

The Time to Choose©
Eva Freund, Shabbat Shuva, 2020

This year instead of dreaming of a very dark cloud hovering over us I wondered what life within the dark cloud might be like. I thought about all the countries in the world and what the daily life of their citizens might look like.

As I peered into the cloud, I saw people living in family clusters and some living in tribal clusters. I saw people living in faith clusters. As I peered farther into the cloud, I saw clusters that appeared to contain a mixture of people. And within all of those clusters there appeared to be a variety of ways in which economic and political decisions were made. At one extreme, decisions were made by a single person (sometimes for the benefit of the inhabitants and sometimes not). At the other extreme, all persons in the cluster had input into decisions.

But then I realized that the all these decision-making processes were fluid. The single leader might be killed or over-thrown through a revolution or a coup of some sort – only to be replaced by another single person or perhaps by a group that wanted to expand the scope of decision-making. And the clusters where all persons had input into decisions were differently fluid

Wherever all persons had input into the making of decisions a number of things existed. These clusters had referees – judges, police, and civil servants. They had rules defining the voting process and they had norms – the unwritten rules that govern political and social conduct. Where these existed, change occurred not with a bang but a whimper. And sometimes the change was not even noticed. Sometimes the desire to stay in power requires the changing of referees, the changing of the laws and the ignoring of the norms.

When referees disappear—judges are forced out of office, courts are packed with reliable cronies, and civil servants are fired and replaced by loyalists; laws and regulations are no longer enforced in a neutral and disinterested manner; the press is no longer protected from assault, imprisonment, or death; the press is not allowed access to information and only the press approved by those in power are allowed to publish.

When the rules of the voting process are changed -- the opposition is neutralized -- gerrymandering is put into place so that it almost impossible for the opposition to win a majority of seats even when they have a majority of the votes; legal disenfranchisement is implemented through poll taxes, literacy tests, reducing the election period, reducing the number of polling places, purging the voter rolls in opposition districts. and restricting who is allowed to vote.

When norms are ignored -- competitors are treated as enemies not as rivals; political actors weaponize their control of institutions in order to marginalize opponents or hamper effective day-to-day governance; individuals narrow their focus from caring for their community to caring for their family to caring only for themselves; and individuals weaponize their power by demonizing the “other.”

Protesters mass in the streets, those in power crackdown and stage displays of strength in an attempt to project authority. This is what happens in countries before a collapse. This is what Saddam Hussein, Bashar Al-Assad and Gaddafi did. There is much that former intelligence officials see happening here that they first saw in China, and the mid-east. And they are un-nerved as they watch the leader of our cluster cultivate the aura of a strongman as he advocates the use of force and cultivates bromances with other strongmen.

This is not the first time referees would disappear, rules would be broken, and norms ignored. In fact, all of these and more were foretold in Deuteronomy, chapter 32.

The first “Song of Moses”, this week’s Torah portion, provides an encoding of the social memories. It is likely that the poem format would allow the people to better remember and tell their history. This song decrees the faithfulness and power of Adonoi as it decries the faithlessness and wickedness of the people. It predicts the consequent divine punishment; and it ends by pointing out that Adonoi will relent and will vindicate the people.

When Moses finished giving all of the words of this song to the people he then said *“Take to heart all these words to which I give witness today and urgently command your children to put them into practice, every single word of this Revelation. Yes. This is no small matter for you; it’s your life.”*

Which words will **we** tell to the next and future generations? Will we tell them that we acquiesced to leaders who treated us as having little human value; or will we tell them that we followed the words and intent of our Torah? Will we tell them that we gave up; or will we tell them that we adapted and that we survived? It is our life – it is each of our lives. It **is my** choice. It **is your** choice. It **is our** choice. **Now is the time to choose.**