

Pesach Day One, 5784
Heart Smart
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Coming together at the Seder, asking our questions and discussing our liberation, its meanings and implications, cognitive intelligence is most on display. We speak of the Wise Son, who wants to know the laws of Pesach and all that we are commanded to do, as opposed to the wicked son, who wants to know why we should follow all of those commands. The wise son's question is cognitively smart.

But the wicked son's question is emotionally necessary. For the Jewish People, to be liberated is to be bound in covenant through Torah law. It's a lot. We should demand that it make sense to us.

In the ancient world, and in our Tanakh, the locus of cognitive intelligence was thought to be, or at least referred to, as the heart—not the head, the heart. In his book *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel*, the scholar Nahum M. Sarna writes that our thoughts, intellectual activity, all the cognitive aspects are all seen in the Bible as issuing from the heart (p. 64). Conversely, the locus of what I call heart wisdom, or emotional intelligence, was the *nefesh*—the abstract place of our animus, or life force. Or, the neck! When we are strong willed, God calls us *kishinu oref*, stiff necked. (Shemot 32:9, 33:5, 34:9) .

There is one character in the haggadah whose cognitive intelligence is noted over and over again. This character gets smarter and smarter over the course of our liberation narrative. Of him, Godself says, “I have reinforced his heart” (meaning, his brain)(Ex. 8:27, 10>1)--and this character already was quite smart.

That person, of course, is Pharaoh. The first thing we learn about him is his shrewdness:

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יוֹסֵף:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ:

הִבֵּה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פֶּן-יִרְבֶּה וְהִזָּה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֶף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ:

And a new king arose over Egypt who [deported himself as if he] did not know Joseph. And he said to his people: Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and more powerful than we.

Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they increase....”

(Ex. 1: 8-10)

Now, many of us are bothered by what appears to be God's manipulation of Pharaoh. God hardens, or strengthens, Pharaoh's heart, and the next plague ensues. On the surface, it looks like the plagues come to Pharaoh and the Egyptians because of the many times when Pharaoh refused to let us go. But is that really what is happening?

Arguably, yes. the surface it looks that way. But also, arguably, no. Is it not more reasonable to assume that the plagues come because Pharaoh and the Egyptians have enslaved us and caused us to suffer Pharaoh's genocidal plans and worker abuse?

Dena Weiss of the Hadar Institute argues convincingly that when God hardens Pharaoh's heart God is NOT effectively making Pharaoh behave badly. Pharaoh already behaves badly before the interventions begin! Let's explore this a bit.

We need to remember that in the Torah, the seat of will is NOT the heart. As Weiss explains, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart does have the effect of preventing him from sending the enslaved people (us) away. He actually relents and sends them (us) away repeatedly! What his heart does is make him *retract* his decision; he uses reason to talk himself out of the choice that he made based on his emotions. Each time a plague is lifted, Pharaoh hedges his bets and restrains us. After all, if his magicians can do similar tricks, or Moshe will take away the plague, he strengthens his sense that he does not have to let us go.

It feels to me more as if the punishments of the Plagues come to Egypt like birth pangs. We need to get out of there, and what holds us in bondage there must release us. We must be birthed into existence as a free people. Indeed some of our sources see God as birthing us through the waters of the split sea. But in Pharaoh's case, of course, this birthing comes with great resistance on his part. And God orchestrates Pharaoh's holding onto us in order to punish Pharaoh for having kept us in bondage.

Let's focus in a bit more on the smartness idea and what it means.

When God reinforces Pharaoh's heart, God is strengthening Pharaoh's ability to think, to be strategic, to act shrewdly, As Dena Weiss writes, God "doesn't make Pharaoh tough, so much as God makes him sharp. Pharaoh's cruelty and propensity to sin are not what God is manipulating; rather, God is strengthening Pharaoh's ability to rationalize his behavior. We know that he is being cruel, but Pharaoh thinks he is being smart." Over and over again, Pharaoh convinces himself that he is right, and by logic,

he should keep us enslaved. Pharaoh makes decisions based on whether they are smart, shrewd, strategic, and not based on whether they are morally just.

And we are there to witness and to learn. God wants us to see and know Who God is:

וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבֶן-בְּנֶךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלִיתִי בְּמִצְרָיִם וְאֶת-אֹתוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר-שַׁמְתִּי בָּם
וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה:

And so that you tell in the ears of your son and the son of your son, of My setting Egypt to scorn and of My signs that I placed in them, and you will know that I am the Lord.

(Ex. 10:2)

And what is that God's might, that manifests in signs and wonders? It's all heart—by which I mean emotion, and specifically love, the deepest kind of knowing. We are meant to learn who God is—and who we are called to be—by witnessing a particular kind of triumph, that of heart—the emotional kind—over shrewdness. Compassion over strategy. Love over pragmatism.

Our intelligence can blind us to what we really ought to do or ought not to do. We can think ourselves into all kinds of trouble. And what we need to do is feel how we are part of a larger story.

That is why, I think, the sages and elders who know the most are told specifically that the most important thing for us to do is sit down with our loved ones and tell our story, together and to find ourselves in it, as part of an ancient people and as people here and now. We are to tell it so that we can feel it.

May it move us, may it inspire us, and may it lead us to the fullness of our liberation.

Pesach 5784

7th Day

The first thing we learn in today's Torah reading is that we left Egypt armed—armed, and yet so vulnerable that God was afraid we could not face the enemies who would beset us. God led us on a route that could only have felt like a meandering surge to the edge of the Sea, and God caused Pharaoh to pursue us so that Pharaoh, and the Egyptians, and we, could learn once and for all what God had been knocking Godself out to demonstrate before we left.

The text reads: “Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and they said to Moses, ‘Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’”

And then, Moses tells our people to do something that must have been quite difficult in that moment:

אל-תִּירָאוּ הַתִּיצְבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת-יְשׁוּעַת יי'...

“Do not fear. Stand, and see God's delivery.”

We are to stand and see, from the epicenter of our panic, the rush of the sea before us, the hoofbeats of Pharaoh's steeds behind us, and the fear swirling in our hearts. We are to stand there and if only for a moment, just be, as God shows us what God has been trying to teach all of us—we, who will survive, and the Egyptians, who will not.

And what is it that we are to see, and learn? Is it simply that when we are weak, God will save us? Despite the miracle of our existence and the extraordinary deflection of Iran's recent attack, I think that God wants us to learn something more transformative—something we can use, not only to survive but to flourish in the fullness of our humanity. I'd like to sketch a path toward what that might be.

As we daven together here at shul, a much publicized pro-Palestinian protest is taking place on Library Mall as part of a national movement. I am sure that calls for a ceasefire in Gaza and for the UW to sever ties with organizations supporting Israel are intermingling with the cry to “free Palestine” from what many protesters believe to be an unjust occupation, based on the notion that the State of Israel came into being as the result of a brutal colonization by people—Zionists—who had no connection to that place and stole the land and its Palestinian identity from those who were displaced. Their

concern for Gaza's decimated civilian population, their call for a ceasefire, and their concern for the cause of those who live under Israeli occupation in the West Bank are understandable, but I believe the movement that brings them together for this action is terribly misguided and toxic to the cause of justice for anyone, in that it is saturated with antisemitism and increasingly violent and dangerous.

Between the last day of yom tov and this one, I sat in my office with a Jewish UW graduate student and listened as she described how nearly all of her friends have deserted her since October 7. Their liberal causes—the same ones this graduate student and I have shared—now demand that there be no dialogue, no engagement at all with Zionists. “Resistance by any means” includes closing of the ears and cutting off relationships that might lead to a peaceful resolution—or even casual friendships between UW students who believe in the right to Jewish self-determination and those who would deny us that right.

At this point in our Pesach celebration we find ourselves at the nexus of our past and our future, living into our imagined bondage and anticipating an imagined redemption from the constraints and difficulties we confront.

Then, we were armed but afraid and vulnerable.

Today, we are protected in ways generations that came before us would have envied. Now, the State of Israel boasts one of the most formidable armies in the world.

Then, we were weak. Now, we are strong.

Then, we were the obviously oppressed, standing against a clear oppressor.

And now? Not so simple.

We set places at our seder tables for some of the 130 hostages still captive in Gaza. We asked ourselves how we could celebrate when we have not yet been able to grieve the massacre of October 7. We questioned our moral right to celebrate when harrowing numbers of Palestinian civilians in Gaza have been killed, the survivors reportedly starving, and we don't see an end game. And yet, families and friends gathered for sederim here, in Israel, and all around the world this week, and we celebrated Pesach. Like so many of the generations of our people that preceded us, we sat down to tell the story of our liberation, and we sought inspiration in the telling.

It was good and healthy for us to celebrate what we could, when we could, during Pesach—to look around the table and relish the sight of one another, to savor the sound of one another’s voices, the taste of charoset and matzo ball soup, and to live into the story both backwards, in memory and forward, in hope.

Then, God led our enemy to the Sea, opened it for us and closed it upon them. Now, our enemy crouches at the door— any door—we don’t know which one, or so it feels.

But that feeling, that attitude, is not the one we need. This may be a moment to heed the words of our Torah: הִתְיַצְבוּ וּרְאוּ – stand, and see— and also hear, and speak, and learn, and find those people who will walk with us on a path to justice.

It is not wrong to say that our enemy crouches at the door. And they—at least some we might call the enemy or who see us as theirs—can justifiably say the same of us.

And that will get us nowhere. God is not going to drown them, or us, in the Sea, God forbid. The only path to peace is a shared one. We will only be safe when they are safe. We will only regain our dignity when they have theirs. Justice for us is bound up in justice for them. There is only one future and it is, of necessity, a shared one.

What does God want us to see? What are we meant to learn at this moment? Could it be time for both sides to see and understand one another’s trauma? Could it be time to learn that nothing but weed rot can take root in a killing field? Can we find a path to transformation in our own hearts, and can we talk about it with anyone who would sit down with us? Can it be that the only way we will ever flourish in the fullness of our humanity is when we practice humanity mutually, because we finally understand that we are not meant to be expendable but rather are meant to stand together and care for our world?

Just as we sat at the seder in this difficult time and felt the transcendent power of our liberation story, may the resiliency that brought us to this moment give us the strength to hope and take action for a better future. May we live in this moment with our eyes and our hearts open and may we raise our voices and demand that others do the same.

In the words of Noam Tzion, translated by Ayelet Cohen, in one of this year’s new haggadot:

“For everything there is a season...under Heaven
A time for weeping and a time for laughing,
A time for mourning and a time for dancing...

A time for war and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 4, 8)
In those days when each time collapses into the next
We have no choice but to cry and to laugh with the same eyes
To mourn and to dance at the same time
And the long arc of history is compressed into one day and one hour.
We ask for the strength to contain
The intensity of our bursting hearts,
To rejoice with those who are fortunate to embrace today,
To enfold all of those withdrawing into their longing, their souls trembling,
To hold onto hope without letting go,
And to leave some quiet space for a silent scream.
Please, grant us the room to shatter into pieces,
And the spirit to be rebuilt anew.”

...a sentiment to which I invite you to join me in saying “Ken y’hi ratzon.”