

A Broken Spirit's Deafening Silence

Though the fireworks boomed and lit up the sky, and the air was thick with cheers and boasts, and glasses clinked with blissful intentions and the bands played on well after guests had faded, it was the silence of those with broken hearts and spirits that should catch our attention.

We are culturally conditioned to ring in the New Year with chimes of high expectations—we also give sighs of relief after a particularly troublesome *Annus horribilis*. And yet, beyond the social conventions and expectations, the passing of a year should give each of us pause.

Listen carefully and we can hear rising above the cacophony of our world the silent witness of our fellow humans in their suffering. The anguish of those shivering without shelter and aching against hunger calls to us. The longing of those seeking refuge from oppression and justice from bigotry calls to us. The despair of those desperate for companionship and losing their passion for life let alone the future challenges us to listen intently.

There is a template for this practice of listening intently that we find at the beginning of this week's Torah portion, *Va'eira*. God says to Moses:

⁵ I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites who are enslaved by the Egyptians and I have remembered My covenant. ⁶ Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am Adonai and I will free you from the yoke of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary acts of judgment. ⁷ And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, Adonai, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. ⁸ I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I am Adonai!"

⁹ But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they could not hear Moses because their spirits were crushed by cruel bondage. (Exodus 6:5-9).

God heard the moaning of the enslaved. But try as he might to encourage his people that redemption was at hand, the people could not hear Moses. Frustrated, Moses nearly gave up after that initial rejection. So God reinforced him, not with more inspiring words but with a call to action:

Moses said to Adonai, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, a man of impeded speech?"

¹³ So Adonai spoke both to Moses and to Aaron in regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, and God commanded them to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. (Exodus 6:12-13)

Moses and Aaron gather the heads of each of the tribes. They instruct them to teach their respective families and prepare the people for the dramatic events about to unfold. The story of the signs and wonders that plagued Egypt that led to the ultimate freedom

of our people is well known. It is told around our festive Passover tables. And yet the message of that cornerstone of Judaism is not meant to be heard over the excited chatter and clanging dishes of a tremendous meal. Rather, it should be heard with the heartfelt knowledge that “our ancestors were slaves (*avadim hayinu*) and that we, too, know what it is like to be strangers in a strange land, oppressed and abused.

Just last week dozens of Temple Sinai members went downtown to participate in the Christmas Day Project. Sinai members Paul and Susan Levine were our lead organizers. Together with hundreds of other volunteers we came to provide warm clothes and essentials for more than 800 homeless people. Some were able to express their appreciation with words. Others sang out in joy to have much needed gloves, a hat, a scarf or a sleeping bag. All expressed volumes with just their eyes. And it was that silent expression on the face of a man, woman or child who just needed to know that someone out there cared which we'll all remember.

Our best intentioned words may not be able to be heard by those whose spirits are crushed by society's cruelty. They may not respond to our prayers and songs. But they are lifted up by our acts of kindness, compassion and generosity. God has blessed each of us with a spirit that can soar to the heavens and roar with a resounding joy. But when someone's spirit is crushed the cries may not be heard at all. It is up to us to listen most intently to their silence.

Shabbat Shalom,

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