

The Ongoing Process of Liberation - June 18, 2021

Two years ago, I gave a sermon about a holiday I had just heard of for the first time that week: Juneteenth. Yesterday, Juneteenth became a federal holiday. How quickly things can change! So I wanted to share some of what I said about it in 2019, and also reflect on what's changed during these past two years.

On June 19, 1965, Union General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, with more than 2,000 Union troops. He publicly read General Order No. 3, which began: "The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free." Two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation had gone into effect, the last slaves, those in the westernmost states, were told that they were finally free. On that day, the people celebrated, and a new Independence Day was born: June 19, or Juneteenth. In the years that followed, African-American communities celebrated the day with picnics, parades, and parties... It has been celebrated in African-American communities for 150 years, but had not gained wider attention until recently. Understandably, but regrettably, it is as if white America would rather just forget the holiday and the chapter of history it represents. Indeed, one of the 14 congressmen who voted against

making Juneteenth a federal holiday, Tom McClintock, said yesterday: “I don’t believe it’s healthy to reach into the dead past, revive its most malevolent conflicts and reintroduce them into our age.”¹

But as William Faulkner famously wrote, “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past.” The lingering effects of slavery were brought into Americans’ consciousness with a new urgency this past year with the killing of George Floyd and the resulting protests, and with the recent push to legalize voter suppression. Incredibly, we as a country are still struggling with the notion that Black Lives Matter. Declaring Juneteenth a national holiday won’t solve the problems of racism in this country, but it does give us a new reminder of the work that still needs to be done. As Kevin Young, the director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture points out, “What Juneteenth and other Emancipation days commemorate is both the promise of freedom and its delay. For June 19, 1865, doesn’t mark the day enslaved African Americans were set free in the United States but the day the news of Emancipation reached them in Texas, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation. It is a holiday ringed, like a good brisket, though not in smoke but irony. Out of such ironies Black people have made the blues, made lemonade, made

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/17/us/republicans-against-juneteenth.html>

good. The lesson of Juneteenth is both of celebration and expectation, of freedom deferred but still sought and of the freedoms to come.”²

The Jewish community has found itself in a fraught position during this new wave of attention to racial justice. Many Ashkenazi Jews don't see themselves as white, and so don't see themselves as beneficiaries of white supremacist culture. And with the rise of antisemitism in this country as well as around the world, there are some who think the Jewish community should be speaking and acting against antisemitism instead of antiracism, as if the two are mutually exclusive rather than tragically intertwined. The irony is that we Jews are uniquely suited to this task of facing America's past in order to create a better future. We know something about remembering and grappling with the past. And if there's one event that the Jewish community remembers above all others, it is our own liberation from slavery. *Y'tziat Mitzrayim*, the exodus from Egypt, is recounted and referred to countless times in the Bible and in the liturgy. The first of the Ten Commandments declares, "I the Eternal am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). The end of the V'ahavta declares, "I the Eternal am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, the Eternal am your God" (Num.

²<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/18/opinion/juneteenth-federal-holiday.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

15:41). We remember the exodus in the morning liturgy and the evening, on weekdays, on Shabbat, and on holidays. The Torah commands that we observe Passover “In order that you may remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life” (Deut. 16:3). And the Sages expanded on this verse, saying, “‘The days of your life’ refers to the days. ‘All the days of your life’ refers to the nights. And the sages say: ‘the days of your life’ refers to this world. ‘All the days of your life’ includes the days of the Messiah” (Mishnah Ber. 1:5).

We are called upon to remember the exodus every day and every night, in this world and even in the World-to-Come, because our liberation from slavery is the defining experience of the Jewish People. It is an experience that echoes through our history and informs how we see ourselves and how we live every day. As Rabbi Nahum Ward-Lev suggests, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible reconceptualized the exodus “from an event in the past to an ever-present process, an ongoing journey, a liberation journey with God.... On a societal level, the awareness of an ongoing exodus through time places liberation work at the center of the human vocation. The prophets’ understanding that the exodus must take place in every generation can be heard in our day as a moral imperative to counter racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and related oppressions

-- an imperative to work for a society in which all people can flourish.”³ A recent report on antisemitism published by Jews for Racial and Economic Justice reminds us, “It is crucial to say that at every step of the way and at every point in our history, Jews and Jewish communities and institutions have resisted their oppression and the oppression of others. In the face of oppression, Jews have joined revolutionary movements on every continent on which we’ve lived. European Jews and Arab Jews have been central to leftist movements, which is part of what makes ruling elites fear us. Jews were at the heart of the labor, Socialist, and Communist movements that swept Europe in the late 19th Century and the Middle East and North Africa in the 20th Century. Jews brought their organizing skills, socialist ethos and political analysis with them in their mass migration to the United States in the early 20th century, and were critical to the American labor movement and important to the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement and the gay rights movement.”⁴ We remind ourselves of our redemption from slavery in order to continue the work of liberation, both for ourselves and for all oppressed peoples. As Toni Morrison put it, “the function of freedom is to free someone else.”

³ *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets*, 22, 43.

⁴ <https://www.jfrej.org/news/2017/11/understanding-antisemitism-an-offering-to-our-movement>

Jews aren't the victims or the heroes of the shameful story of slavery in this country. But our own liberation narrative compels us to be witnesses to that story. We can be witnesses by supporting efforts to shine a light on that history, even when it makes us uncomfortable. We can be witnesses by being honest about our own ancestors' roles in America's slave trade. And we can be witnesses by doing everything we can to rectify the wrongs that are still being perpetrated because of slavery's legacy. "That you may remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life." The past is never dead; it isn't even past. Happy Juneteenth and Shabbat Shalom.