

Weekly Teaching

January 11, 2019

It is at this time every year, as we get deeper into the winter season, that we begin Torah readings from the Book of Exodus. The dreary weather is a good reminder that God redeemed us from the “heart of darkness”.

Our story of Exodus recounts how our spiritual ancestors were liberated from their Egyptian bondage so that they could receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, and then begin their journey through the Wilderness, heading towards the “Promised Land”.

The Torah is in essence “God’s flashlight”. The Torah, with its sacred teachings, helps us pierce the darkness that surrounds us while we take our own journey through the wilderness of our lives; sometimes a journey fraught with dark times and places.

This week’s Torah reading opens with the 8th Plague, “the swarms of locusts that darkened the land.” After which, the 9th plague engulfed all of Egypt in a “thick darkness” that made the Egyptians incapable of movement for three days. Finally, this dark terror culminates with the 10th and final plague; at the stroke of midnight, all of the firstborn of every Egyptian household is tragically struck dead. This last and most grave plague results in “all of Egypt” crying out amidst the darkness.

Subsequently, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron in the night and said: “Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you!” Every family in Egypt witnessed the death of a child; the horrible consequence to Pharaoh’s evil and unwillingness.

The rabbis were quite ambivalent about our story of Exodus and especially the 10 Plagues and the drowning of the Egyptian forces in the Sea. Our Exodus narrative is a sacred proof text that sometimes the only way to confront violence is to utilize violence in response. The rabbis, however, are quite weary of this need, and mandate that all reasonable means of non-violence are explored before one must confront evil with violent acts.

The Ten Plagues are a model for the gradual increase in the intensity of the resistance to Pharaoh’s oppression. Moses confronts Pharaoh first with only his words of warning.

Then the plagues themselves grow more extreme only with each of Pharaoh’s stubborn refusals to turn away from his evil acts. The 10th plague, making death the final response, was needed to overcome the evil that had been put in place.

An ancient midrash is taught which has God commanding the Israelites to cease from their rejoicing. God says: “Are not these my children as well?”

We recall this teaching every year at our Seder table when we perform the sacred act of removing ten drops of sweet wine from our full cups as we recite each of the Ten Plagues; thus we symbolically diminish the sweetness and joy of our liberation from bondage.

When an individual and/or society pursue acts of oppression they usually become blind to their own evil acts; the result coming in place is a “thick darkness” that is very difficult to pierce. The first sign of entering in proximity to “darkness” is when individuals and/or society forget how to have empathy for others who are suffering.

Empathy is always necessary, even when confronting our enemies.

Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter from his Birmingham jail in 1963 to his fellow clergy. In this letter he wrote:

“...We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was “illegal.” It was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers...

...We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation....”

Elie Wiesel similarly pronounced that:

“The opposite of love is not hate. It is indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness. It is indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference.”

Wiesel additionally proclaimed:

“I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

Neutrality isn’t staying in neutral; it’s moving us backwards towards a darker place.

Exodus, during these dreary and dark winter months, is our liturgical reminder that we must pro-actively grab “God’s flashlight” and help pierce the darkness that surrounds us while we take our own life journey through the wilderness of our lives.

May God give us the strength and willingness to continue the legacy of our spiritual ancestors and to help effectively bring God’s light to the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

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