

Pesach Day 7 5784
Oppressor, Oppression: We Should Really Talk
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The first thing we learn in today's Torah reading is that we left Egypt armed—armed, and yet so vulnerable that God is afraid we cannot face the enemies who will beset us. God leads us on a route that can only have felt like a meandering surge to the edge of the Sea. God causes Pharaoh to pursue us so that Pharaoh, and the Egyptians, and we, can 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 הַתִּצְבּוּ וְרֵאוּ אֶת-יְשׁוּעַת יְיָ.

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

We are to stand there—at 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 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 over the generations and the extraordinary deflection of Iran's attack just two weeks ago, 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. There was a lesson for us then and I think there must be a lesson for us now. 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. The protesters' 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 organizations—supporting causes this graduate student and have ardently 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 sedarim 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 – to stand, and see— and also to 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 now? 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 at 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.*”