



Shabbat Va'era
25 Tevet 5778 / January 12, 2018

Dear Shir Tikvah,

Shabbat shalom!

This last week, I spent much time in the Jewish Quarter of Prague, where Jews lived continuously from the 10th century until the 20th century. The Jewish Quarter had been demolished at the turn of the 20th century, save for six key historical sites - synagogues and other important communal spaces. We toured those sites and learned so much about the history and practices of Czech Jews. It was surreal to walk the crowded streets of the Jewish Quarter with so many other tourists from around the world, learning about a Jewish community that no longer exists.

I walked into a room full of silver in the Spanelska synagogue and my breath got caught in my throat: among the familiar objects, the spice boxes and Torah pointers, the havdallah sets and talismans to ward off the evil eye, were crowns. Crowns, bejeweled and filligreed, one after another, sitting on a shelf. I'd seen crowns before in museums, of course. Crowns for kings and emperors, for rulers the world over. But these crowns, which looked so very similar to all those other crowns in shape and size and beauty, were made for Torah.

The Jews of Prague made crowns for Torah to wear in a time when they were confronting the full force of oppression and anti-Semitism from earthly rulers. Torah wore a crown when their world fell apart with plagues and orders of expulsion, with fires and home demolitions.

Our ancestors were many things: devoted, sometimes visionary, sometimes terrified, studious, trapped in history. But I saw in those crowns a deep and poetic undermining of the status quo, an unwillingness to go quietly along with an oppressive system.

We began the book of Shemot (Exodus) last week, when the Israelites begin their generational journey out of enslavement to an earthly oppressive ruler and into embodied relationship and service to Torah and to the Divine. This is a transformative, paradigm-shifting, deep-tissue journey. This is a commitment that continues to make claims on us today. It requires us to challenge systems of power that do not uphold the dignity of all of creation, to crown our learning, our tradition, our commitment to justice over and above any humanmade structure of power.

This weekend, we recommit to living out the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we mark eight years since the devastating earthquake in Haiti, and we shake with horror at the ways that immigrants are being spoken of, targeted and treated by the current administration. This weekend, may we remember to crown Torah, through our activism, through our poetry and song, through our loving treatment of friends and strangers, through our care for nature, through our learning. Within this act of radical reimagining of the crown lies the seed of a resistance to oppression that is ancient, embodied, and flush with possibility.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Arielle Rosenberg