

Weekly Message from Rabbi Wexler – January 14, 2021

In the wake of the insurrection at the Capitol last week, worried about our country, the future of American democracy, and the values that are at the bedrock of our nation, I find myself asking: what are we to do? How are we to respond? I believe in my heart that one can not respond to violence with violence and respond to hate with hate. Yet, a response is necessary and this week's Torah portion, Vaera, offers as a guide. Vaera tells the story of the first seven plagues. It is the story of Moses going before Pharaoh and demanding "let my people go." However the parasha begins with God informing Moses: Va'era el Avraham, el Yitzhak, v'el Ya'akov... - I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob." The word vaera means "I appeared." It is related to the word re'eh, "to see." The command, re'eh, shows up several verses later, when God says to Moses, "Re'eh, nitatiha Elohim l'Pharoh... - See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh."

This verse glaringly stands out in what is otherwise an emphatically monotheistic text. Many have interpreted this passage in a way that reconciles it with its apparent break from monotheism. Rashi interprets "Elohim" here to mean a judge and a chastiser. Others interpret it to mean that Moses is really God's human proxy.

But allow me to suggest a different interpretation. Remember that in the title verse of the parsha, God says, "Va'era el Avraham..." meaning "I appeared to Avraham," but also, "I showed up for Avraham. I intervened. This is how I showed up." Now God is saying to Moses, "Re'eh." "See," but also, "Appear." Show up. This is how you will show up: you will show up as the God that Pharaoh needs to see – not the punishing, all-powerful God, but the God that lives in a human being. "nitatiha Elohim l'Pharoh." I am empowering you to show the God in you to Pharaoh. The God in you is the God Pharaoh needs to see, because Pharaoh needs to understand that all people are "B'Tselem Elohim," in God's image.

Re'eh, nitatiha Elohim—this is how we must respond—standing up, showing up, living by our values, and helping others to see the Godliness within one another. In our HaMakom High School we are currently in the middle of our January mini-mester. The theme is racial justice and diversity in the Jewish community. This past Tuesday, we welcomed via Zoom, Rebecca S'manga Frank as our guest. Rebecca is a black Jew, a writer, actress, and activist. It was a privilege to hear her story and to listen to her creative work. But one thing that struck me the most in our conversation is the way that she engaged with the teens. Before calling on a student to answer a question she would say "I see you.." "I see you Rebecca," "I see you Rivi," "I see you Tristan." A simple yet powerful message. The pandemic coupled with the social and political unrest in our country has led to great sorrow, uncertainty, and loss. Perhaps more than ever, we need to show up for one another. We need to see one another. We need to share the divine spark within us.

That is precisely what we will do this weekend as we join together, physically distanced but spiritually close for Community Mitzvah Day. I hope you will sign up to participate in Federation's Virtual Community Mitzvah Day this Sunday and then will participate in TBS' Mitzvah Day on Monday. You can find all of the information about the many projects, collections, and Zoom sessions here at TBS. Community Mitzvah Day is an important way that we reach out to others. It is one of the ways that we say "we see you" to those in need. Now, it is time to show up.

Shabbat Shalom.