

B'ha'alot'cha 5780
Time to Step Up
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Shabbat shalom. I am so happy to be with all of you today.

The past few weeks many of us have become more irritable. It was bound to happen that our resilience would wear off at some point. We have borne so much fear, so much isolation, and so much loss. Nearly 115,000 have died of Covid-19 . We are hurt, bereaved, and angry. I am so glad we have come together to pray and remind ourselves that we need each other, that we are lost without community, without people who lift us up, bear our grief with us, and strive with us for better days. I am so happy to feel the sense of connection that we have missed on Shabbat.

I say the “*Modah Ani*” prayer when I wake up in the morning. It says: Thank you, God, I give it all up to you and I acknowledge that You don't owe me anything, yet you gave me this day. A few days ago it struck me how difficult it is to feel gratitude when we are irritated. The murder of George Floyd was a wake-up call. It reminded me of the privilege that is both my blessing and my responsibility. Because when you admit that this world, or God, owes you absolutely nothing, and yet you can be in this world, breathing and thriving, compassion and the urge to share your blessings rise up from deep within. The *Modah Ani* prayer ends with the words, “*Rabbah emunatecha,*” great is Your faith. We are telling the Eternal One that we accept the responsibilities that come with being alive in this world. We are here to do good. We are here to give unselfishly because we are capable of understanding how blessed we are.

Our parasha shows Moses asking his Moabite brother-in-law to guide the Israelites from the Wilderness to the Promised Land. It's strange, because God seems quite clearly to be guiding them with fire and a cloud. Yet Moses thinks they need to learn the terrain from someone who knows it in

his bones. We, too, need to learn more about the experience of others. We need to learn with eyes and hearts wide open. We are making plans to learn more, as a kahal.

Our parasha also shows many people taking on mantles of leadership and service. We learn something interesting from the induction of the Levites into their sacred work. Before they can serve, others must help them to purify themselves. It is naturally assumed that they will come with sins that are visible and easy to identify, and also with spiritual imperfections that lie beneath the surface. Holy work is not for saints to do. It is for regular folks like you and me. And, like our ancestors, we can help each other to see ourselves more clearly so that we can serve more purely and effectively.

Our sages teach that it is not our duty to complete the work. We don't have to have all the answers and it's not on us to fix the world by ourselves. But we must be fixers. Our streets are clearing from the rallies, marches, and destruction rage has brought, and it is time for us to step up and meet the opportunity of this moment, to take the next step to learn, to do, and to teach the message of our Torah: that the measure of our goodness, along with our fate, are part and parcel of the justice and compassion we make manifest. Our parasha today states that there must be one law for all people. Those who live among us with different backgrounds are entitled to the same opportunities for justice as we are. We know that. So let's make it real, already!

Remember: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Pastor Theodor Parker first spoke those words in opposition to slavery here in America in 1871, and in 1958, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. repeated them to a nation still fighting for equality and an end to racial injustice. The arc of the moral universe is longer than I thought it would be, when it comes to race. I never would have imagined that in 2020 I would be speaking about systemic white superiority, yelling into a

megaphone that all of God's children are equal and deserving of dignity and security. This is where we are. It's time to move forward.

Elie Wiesel said when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

Let us now find our voice on white supremacy and what it means, not just for us as Jews, but for us as mostly white people. Coming together to pray in the holiness of Shabbat is a great first step. I look forward to learning with you and working together to do our part to make our country a place where God's presence can breathe.

In today's haftarah, the prophet Zecharia teaches that when the day comes that we notice God's spirit shining on us like spotlights, we will search our souls and take responsibility for our mission in this world. Then, just as today, "not by might, nor by power, but by God's spirit," we will redeem our world. I pray that the Divine Spirit moves us to act and bring that redemption closer. Shabbat is a perfect time to bask in our blessing, starting with the great gift of being alive.

Modim Anachnu l'adonai. How blessed we are. *Rabbah Emunatam shel Elokeinu.* How great is the faith entrusted in us. I pray that we can step into that faith with courage, hold each other close, even as we may challenge one another, and do our part. May that be God's will, and ours.