith from crisis,

let us renew ourselves and our congregations for work with local, state and

national agencies to bind up the broken and lay straight the way forward.

Ken yehi rason.