

Rise Up from Your Place – Rabbi Zoë Klein 1/18/2013 MLK Weekend

This week's Torah portion is *parashat Bo*, Exodus chapters 10 through 13.

It begins in the court of Pharaoh, whose heart along with the hearts of his courtiers are hardened to the plea of a people subject to abuse, humiliation, degradation.

Moses has just informed Pharaoh that should he continue to refuse to let the people go, God will send locusts to devour the land.

This will be the eighth of the plagues.

The first three came up from below – the bloodied waters of the Nile, the frogs rising out of the river, the dust of the earth swarming into lice.

The second three plagues came from our level, wild beasts, pestilence, boils.

The third set would come from above, hail, locusts, darkness. All of nature aligning itself against Egypt, against oppression, humiliation, degradation.

The final plague would come from a place higher still, the angel of death set free from his chamber just outside the border of deepest night, the slavery of a people framed by the death of children. Hebrew children drowned in the Nile. Egyptian firstborn children exhaling their last breaths all together.

In Torah we read:

Pharaoh's courtiers said to him, "How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship the Lord their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?" So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, "Go, worship the Lord your God! Who are the ones to go?" (Exodus 7 – 8)

(An interesting question, Pharaoh was not intending that all of them should go.)

Moses replied, "We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds, for we must observe the Lord's festival." But he said to them, "I mean to let your children go with you? Clearly, you are bent on

mischief. No! You menfolk go and worship the Lord, since that is what you want.”
(Exodus 9 – 11)

So came the locusts. Then came the darkness. And it was a particular darkness. Not the kind of darkness you experience at night.

This was a darkness of which Torah says: *A man saw not his fellow, neither rose any from his place for three days (Exodus 10:23)*

Midrash Rabbah said there were seven days of this darkness. During the first three days, “a man saw not his fellow”; during the last three days, he who sat could not stand up, he who stood could not sit down, and he who was lying down could not raise himself upright.

The rabbis comment, there is no greater darkness than one in which “a man sees not his fellow” - in which a person becomes oblivious to the needs of his fellow man. When that happens, a person becomes stymied in his personal development as well, which leads to him not being able to rise from his place. (Chidushei HaRim)

This was not the kind of darkness we experience at night. This darkness was physical, you could feel it. It affected you. It was the kind of darkness of which Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr spoke when he said, “Only in darkness can you see the stars.” Only in this kind of deep darkness can you identify the points of guiding hope, the starlight by which you can begin anew to see your fellow.

Torah goes on. *Pharaoh then summoned Moses and said, “Go, worship the Lord. Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind. Even your children may go with you.” (Exodus 10:24)*

Even your children, as if they are a luxury, rather than the essence of it all.

Moses argues that they need their flock to select sacrifices to the Lord, that they will leave no hoof behind. An interesting ancient slogan. No child left behind, and no hoof left behind either.

Pharaoh changed his mind and said "Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die." And Moses replied, "You have spoken rightly. I shall not see your face again." (Exodus 10:28-29)

Pharaoh was willing in the beginning to let the menfolk go as long as the children remained behind; for as long as the younger generation remained in Egypt, in bondage, in the mindset of hierarchy, there would be no future for the people of Israel. There would be no true Exodus.

The rabbis teach that the "Pharaohs" of our day have the same attitude. If the older folk wish to cling to Jewish tradition, that is perfectly acceptable; but the youth should be raised in "the spirit of the times." (Maayanah Shel Torah)

But Moses would not go without the children. When Pharaoh asked, who will go? Moses made it clear. We will take our children. Our children are our obligation. We will not leave them in Egypt. We will not worship our God without them. Our sons and our daughters, they will come with us.

This week David Wheeler, the father of Benjamin Wheeler, one of the children executed in the Newtown massacre, David Wheeler, one of the parents whose child's backpack and uneaten lunch was returned to him by a federal officer, said: "Parent is defined as a point of origin. What I have recently come to realize is that I am not done being the best parent I can be for Ben. Not by a very long measure. If there is something in our society that clearly needs to be fixed or healed or resolved, that resolution needs a point of origin. It needs parents."

"We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters."

If there is something in our society that clearly needs to be fixed or healed or resolved, that resolution needs a point of origin. It needs parents. We are those parents, one and all, and we are not done parenting our society. There are cuts and bruises, and wounds that run far deeper, and some need bandaids, and some need kisses, and some need actions far bigger.

"What I have recently come to realize is that I am not done being the best parent I can be for Ben," he said, and nor are we. Parent is a point of origin, and when something needs to be fixed or healed, that resolution to fix it, to heal it, is a point of origin as well. It needs parenting.

Grace Paley tells a story, that in 1943, when she was riding a bus from New York to Miami Beach. She writes:

I opened my eyes to the sound of new people brushing past my aisle seat. And looked up to see a colored woman holding a large sleeping baby, who, with the heaviness of sleep, his arms so tight around her neck, seemed to be pulling her head down. I looked around and noticed that I was in the last white row. The press of travelers had made it impossible for her to move farther back. She seemed so tired and I had been sitting and sitting for a day and a half at least. Not thinking, or maybe refusing to think, I offered her my seat.

She looked to the right and left as well as she could. Softly she said, Oh no. I became fully awake. A white man was standing right beside her, but on the other side of the invisible absolute racial border. Of course she couldn't accept my seat. Her sleeping child hung mercilessly from her neck. She shifted a little to balance the burden. She whispered to herself, Oh, I just don't know. So I said, Well, at least give me the baby. First, she turned, barely looked at the man beside her. He made no move. So, to my surprise, but obviously out of sheer exhaustion, she disengaged the child from her body and placed him on my lap. He was deep in child-sleep. He stirred, but not enough to bother himself or me. I liked holding him, aligning him along my twenty-year-old young woman's shape. I thought ahead to that holding, that breathing together that would happen in my life if this war would ever end.

I was so comfortable under his nice weight. I closed my eyes for a couple of minutes, but suddenly opened them to look up into the face of a white man talking. In a loud voice he addressed me: Lady, I wouldn't of touched that thing with a meat hook.

We have come a long way, from freedom to sit, to freedom to vote, to freedom to be elected. But we should not be satisfied. We should not believe that we are done parenting this baby of ours.

Martin Luther King preached:

There are those who are asking: "When will you be satisfied?" ...We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity... No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. (I Have a Dream)

We often focus on King's words, the power of his oration. However, we should focus less on what King meant by his words and more on what he meant us to do with them.

Justice will roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream only when we dig irrigation systems, engrave into the immobile rocks, use his words and our values as spades and break through the dams that prevent justice and righteousness from rolling down, chip away at that which chokes us, as the Prophet Amos promised. It will happen if we work to clear the path.

In 1962 Martin Luther King preached the following message:

I can summarize all that I have been saying by affirming that the demands of desegregation are enforceable demands while the demands of integration fall within the scope of unenforceable demands.

Some time ago Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick made an impressive distinction between enforceable and unenforceable obligations. The former are regulated by the codes of society and the vigorous implementation of law-enforcement agencies. Breaking these obligations, spelled out on thousands of pages in law books, has filled numerous prisons.

But unenforceable obligations are beyond the reach of the laws of society. They concern inner attitudes, genuine person-person relations, and expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify. Such obligations are met by one's commitment to an inner law, written on the heart.

Man-made laws assure justice, but higher law produces love. No code of conduct ever compelled a father to love his children or a husband to show affection to his wife. The law court may force him to provide bread for his family, but it cannot make him provide the bread of love. A good father is obedient to the unenforceable.

Pharaoh asked: Who will go with you?

Moses answered: We will go with our sons and daughters.

David Wheeler answered: I am not done being the best father I can be to Ben. Not by a long shot.

Grace Paley answered: I liked holding him, his deep child-sleep.

Who will go with you?

A good parent is obedient to the unenforceable.

Decency, dignity, generosity, humanity.

A vigorous enforcement of civil rights laws will bring an end to segregated public facilities which are barriers to a truly desegregated society, but it cannot

bring an end to fears, prejudice, pride, and irrationality, which are barriers to a truly integrated society. Those dark and demonic responses will be removed only as men are possessed by the invisible, inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation. True integration will be achieved by true neighbors who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations.

However Dr. King doesn't end his talk only with talking about the unenforceable. And this is sometimes the mistake we make, as modern liberal Jews, as secular Americans, as the fairly comfortable middle to upper-middle class, as people who rarely worry about whether there will be a next meal, we pride ourselves on being obedient to the unenforceable. We are so good at that, we might say to King, we do see past racial lines, we believe in equality, we don't beat our children, we love all people, we see the divine spark in every can of paint, we support integration, we have a rainbow coalition of friends and coworkers, our hands are ever extending the bread of love. We are true neighbors (except when they want to put public transportation under Beverly High School), we are true neighbors, we don't suffer from prejudice, pride, and irrationality. We are enlightened.

But King continues. He says:

Let us never succumb to the temptation of believing that legislation and judicial decrees play only minor roles in solving this problem. Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless. The law cannot make an employer love an employee, but it can prevent him from refusing to hire me because of the color of my skin. The habits, if not the hearts of people, have been and are being altered everyday by legislative acts, judicial decisions and executive orders. Let us not be misled by those who argue that segregation cannot be ended by the force of law.

Oh we do have our hands extended with the bread of love, but all around us, there are people in need of bread. Oh it is true that we may have conquered our own prejudice, pride and irrationality...but fear? We have a lot of fear. We're afraid of the society we have just as some parents are afraid of their children. We're afraid to stand up to it. We support free speech, but we're afraid to speak freely because everyone and their cat has the ability to freely

speak back, post comments, build websites, launch campaigns. We read op-eds, but rarely if ever write them. We have opinions which we are happy to share, but we don't plant them as a point of origin and out of them build a movement.

The story of the Exodus begins with the death of children and ends with the death of more children. It begins with a river turned to blood. It ends with blood in every home. How many children before we start to recognize that they are our children? That they are all our children. They children whose blood runs as a river, and the child holding the gun that blew them all apart, and the system into which they were all born, we parent it. And we are not done parenting it.

Yes, we've come a long way from "I wouldn't of touched that with a meat hook." We empathize. We empathize without realizing that empathy is a dangerous self-soothing emotion. It makes us feel connected and better, with empathy we hold out our hands and offer the bread of love. But our children need real bread, real protection, real action.

When will you be satisfied? We can never be satisfied as long as we are not being the best parent we can be for our family of families, our community. Our country. If there is something in our society that clearly needs to be fixed or healed or resolved, that resolution needs a point of origin. It needs parents.

There is a river of blood flowing through our communities.

Over 30,000 Americans die each year as a result of gun violence. The number and severity of violent shootings in recent years can only be described as an epidemic. An ongoing slaughter.

In the two years since Congresswomen Gabrielle Giffords was shot in Tucson, Arizona, we have seen more than 60 mass shootings. Every day, more than 80 fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, children, family, and friends are killed as a result of our inability to advance common-sense regulations.

We cry. We feel it. We send donations. We hold out the bread of love.

But the power of the NRA in controlling the debate on gun control by raising money and mobilizing a determined minority has yet to be met with an equal fervor on the part of those favoring effective gun control. Our empathy doesn't cut it.

Empathy is effectively not too different than standing idly by the blood of our neighbor.

Yesterday I was at an interfaith breakfast in honor of Dr. King. I was invited to give the invocation. The keynote speaker was Reverend J. Edgar Boyd, the new pastor of the First A. M. E. church. We set a date to meet next week about renewing our relationship, and he seemed eager to do so.

When he spoke, he charged the community not to get mad. He said “Don’t get mad at the NRA, don’t get mad at the makers of violent video games, don’t get mad at Walmart, when you get mad you lose your cool and you can’t rationalize. It’s not productive to get mad. Don’t get mad. Get busy.”

It is time for us to get busy.

The ninth plague was a darkness of which Torah says: *A man saw not his fellow, neither rose any from his place for three days (Exodus 10:23)*

We see our fellow. We are so good at that, we see past racial lines, believe in equality, we see the divine spark in every color, we integrate and elevate and celebrate. We have a rainbow coalition of friends and coworkers, our hands are ever extending the bread of love. We are true neighbors.

We do see our fellow. But we have too long been sitting in our place.

We do see our fellow. We have that love which is “mankind’s most potent weapon for personal and social transformation.”

But it is time to rise up from our place.

Who will go with you? Our sons and daughters, all our children. We will not stay in this place, not one of us, we will not look upon your face again, the face of greed, conspiracy, oppression, degradation, humiliation. We will not be satisfied as parents to only give the bread of love to our sons and our daughter and your sons and your daughters. This is a point of origin.

It is not so dark that we cannot see our fellow, but it is still dark enough that we are gripped in our place.

We do see our fellow. But it is time. It is time. It is time to rise up from our place.