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Kol Rinah
Parashat Bo
February 4, 2017 / 8 Shevat 5777

Contemplation and Action

“Don’t just stand there. Do something!” We’ve all heard that. It’s the classic call to action. But perhaps you’ve also heard someone say, “Don’t just do something. Stand there!” If “Don’t just stand there. Do something!” is a call to action, then “Don’t just do something. Stand there!” is a call to contemplation.

And it’s action, activity, or activeness, and contemplation that I want to explore together this morning. And I want particularly to look action and contemplation in the context of our congregation.

But let’s start with the parasha. Moses famously goes to Pharaoh and says? “Let my people go.” We misquote this all the time. He doesn’t actually say, “Let my people go.” He and Aaron tell Pharaoh that God says, “Let my people go that they may worship me.” The idea is that they’ll go into the wilderness for three days to worship God. Commentators wonder why this very limited and temporary freedom is the extent of God’s request of Pharaoh.

But for me, it’s the plea of slaves, whose existence is about action, for a respite from action and *for* contemplation. The slaves want a vacation. And that’s so often how we view contemplation. We work till we drop, then we vacation and rest and contemplate. And then we repeat the cycle. Amidst endless action, we crave contemplation.

Living in a world that demands action of us, that prioritizes action over contemplation, living in a religion where we are commanded *ששת ימים תעשה כל מלאכה*, six days you shall do all your work, how precious, how sweet, how necessary to have a place and a time where no action is demanded of us, and in fact where physical work is dramatically restricted, where instead of doing something, we are commanded to sit, or stand, but essentially, also, to rest.

Just as Shabbat is sanctuary of time, a synagogue, shul, services—are a sanctuary in space to escape, for a few precious hours, the action demanded of us everywhere else in our lives.

In this sense, shul is a place not for action, but for contemplation. Because isn’t that, in some sense, what tefillah and talmud Torah, prayer and Torah study are—opportunities for reflection and contemplation?

But this still keeps us in the cycle of alternation between activity and contemplation. Is there some way to integrate the two, to contemplate amidst action and to act amidst contemplation, for action to be contemplative, and contemplation to be active? We won’t figure this all out now, but we can start.

Let’s go back to the parasha. One of the things that makes Parashat Bo famous is that it contains what’s described as the first mitzvah in the Torah, the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, in Exodus 12:1. Exodus 12:1 begins the first legal, halakhic, section of the Torah. Before that, the Torah is exclusively narrative. And narrative is almost by definition about action. First this

happened, then this happened. Even the genealogies are narratives of a sort, since they convey past action in a concise, condensed form.

But the legal, halakhic sections of the Torah are a different genre. They are not narratives, not telling stories about the past, about past actions. Rather, they are moments of revelation that require study, learning, consideration. While God is perhaps active in revealing and teaching Torah, receiving Torah occurs through contemplation, through stillness, through noticing the world around us, and being able to be attuned to the divine voice whose echoes we try to hear by stilling our own bodies, our busy minds, and our egos.

But this contemplation is not about rest or vacation. It is not the contemplation yearned for by slaves, slaves to Pharaoh or slaves to smartphones. Or even slaves to God, I think. It's contemplation about mitzvot, about how to act justly, humanely, ethically, spiritually, sacredly, Jewishly. In this way, contemplation is about who we are, what our purpose in the world is, and how we are to act. Contemplation is not here about vacationing. It's about preparing, reflecting, looking inwards, however painful that may be, and looking forward in time to consider who and how we want to be in the future.

And when done right, the actions that result from this contemplation will be actions we understand as mitzvot, holy, commanded action and activity whose doing connect us to ourselves, to each other, to God.

Let me speak personally for a moment. As a rabbi, husband, father of three, and American today, I could easily fill my hours with endless activity, visiting, calling, writing, e-mailing, playing, cooking, exercising, meeting, working, working and working. But a few lunchtimes a week, I find time to sit somewhere for an hour and eat, and read. I recently read an academic book, really someone's dissertation, on 16th century commentaries on midrash. Wednesday, I found myself reading parts of "Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change," by William Bridges, and another chapter of "The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring," by Parker Palmer, which inspired much of this sermon. Sometimes after I've finished my last bites, as I sit there, reading another page or two before I pay the bill and go back to work, I'll have pangs of guilt, that I should be *doing* more.

But as I read Parker Palmer earlier this week, I realized my lunchtime reading is my contemplation. Much of what I write and speak about, and ultimately do, comes from the reading and thinking that happen during those meals. Contemplation has become critical to my work, to my ability to my work, and to do it well.

For us here at shul on Shabbos mornings, my first goal is to have a contemplative time and space so we may feel some respite and rest from our crazy work and our crazier world. My second goal is for us also to contemplate in ways that are reflective, preparatory, and even challenging and hard, that may affect the ways we act once we leave this sanctuary of space and time.

"The function of contemplation in all its forms is to penetrate illusion and help us to touch reality," says Parker Palmer. But, continues Palmer, "Contemplation is difficult for many of us because we have invested so much in illusion.... Pain is one of the sure signs that contemplation is happening. Contemplation may lead eventually to bliss, but first it will give us the pain of knowing that some of our dearest convictions are shallow, inadequate, wrong."

Some days here at Kol Rinah will be all *Shabbat menucha*—shabbat rest, and celebration. But there will be times where we'll wrestle together in contemplation, in study, in conversation.

March 3-5, when we have our scholars in residence, Suzanne Feinspan and Dove Kent, to focus our contemplation on whiteness, privilege and anti-Semitism, may be among those moments that are more challenging. But that only indicates their importance.

As we begin musaf, let us appreciate this holy time, this precious space in our lives and in our world, to look inward, together.

Shabbat shalom.