

No One Should Be Left Behind

This week's Torah portion, *Bo*, relates the final three plagues against Egypt before they agreed to let our people go. Before the eighth plague, a tremendous swarm of locusts (*arbeh*) could easily have been avoided. Already, Pharaoh's advisers told him that all was lost and that he should agree to end our enslavement and give us freedom. And so, Pharaoh asked Moses, "Who, who will be the ones who go" with you to worship your God? And Moses answered:

"We will go with our young and old, with our sons and daughters, and with our flocks and herds, because we are to celebrate a festival to Adonai." Pharaoh said, "Adonai be with you if I let you go, along with your women and children! Clearly you are bent on evil. No! Have only the men go; and worship Adonai, since that's what you have been asking for." Then Moses and Aaron were driven out of Pharaoh's presence. (Exodus 10:9-11)

Pharaoh could not understand that our ancestors considered themselves a family. He could not understand that it was inconceivable for us to leave a single person behind who wanted to be counted as a part of our family. Ultimately, we did leave *en masse*, men, women, children and elders and even a "mixed multitude" (*eirev rav*, Ex. 12:38) who escaped slavery along with us. Our family absorbed those of different ethnic origins to join us and become Israelites. No one was left behind---unless they chose to exclude themselves. And this self-exclusion is captured in the Haggadah as the expression of the "wicked" child who asks at the Passover seder, "What is this ritual to you?" The response is harsh but historically and emotionally accurate:

Rebuke him by saying, "This is done because of what Adonai did for me when I went free from Egypt." Emphasize "for me" not for him. For by separating himself from his people, he would not have been redeemed.

The Pew studies have well established that only those with active affiliation in synagogues are showing immunity from total assimilation and loss of Jewish identity. Those who drift away from synagogue affiliation, though they may have a relatively high sense of positive Jewish identity, will ultimately exclude themselves from the future of our Jewish family. Their loss is felt deeply and we need to continue to reach out and welcome them back. We want to leave no one behind.

How fitting it was that this week, Colorado witnessed the inauguration of its first Jewish Governor, Jared Polis. Our own Rabbi Susan Rheins delivered the Benediction. Polis, gay, Jewish, a progressive entrepreneur, a five-term congressman from Colorado's 2nd District, emphasized inclusion: a Colorado where everyone should feel respected, included and at home. That message was echoed later at the Inaugural Ball as pop-legend Cindi Lauper sang hit, True Colors:

You with the sad eyes
Don't be discouraged
Oh I realize
It's hard to take courage
In a world full of people
You can lose sight of it all
And the darkness inside you
Can make you feel so small
But I see your true colors
Shining through
I see your true colors
And that's why I love you
So don't be afraid to let them show
Your true colors
True colors are beautiful
Like a rainbow

Transcending politics is our ethical imperative to offer hope and inclusion to all. This ethic was championed by Moses and codified by over 3,000 years of Jewish tradition. Reach out to others and invite them to join us. Let us continue to build a community where people are respected and cherished regardless of their faith, race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Let us continue to weep for those who exclude themselves---but we'll keep reaching out because our rainbow shines most brightly when it includes the full spectrum of human brilliance.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins