

Shabbat Sh'mot 5777
20 January 2016
Rabbi Michael Adam Latz
Shir Tikvah Congregation

Cry Unto Pharaoh!

ויקם מלך חדש על מצרים אשר לא ידע את יוסף

A new pharaoh rose up over Egypt who knew not Joseph. Now, when we ended the book of Genesis last week, Joseph and Pharaoh had a close relationship—you remember how cozy those two were, saving all the Egyptians and the Children of Jacob by planning ahead; well, the Jews thought they had it made in the Egyptian shade. Not so much. Over the years, this new pharaoh strategically and intentionally made life more and more difficult for the Israelites: taking away their rights, enslaving them, beating them, challenging their basic dignity.

וַיִּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבָדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ

The Israelites groaned under the bondage and cried out;
The new pharaoh was cruel and paranoid, indecent and violent. So we cried out to God—

We cried out to resist tyranny. Because we knew in our bones that slavery and human dignity are incompatible.

Raise your hand if you know the name of the person who delivers your mail? How about the name of the person who picks up the garbage or the recycling or the compost from your house or apartment or condo?

This is how white supremacy works, how racism works—it seduces us with a fallacious notion of radical individualism that says we can and must do everything on our own. But in reality, it isolates us so that we don't even know the names of the people who are intimately involved

in our lives: people who pick up our trash, serve our food, draw our blood, clean our streets. It divides us. It dehumanizes us. You want to be a religious person? Learn people's names. Listen to their stories. Share your own. Break down those invisible but potent barriers. Story telling is a radical act of resistance.

Tonight is a night for stories.

I want you to know the names of two women who remade the world—and without whom, we wouldn't be here tonight: Shiphrah and Puah.

Shiphrah and Puah were the midwives who delivered the Hebrew babies. And when Pharaoh decreed that all the Israelite boys must be killed (he got paranoid the Israelites would form a mass army and rebel), they engaged in history's first act of civil disobedience. They refused to do what the almighty Pharaoh demanded.

Pharaoh was furious! "Why are you disobeying me?"

Shiphrah and Puah answered him, "The Hebrew women are vigorous! Their labor is so short—they give birth before we arrive."

C'mon folks. Shiphrah and Puah lied. They lied to save those babies. They refused to destroy innocent human life because of the ravings of a megalomaniac lunatic. According the Egyptian legal system, they broke the law!

But God rewarded them and their households.

And we remember Shiphrah and Puah—and their epic moral courage—this night.

The Exodus story recalls our people's liberation from slavery to freedom. It wasn't an easy road to freedom.

You might remember the story? Moses didn't walk up to Pharaoh in his palace one day and say, "You know Sir, we'd like to talk. You see, while we really enjoy working seven days a week in the hot Egyptian sun and don't really mind our task masters beating us or throwing our baby boys in the Nile, we've decided that this just isn't the right match for us Israelites. Thank you for your time, but we're going to depart to worship our God in freedom. How does next Tuesday at noon work for you?"

C'mon!

This liberation wasn't easy! Pharaoh's heart was stone. The Israelites spent 400 years being treated like garbage. Moses had a hard time speaking in public and the people had Egypt in their hearts. Few of them could imagine a different life—a world where they were free. In fact, the rabbinic commentators explain that the Israelites couldn't even hear Moses at first—*mi-kotzer ruach v'avodah kashah*—they were being worked so hard they couldn't even breathe, much less imagine freedom.

That's precisely why there were 10 plagues before Pharaoh let the Israelites go free. Why? To remind us that freedom doesn't happen over night.

You and I—we've got a lot in common now with Shiphrah and Puah: as of noon today we are called to engage in ancient acts of resistance. We're gonna get uncomfortable. Are you ready to get uncomfortable? Are you ready to disrupt business as usual?

That's hard for a lot of us. We like things orderly. We're Minnesotans. We're nice.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his famous letter from a Birmingham Jail, "I must make two honest confessions to you, my

Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

Today, in 2017, the same folks who are demanding a Muslim registry are likely some of the same folks calling in bomb threats to JCCs and bringing guns aplenty into mostly poor, mostly Black and Brown neighborhoods; they're the same pharaohs who want to take social security away from old folks and health care away from the sick; and blame all our problems on Brown immigrants and Transpeople using public bathrooms as they engage in the cynical politics of division and distraction—all the while never doing a damn thing about Aleppo or the rising oceans or public education or building a bridge or creating a job for anyone not selling oil to Russia.

Those 10 plagues were as much to challenge the Egyptians and the Pharaoh as they were to show the Israelites that we had the power of endurance; the plagues helped the Israelites slaves build the requisite faith and the spiritual muscles to resist tyranny. We build faith step by step, story by story, person by person.

Those 10 plagues were the original politics of disruption; humanity's boldest wake up call.

You beat these slaves? We're gonna ruin your water!
You overwork these people? We're gonna wreck your crops!
You won't pay them? We're gonna block your roads!
You won't free them? We're gonna turn off the lights!
You deny people their basic human dignity? We coming!

After 10 plagues, Pharaoh's hardened heart finally shattered and our people marched to freedom!

Why?

Because enslaving people, discriminating against people, denying people their innate dignity is such a profound theological affront to God that business as usual just isn't possible. We must never forget where we've come from and who we are: We were slaves in the land of Egypt, you and I; those are the words we recite every Passover seder. This. Is. Personal. Human dignity is our ultimate theological concern. And when that means interrupting business as usual to break the chains of bondage, then it is both our religious inheritance and our moral obligation to rise up against the tyranny that prevents all people from being fully human.

In the next four years, I imagine there are pharaohs who will tell us—or tweet us—something that assaults the deepest promptings of our conscience. Will we stand in the moral breach like Shiphrah and Puah? In our hands will be the decision to join Pharaoh or to engage in moral resistance. Sometimes it will involve rallies and letter writing campaigns and testifying to legislative committees. At times, like Shiphrah and Puah we will be called to proclaim there is a higher, holier purpose and we must be emotionally, spiritually, and ethically prepared to do what is necessary to make manifest those ancient values. Values that cry out like the babies the midwives kept alive—because we know we cannot break that which is already broken—our task is alive with hope and compassion, promise, and redemption. This

moment cries for our spiritual and moral resistance to normalizing hatred and violence against people who are different, who look different and pray differently—because we believe what we were taught when we first embraced Torah—that humanity was created in God’s image... That Love. Trumps. Hate.

The Exodus was a theological revolution. It is time for a new theological revolution, a new moral revival!

Every synagogue and mosque and church must now call ourselves to compassionate activism, to stand up for the poor, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the sick, the immigrant, the Muslim, the Gays, the Trans, the person of color, the elderly, those with disabilities.

If our belief in God does not demand the *mitzvot*—the commandments—of love, compassion, generosity, and a robust commitment to healing our planet, if it is only focused inward, on the self, its simply narcissism.

The time has come for authentic people of faith to rise up and resist the blaspheming of our religious traditions: Jesus hung with the prostitutes in the hood, Moses crossed the border with a motley band for former slaves with no papers, and Muhammed proclaimed that our attachment to worldly possessions would destroy our ability to see God in the world.

It is time for a theological revolution in America:

A theological revolution where we wake up to the suffering around us and strive, together, to find ways to build a community and society with compassion as the cornerstone of our social policy and human dignity and mutual respect at the heart of our politics.

A theological revolution where people of faith proclaim that racism and sexism and the worship of guns are blasphemy and addressing mass violence and the need for decent public education and quality

affordable health care and work that pays a sustainable and thriving wage are not merely rights in a civilized society; they are moral commitments we must make to one another and the next generation.

It is time for a theological revolution in America where we are willing to listen to people who disagree with us because we hold their humanity and our collective future in our hearts and because, to be a person of faith means that hope is a commitment we make to ourselves and to our children.

It is time for a theological revolution that brings to life the Golden rule—do nothing hateful to another human being precisely because we are our sister's and our brother's keepers.

And it is time for a theological revolution that says if and when we invoke the name of the Eternal we better be prepared to defend all of God's creatures and creation with every fiber of our bodies and souls—especially the ones who drive us bananas.

Today, we inaugurated a president who traffics in hatred and colludes with white supremacists. There are those who choose to cozy up to him and his administration, or worse: who suggest we wait and see. No! When you appoint a white supremacist as your chief advisor, when you nominate a man who does not believe in fairness to people of color as your attorney general, when you nominate a climate denier to head the Environmental Protection Agency, when you boast about grabbing women with impunity and you mock those with disabilities, when you threaten to register my Muslim sisters and brothers, when you threaten the health care of 18,000,000 of our fellow citizens, you have shown that you do not share the values of people of faith in this great nation. Our moral tasks are resistance, resilience, and repair.

We will not stand idly by while you make our neighbors and our planet bleed with the stench of xenophobia and racism and sexism. The prophet Elie Wiesel (z"l) taught that we might not be able to stop all injustice, but we'll all be damned if we don't try every chance we have.

Our moral task in the next four years is clear:

1. **Resistance!** Shiphrah and Puah paid attention to the challenges and the world around them. Disrupt and interrupt cruelty every time you witness it. Let no racist joke get finished, no sexist commentary go unchallenged, no locker room talk be spoken in our presence, no rejection of people who look or pray or believe differently. This is whatchutzpah looks like. It means defending what is right, speaking out, and resisting normalizing cruelty even when it doesn't make you popular. Especially when it doesn't make you popular.
2. **Resilience.** If you belong to Shir Tikvah or another spiritual community trying to live into our theological and moral commitments—awesome! If you are not yet a member, what are you waiting for? The only way we're going to get through this moral swampland is by holding on and joining one another, fiercely. That means supporting the organizations who provide moral leadership in this time of moral crisis. We are powerful, together.
3. **Repair.** Show Up! Be present. Stretch Spiritually. We're going to be asked to be present and it's going to be hard. It's gonna be cold. (It's Minnesota folks; weather is always gonna happen). We're gonna be tired. And still we need to show up. To rallies. To protests. To the halls of the State Capitol. To congress. To City Hall. As people of faith. Because we believe in human dignity and that our public leaders are servants of the public—not the other way around.
4. Finally, **Keep Going.** Eight years ago, then Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke about a famous New Yorker, Harriet Tubman. Tubman, as you know, guided more than 300 slaves on the Underground Railroad, from the southern slave states to the free states in the north.

“And on that path to freedom, Harriett Tubman had one piece of advice.

If you hear the dogs, **keep going**.

If you see the torches in the woods, **keep going**.

If they're shouting after you, **keep going**.

Don't ever stop. **Keep going**.

If you want a taste of freedom, **keep going**.

Even in the darkest of moments, ordinary Americans have found the faith to keep going.”

We who believe in freedom cannot rest.

We who believe in love, compassion, and human dignity cannot rest.

We who believe that ours is a nation of immigrants cannot rest.

We who believe in the equality, justice, and care for our planet cannot rest.

We who believe that Shiphrah and Puah were right and just when they defied Pharaoh's immoral decree cannot rest.

Keep going!