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### Democracy and Torah

This past Wednesday afternoon I spoke to a group of students who attend a Christian high school that is a sort of Protestant version of the Jewish day schools that many of our children attend. In between their semesters, they had enrolled in a weeklong course exploring the broader context of their own Christian faith. They had never been to a synagogue. They had never spoken to a rabbi before. Their knowledge of Judaism was mostly gleaned from what they knew from the Bible. I love speaking to audiences like that. It's a creative challenge to summarize all of Judaism in ten minutes to teenagers with little prior background. And, as I've shared before, I find the questions that they ask to be absolutely unpredictable and absolutely fascinating.

One student asked me if Jews ever had disagreements about matters of religious practice or ritual and, if we did, how have we resolved those disputes. So that gave me a chance to share with them that, indeed, Jews don't always agree about matters of religious practice or ritual, or matters of philosophy or worldview, and that our sacred tradition is, in large part, a record of our disagreements and debates. And because we debate and analyze and try to prove the correctness of our positions by using words and arguments and discourse, we have survived through the centuries of our exile with our portable homeland that is renewed each generation by our continued commitment to study Torah, argue about its meaning and implications, and then live our lives according to our best understanding of what we are meant to do. Sometimes disputes are resolved, but never by compulsion or force, but only when one side of a debate convinces the Jewish people that its path is correct...until a time arises when another option may become dominant.

I left the students and noticed some alarmed text messages from family and only then did I see for the first time the images that had shocked and appalled men and women of good will across the country and across the world. There is a deliberate grandeur to Washington DC, no place more so than the Capitol building. That grandeur is meant to evoke a certain awe and reverence for the democratic process itself through which each one of us is represented. So many men and women whom I admire have worked and debated and legislated in the halls of congress on behalf of human welfare and freedom. It was a profound sense of violation to see the confederate battle flag, the banner of treason and hate, being waved in the United States capitol. It is a source of burning anger to know that the riot was inspired and encouraged by powerful politicians, including the president himself, who riled up an angry mob, and then cowardly sent them on without him to spread havoc and violence. And it is frightening to be reminded of how our country sits at the very precipice of political violence that can threaten the safety of members of congress acting on our behalf, and can easily and quickly threaten our safety as well.

Fear of anarchic violence and fear of the replacement of democratic deliberation by mob rule, are rightfully contained by the fear and reverence for the authority that effective government can inspire. Rabbi Hanina, deputy to the High Priest said, in Pirkei Avot, "one should pray for the welfare of the government - **שְׂאֵלְמָלְא - מוֹרְאָה** for were it not the fear that the government instills, each individual would swallow up their neighbors alive."

The government that Rabbi Hanina knew was Rome. And, as the "*segan kohen*" the perpetual deputy High Priest, Rabbi Hanina was presumably passed over, time and again, for a promotion that he deserved, to become the High Priest. (Those of us learning daf yomi learned just a few weeks ago that Rabbi Hanina was the most qualified expert on the intricate laws of purity needed to be an excellent high priest). Yet he never entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur and he never served in a position of full religious authority because a despotic foreign-imposed government did not want him in that role. Yet even that despotic foreign-imposed government was preferable to anarchy and the struggle of "all against all." We have seen a small glimpse this week into what it looks like, when there is no fear or reverence for governmental authority

and when the orderly transition of power is replaced by a violent struggle of all against all to determine how power will be wielded, by whom, and for how long.

But this fear or reverence for established authority is not the only fear I have been contemplating. Parashat Shmot opens with a description of the rapid decline in status of the Hebrews in Egypt. In just a few words the Torah describes the descent from the generation of Yosef and his brothers, who were honored in Egypt, to slavery, oppression, and the murder of Hebrew babies. The first spark of redemption that halts and diverts this tragic story is the resistance of two midwives, Shifra and Puah, to Pharaoh's murderous plans. Shifra and Puah, the Torah tells us "feared God - וַיִּירָאוּ הַמִּיֻּלְדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים" and because they feared God they were not afraid of Pharaoh and they spared the Jewish boys.

Between these two poles of reverence, reverence for government and reverence for God, is the entire framework for democratic self government. Stable self-government, in which the peaceful transfer of power is itself revered, even by those who are overlooked for leadership like Rabbi Hanina, endures precisely because there is a way to perpetuate government from one leader to the next. And, stable self-government requires citizens with moral backbone and moral clarity. Sometimes a midwife has to say no to a great king.

Four years ago, on Parashat Shemot, I spoke to you about the complicated relationship between religious Jews and democratic freedoms. I shared that when Napoleon marched into Russia as a flawed standard-bearer of liberty, equality, and brotherhood, he faced the spiritual opposition of the Ba'al HaTanya, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, who argued that the cruelty and oppression of the Russian czar would bind the Jewish people to God and to the Torah whereas the freedoms represented by Napoleon would alienate us from God and the Torah. Two centuries later we know that the Ba'al HaTanya might have been correct to reject Napoleon but he was wrong about the political circumstances in which Judaism thrives.

Democracy is good for Jews and good for Judaism because it requires the cultivation of character and that is a project we should embrace and a business we invented. Democracy is good for Jews and good for Judaism because resolving disputes and transferring power from one set of hands to another by deliberation and debate instead of violence, is the most sustainable and reliable method humans have discovered to cultivate stability and continuity. The Roman Republic is one possible model for modern democratic self-government. Athenian democracy is another possible model for modern democratic-self government. But neither of those models lasted a very long time. But the culture of the beit midrash represents another ancient, enduring, and still vital model for democratic self-government.

Our method for debating and deciding matters of the utmost importance - *devarim ha'omdim b'rumo shel olam* - without recourse to force or violence, but only through deliberation, debate, and discourse, has ensured our survival for thousands of years. A similar commitment has led to peace and freedom in the nations of the world that have adopted those methods for resolving their disputes. That has been this country's greatest strength, and with our renewed commitment to democracy, it can be so again.

As the tide turns in favor of redemption in Parashat Shemot the Torah presents one redemptive moment after another, each one necessary but not sufficient to conclusively launch our freedom. Shifra and Puah had to resist Pharaoh's command to murder Hebrew babies. Moshe, leaving the palace to spend the day with his erstwhile Egyptian brothers, had to somehow understand that his true brothers were the Hebrew slaves he had been observing, and expresses his solidarity with them and with us. But the final shift towards redemption occurs when the Hebrew slaves, at long last, after generations of suffering and degradation call out to God:

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הֵם וַיָּמֹת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבָדָה וַיִּזְעְקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָּם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים  
מִן־הָעֲבָדָה:

A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God.

The Netziv points out that this turning point in human history was sparked by our decision to gather and to pray. It does not say that we cried out to God while we were working, but rather that we cried out to God, in a collective voice and in an organized way in response to our bondage.

And this is my final request to you today. When frightening and tragic events occurred in recent years, I had the ability to find comfort in the community that we create when we gathered for prayer here in our shul. I had faith that our prayers were heard, and I knew that even if they would not be answered, at least I stood among good people who were sensitive to that which was wrong or tragic in the world and that too was a source of strength. While we lack the capacity to gather in one place in prayer in large numbers, I ask you to connect your tefilot in the coming days to the fears and the hopes that we feel as Jews and that we feel as Americans. Our neighbors and friends are falling victim to a deadly pandemic that is still increasing in scope - yesterday saw the record number of covid deaths so far. Our neighbors and friends are worried about their jobs and their ability to provide for their basic needs and those of their families. And our fellow citizens need some help in learning how to argue and debate without violence and without hatred.

Shabbat Shalom