

Common Threads: *Our Stories of Resistance and Hope*

Shabbat Bo 5778

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Shir Tikvah

It was a Sunday afternoon in early October, 1991. I was a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My beloved friend, Ann Kaner-Roth (ז"ל), who had graduated the year before, worked as a social worker in the foster care system. We spent the afternoon at the Field House, where we walked among a display of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.

For those who may not know or remember, the Names Project—then often referred to as *The AIDS Quilt*:

“Was conceived in November of 1985 by long-time San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones. Since the 1978 assassinations of gay San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, Jones had helped organize the annual candlelight march honoring these men. While planning the 1985 march, he learned that over 1,000 San Franciscans had [died from] HIV/AIDS. He asked each of his fellow marchers to write on placards the names of friends and loved ones who had died of AIDS. At the end of the march, Jones and others stood on ladders taping these placards to the walls of the San Francisco Federal Building. The wall of names looked like a patchwork quilt.

“Inspired by this sight, Jones and friends made plans for a larger memorial. A little over a year later, he created the first panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt in memory of his friend Marvin Feldman [ז"ל]...

“Today the Quilt is a powerful visual reminder of the AIDS pandemic. More than 48,000 individual 3-by-6-foot memorial panels ... [have been made to honor loved one who died from HIV/AIDS].

“The Quilt was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, [a film about it called] “Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt” won the Academy Award as the best feature-length documentary film of 1989,” and it remains the largest community art project in the world.” [<http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>]

For me personally, the Quilt unlocked a flood of emotion and spurred on my own coming out process. After seeing the Quilt, Ann took me to Ella’s Deli (which, sadly, is now closing), where I sobbed and lamented over a chocolate milk shake and fries: “I’ll never find love,” I wept. “I’ll never be a rabbi. I’ll never be a dad.”

It was 1991. I knew only a couple of gay men over the age of 30 who weren’t dying of HIV/AIDS; I didn’t know any with children. And while I knew that the rabbinic seminary

had decided the year prior to admit openly gay people, I had met only one openly Lesbian rabbi—Stacy Offner. It was a moment of great personal and national despair.

Fast forward five years: October 1996. For one of the first times, the full Quilt was on display on the Ellipse of National Mall in Washington, DC. I joined Ann and her then boyfriend, Marc Roth, our friends Julie and Daniel, Hope and Melanie. I came down from New York City, where I had just began my second year of rabbinic school. I was out. I was with my beloved friends. And while it would still be another seven years until I became a dad and 11 years until I met my beloved Michael, much had changed in my life for the better in those five years. I had changed. The country had changed. We had a President who cared about people with AIDS, who appointed openly gay people to his administration, who sought to overturn the military ban on GLBT people from serving. The national conversation had changed. It was time to tell a new story.

Before a new story, an ancient one: We turn this night to the book of Exodus, to the Torah portion Bo we read this Shabbat. Here we have Moses and Pharaoh locked in an epic battle, we read of the final three plagues, God proclaims how we will remember this exodus—the Passover rituals of sacrifice, matzo, and retelling the story—and the liberation process commences.

More than 50 years ago, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of this historical moment: “At [this] first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses’ words were: “Thus says Adonai, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me.” While Pharaoh retorted: “Who is the Eternal that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know this God, and moreover I will not let Israel go.”

The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed.”

The exodus began but it is far from complete.

Perhaps the success of this epic freedom narrative lies in the fact that we ritualized the act of remembering even as we were physically moving *mignut leshevach*—from slavery to freedom. Somehow, even before it is possible, we start telling the story of our possibility so we can believe it into being...

Shabbat Bo: It is time to tell a new story, a story that both honors our past and let’s us go from worshipping it. We learn from the past, but we are not imprisoned by it. Even before the Israelites flee slavery to freedom, they are already beginning, preparing for the Pesach ritual—already they understand the need to remember their enslavement, celebrate their freedom, and commit to the project of becoming a people whose core moral values are compassion, justice, and human dignity.

Ritual and liberation are bound together.

Tonight, we mark the first anniversary of the inauguration of Trump; we celebrate the first anniversary of the Women’s March on Washington and in every state in this nation; we note our first year as a synagogue committed to Sanctuary; and this weekend, we mark the end of *Shloshim*—the first 30 days after death—for Ann (ז”ל). It is in her honor and memory that I dedicate these words.

A year ago this night, I spoke:

“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 of former slaves with no papers, and Muhammed proclaimed that our attachment to worldly possessions would destroy our ability to see God in the world.”

Torah has always been, in the words of Rabbi Sharon Brous, “willful opposition... an eternal challenge to the status quo.” [pg 63. *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*].

A religious life, Brous teaches, “Must be dedicated to awaken the Jewish heart to work toward social and political change. We [must] work to cultivate kind of holy audacity that calls us to do better, to fight harder, to manifest our core values on the street.”

In the powerful story of the Exodus:

We claimed our voices. We claimed our authority. We claimed our power. We claimed our freedom.

And that is exactly how we tell a new story in 2018.

We—you and I—we are the change we’ve been waiting for.

Folks—we’ve spent the past year doing a lot of heavy lifting, deeply engaged in the holy religious work of resisting tyranny and standing up to immoral public leaders.

When elected leaders in Washington call human beings “illegal,” we responded by living the sacred teachings of our Torah and proclaiming in the words of Isaiah that our doors be flung open wide, “Our house is open to all human beings!” “Let My People Stay!”

When the powerful leaders used their power to sexually harass and assault women—women and a few brave men—stood up and said, #MeToo and began to transform a society capitalizes violence.

When Trump challenges our decency and calls Haiti and Africa holes—or houses—of excrement, we stand up: *B'makom she-ain anashim, hishtadel l'hiyot ish*. In a place where leaders do not act humanely, WE MUST!

When the Attorney General and Republican House and Senate seek to criminalize poverty, we people of faith respond by joining Reverend Barber and The Poor People's Campaign! A campaign “committed to lifting up and deepening the leadership of those most affected by systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation. [<https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/index.php/fundamental-principles>].” And by the way, Rabbi Rosenberg is one of the Minnesota State Co-Chairs!

When narrow minded bigots in DC threaten to ban Transpeople from military service, we—the good people of Minneapolis—elected not one, but TWO Transpeople of Color to our City Council!

We have accomplished much this past year facing down foolish Pharaohs and pernicious policies. Our spiritual resistance has been potent and powerful!

And we have much work left to do.

Spiritual Progressives, Moral Activists—as we live into the story of our collective liberation and we tell a new story of the Exodus from Egypt, let us breathe new life into this moral revival with inclusiveness, creativity, and moral courage.

First, we must do a better job of expanding who sits at the table with us. As the late, great Congresswoman and presidential candidate Shirley Chilsom stated, “If they don't offer you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” 2018 must be a year of dusting off and schlepping out our folding chairs. All of us. Let the era of progressive purity tests be relinquished to the dustbin of history. We must invite more people in to the conversation about how we build a shared society, a society that addresses structural racism and the opioid epidemic; rural poverty and sexism; love for immigrants and how we transform our economy for new jobs for those left behind as we close coal mines and protect the earth; how we finally honor our Native people and lands and pay a livable and fair wage. Yes, expanding the table and bringing folding chairs is much more work than living in the echo chamber of those who agree with us. Ultimately, it much more honest, spiritually faithful, and productive.

Second, Creativity. The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was creative resistance. It was the expression of grief and rage and love. And it grew. So maybe door-knocking and phone-calling aren't your thing—but still you should try. Maybe you can organize a soup swap and invite over 10 neighbors to discuss the issues in your neighborhood. Or hit the zoo or the state fair to help register votes. There are lots of moments to invite people

together to talk about what matters most. Be creative like the stitchers of the Quilt and weave for all of us a new future.

Third, we must have the moral courage to know that no one else is going to do this work for us. No one. It is up to us. In 2012, many folks in this room made phone calls, attended rallies and marched in parades, hosted fundraisers, talked with family members, and volunteered many hours, first to defeat those evil amendments, and then to secure marriage equality. Let's not get sold some nostalgic fantasy or revise history to believe that the march towards marriage equality was inevitable. It was NEVER inevitable. It happened because good people like each of you got off the sidelines, got uncomfortable, and worked our *tuchuses* off! Democracy isn't for the faint of heart. We made marriage equality a reality because people like Ann Kaner-Roth (z"l) decided to bring a whole lotta folding chairs to the table and even when the conversation got as uncomfortable as Thanksgiving Dinner, demanded we keep talking with and listening to one another. To build the world of equity, compassion, and justice our great prophets demand means each of us doing this work, together.

Finally, a humble reminder: The Freedom Project for the Israelites took 10 plagues for Pharaoh and his hardened heart to relent and let us go—and we had God on our side!

Pharaoh was evil. Moshe and the people disrupted his immoral status quo.

Liberation is a lot of work. And it begins when we tell a new story.

It is time for us to tell our new story:

Our story sees the struggles of the miner on the Iron Range and the unemployed African American in North Minneapolis and the woman struggling to pay her bills in Eagan as a human story.

Our story is eternal and compels each of us to care for the stranger, the poor, the widow, and the orphan.

Our story is moral and theological revival that demands accountability from our leaders.

And our story centers our most vulnerable in every conversation about public policy and moral activism.

It is time for us to soak in the Torah of great storytellers, to wrap ourselves in the quilts of moral history, and to create a new and shared story of hope, liberation, and love for ourselves and our beloved community.

Shabbat Shalom.