

Shabbat Yitro 5777
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Shir Tikvah Congregation
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The Torah opens this week's parsha with movement: The Israelites have fled from Egypt and they "came to the Sinai desert, and pitched a tent in the wilderness; and there, Israel camped before the mountain (Exodus 19:2)." Rashi, the 12th Jewish commentator par excellence, notes that the Hebrew uses the singular form of the verb, "to camp"—vayichen sham. Why? We were told in the last chapter that 600,000 men alone left Egypt; when we add the women and children, we're looking at 2,000,000 people. How could the Torah use the singular? Because at this moment, the Mekhilta explains, the people—the newly freed slaves—were briefly of one mind and heart.

It is really almost impossible to imagine, isn't it?: a motley band of slaves—of Jewish slaves—agreeing on anything, let alone being of one heart and mind. That's why the Torah notes how extraordinary this is: At revelation, there was a brief moment of unity, but in reality, the people struggled desperately.

Why?

Slavery isn't just a system of dehumanization and oppression; slavery is a mindset. A mindset that slowly begins to normalize the idea that people aren't equal, aren't worthy of respect, of compassion, of justice. Slavery is a mindset that women are objects and immigrants are violent and people of color deserve to be shot and we aren't worthy and our voices don't matter and transpeople using public washrooms is a safety hazard. Slavery is the normalization of brutality. Slavery is the abject denial of God's presence in the universe.

The Jewish way to resist slavery—to challenge the normalization of dehumanization—is to lift Torah into our hearts and into the center of our communal life. It is to tell the story of our people's experience in Egypt, our liberation, and our covenant over and over and over again.

Why do I keep speaking out over and over and posting over and over and refusing to let up about the current state of our world, our politics, our civic and communal and spiritual lives?

Because I don't want my daughters—or any of our children—to ever believe even for a single second that this is normal—

This is not moral. And—

THIS. IS. NOT. NORMAL.

It is not normal to enslave people, to round up undocumented people, to banish Muslims, to deny African Americans the right to vote—this is not moral and this is not normal.

I want my daughters—I want each of us—to know that there is a holier way of being in the world:

A world that exalts respect and mutual care and an ethic of decency and compassion!

In a world that seeks to normalize profanity, our covenantal task as Jews is to normalize the holy. Our children—we, all of us—need a vision of moral and normal where decency and justice and love are the dominant frames of our public conversations and our private behavior!

V'shinantam l'vanecha v'dibarta bam: Our children need to remember what it was like to have a president in the White House who spoke of people he disagreed with with passionate affection and spoke with moral resolve about their right to disagree with him...

Why keep talking about the moral and spiritual crisis gripping our nation and our world? Why preach to the choir? Because when you preach to the choir, they sing louder. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us a generation ago, this is “no time for neutrality.”

The next two weeks are big weeks in the cycle of our Torah reading: This Shabbat we receive Torah at Sinai. Epic drama.

Next week, Misphatim, we go straight into rules—lots of rules.

What gives?

Can't we bask in Sinai's afterglow? Revelation was awesome! We sang, we danced, we ate, we stood in awed silence, trembling as the Divine revealed herself in an epic maelstrom of earth, wind, and fire. Even the rabbis taught that we agreed with each other at that moment—that alone was a miracle!

But no. We can't chill on the shores of the Nile. Why not?

Because slavery corrupted our sensibilities—to no fault of our own—and God set out a project of human interaction that demanded the minute we crossed the sea and embraced Torah, our covenant would build itself upon the structure, the rules, the inspiration—*mitzvot*, the commandments—to act faithfully towards one another.

Some 3,000 years later, our eyes glaze over when we read all the rules of Mishpatim. But for that first generation of freed Israelites, revelation was a revolution of how to treat one another. It includes laws regarding slavery, marriage, capital punishment, business ethics, kashrut, idol worship and more!

Misphatim is a Divine way of saying that this Freedom Project wasn't going to be easy then—or now. Slavery, you see, is seductive. We need to resist over and over, in every aspect of our daily lives, and to live into a reality that the new normal—then and now—is a moral covenant and spiritual liberation that demands we love the stranger, the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan—regardless of whether or not it is convenient—and our love flows from our respect for the Divine, from a powerful empathy because we were slaves in Egypt, and from a nascent prophetic vision that we transform the world from where it is to where it should be: flowing with justice and with love.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us to view, “any injustice or human oppression as a major tragedy and to feel divine joy at bringing happiness to a mortal. One who curses a human is insulting our Creator and one who loves others gives pleasure to God [pg 57, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity].”

Heschel posed the question, “Who is a Jew?” and he answered:

A person whose integrity decays when unmoved by the knowledge of wrong done to other people.

Who is a Jew? A person in travail with God’s dreams and designs; a person to whom God is a challenge, not an abstraction... a Jew is to cultivate passion for justice and the ability to experience the arrival of Friday evening as an event.

Who is a Jew? A person who knows how to recall and to keep alive what is holy in our people’s past and to cherish the promise and the vision of redemption in the days to come. (Ibid, pg 32).”

To be a Jew in the world today is to hold the memory of slavery and the memory of redemption and the memory of revelation simultaneously; it is to pray for the strength, the wisdom, and the spiritual courage to redeem the world—and then, when we leave the comfort of our sanctuary, to live in holy covenant, singing loudly for justice and hope.

Shabbat Shalom.