

Sh'mot 5781
It Does Not Have to Be This Way
Rabbi Betsy Forester

This week saw simmering trouble explode before our eyes. The nation's ruler, filled with mistrust over how things had turned out, gave orders leading to unprecedented, radical disruption at the foundation of society. We felt insecure as never before, our very freedom and way of life threatened by a man acting as if he believed he were a demigod without a sense of history or understanding of what truly threatens the country. Afraid of people who were different from his own, selfish and self-absorbed, he acted with ruthless disregard for decency and civility. And in the end, while it may come back to bite him, the wake of destruction will deeply scar the country he believed he alone could save.

Of course, I'm talking about Pharaoh, the one in Egypt who did not know Joseph and embarked on a path of enslavement, systematic oppression, and murder. But you knew that, right?

Okay, deep breaths, everyone.

Now I'll say up front that I'm about to talk about Batya, the Egyptian princess. She could have carried on her privileged royal life without ruffling any feathers, or inviting any trouble, but she sees a baby floating in the Nile and decides she must put herself out there and adopt him. She must assume he is an Israelite baby doomed to death by Pharaoh, for how else can she simply take home the little guy without a thought as to the whereabouts of his mother? So there's Batya, and here is Batya, not Princess Batya but Rav Batya, who also could merrily enjoy her birthday today and not bother anyone by confronting what she perceived to be despicable and dangerous this week. Our sages endorse Princess Batya's unconventional activism in the name of morality and call her Batya, meaning "daughter of God." And here I am, the other Batya, a Rav decidedly not into religious escapism, facing the faces of her beloved kahal at the end of a week that faced her with two choices: speechlessness, or speaking out.

So which will it be? Will this Batya be one who carries a torch for people who have been resisting tyrants since Pharaoh? Or will she take the happy birthday route, and we can all have a nice day?

The answer is...Yes.

Today is a day to commune spiritually and to engage in Torah and this is a great day to ground ourselves in who we are. Jewish people all over the world just began reading the Book of Exodus for about the four thousandth time, and in the spirit of our incredible tradition we are going to spend the next 7 minutes or so with Pharaoh, Moshe, and some of the rest of the gang. And then can draw your own conclusions because you are smart people.

Here we go.

The portion of Torah we started reading today reinforces a phenomenon we have come to know all too well: When a group of people is given permission to act immorally and wrongly by a person in authority, the evil of the decree will not keep them from carrying it out. It is much more difficult to incite a single individual to wrongful action than it is to incite a mob. Further, the more open-ended the license, the more difficult it will be to contain the harm. Moreover, the more authoritative the permission, the more deeply and widely the evil will spread.

This week we began reading the Book of Exodus--*Sefer Sh'mot*. The Book opens by listing the Israelite men, and one woman, who went down to Egypt. Surprisingly, the text describes them less by tribe than by name: "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Ya'acov, each coming with his household: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehudah..." and so forth" (Exodus 1:1-2). But then, a shift occurs, and suddenly, instead of people, they become a swarm multiplying menacingly, like a mass of low-life creepy crawlers to be feared. The new Pharaoh knows plenty about Yosef but rejects the narrative of his predecessors whose loyalty to Yosef, the viceroy who turned the Egyptian economy into a serfdom, allowed Yosef's descendants to flourish in their Goshen enclave. The new Pharaoh sees an alien nation capable of waging war on his people and undoing Egypt's prosperity.

Pharaoh then goes about re-ordering his society. The Egyptian people, buying into fear concocted and promulgated by their ruler, go ahead and carry out a campaign of subjugation, and oppression until they tolerate mass infanticide.

Had one Egyptian been told to throw an Israelite baby into the Nile, they might have had qualms. In fact, Pharaoh instructs two midwives--Shifra and Puah--to do exactly that, and they refuse. But not so with the populace. When large groups are given authority to act immorally, individuals feel much freer to do so. And when the permission is cloaked in fear, it tends to be more extreme. When Pharaoh charges "all his people, saying, 'Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile (Exodus 1:22)," they do. A favorite teacher of mine, Rav Avital Hochstein, wrote on this parashah several years

ago: "Evil that operates through fear is very hard to stop in part because it's hard to recognize that evil for what it is. It presents itself as justified, even when it is actually extreme and absurd."

Often, when a group is given license to do evil, it comes back to bite them and the very institutions on whose behalf they believed themselves to be acting. In a few weeks we'll be reading about that. In the Torah, of course.

But here's the thing, and this part is about us. If we do to the other side what we perceive them doing to us, not only are we no better, but more importantly, we will never heal the divisions that keep us from reaching our potential as a society, and whatever angst or anxiety we carry around will continue to plague us long after the hail and lice are cleaned up. If we call all who stormed the Capitol "thugs," we make them alien, avoiding the reality that they are our fellow Americans. If we derisively call people who are left of center "communists," we cut off dialogue. The only way we will ever come together is by finding common ground. That is our greatest challenge. Many are afraid for our democracy right now, and many feel that something precious has been stolen from them. We can continue to demonize one another to no end, or we can try something different.

There comes a time when one looks around and says, "hey, it does not have to be this way." It happens in our Torah portion when the Israelites cry out to God in agony, and God responds by planting the seeds of their liberation. I remember when, 27 years ago, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin decided to reverse policy and recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization, as a step toward peace. It was unthinkable, astounding, that he would shake the hand of PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat. yet he did it. It made a difference. We're still working on it and I doubt the conflict will be resolved in my lifetime. But a process began and the middle east has not been the same since.

Israeli political theorist Yaron Ezrahi writes of that moment, "Rabin did not want to preside over another epic chapter in Jewish history where the Jews die in the end as heroes. He opted instead for the sort of gray compromise that makes life possible." Can we enter a murky place with people with whom we cannot imagine forging an agreement, with hopes of redeeming the vision of a republic in which all who dwell can aspire to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? I hope so.

I am not touching today on the deeply disturbing racial inequities on glaring display this week, except to say that it is good to know we are beginning to do our part here to dismantle them. There is much to be seen and said. If you would like to read profound Torah on that subject, you can look up this *d'var Torah* on our website tonight. At the bottom, I have pasted in a *d'var Torah* written by my son, Benjy, the rabbinical student, who shared some of his thoughts with us when we gathered online to process Wednesday's insurrection together.

We come together to remind ourselves of who we are. Let us remember that we are required to act justly, love kindness, and walk with our God. Shabbat is our day of peace and rest, and God knows we need it. Seriously--God knows. But let us also remember that peacemaking is not a passive act. There can be no peace without justice, accountability and love. There can be no peace without facing the one who is not your friend, seeking common cause, and extending a hand.

The great sage Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel taught:

על שלושה דברים העולם עומד: על האמת ועל הדין ועל השלום.
ושלושתם דבר אחד הם. נעשה הדין, נעשה אמת, נעשה שלום.

The world rests on three principles: on truth, on justice, and on peace.

And the three are intertwined. When justice is done, truth is served, and peace ensues.

(Talmud Yerushalmi Taanit 4.2).

May this Shabbat move us and our country toward that moment.

Amen.

D'var Torah by Benjy Forester
Wednesday, January 6, 2021

In a strange moment in last week's parasha, right before endowing his grandsons Ephraim and Menashe with their blessings, Jacob fails to recognize who they are. He asks Joseph "מי אלה? - Who are they?" Malbim (19th C, Ukraine) suggest that having grown up Egypt, they looked like all the other aristocratic Egyptian children, so Jacob failed to recognize them. This week, we learn of the childhood of our great leader

Moses spent in Egyptian royalty. We can only imagine the extent to which his full presentation passed as royal Egyptian.

As a young man, Moses discovers two Egypts. The powerful and protected Egypt of his upbringing, and the oppressed Egypt of his actual people. Unable to reconcile the gap between these two Egypts, Moses strikes an Egyptian abuser, who himself was beating an Israelite, one of Moses' own kinsmen (אחי). Moses flees to Midian, casting away his royal robes, and ultimately assuming the charge of returning to lead this people to freedom.

A Midrash has God say to Moses, "You left your own concerns and went to look with compassion of Israel, behaving like a brother toward them." Moses' greatness comes, in this account, not from his exceptionalism, but from his ability to cast aside his privilege and align with the plight of the oppressed. Such becomes the central ethic of the Ancient Israelites and the Jewish People.

Yesterday we once again saw on national tv what has been plainly obvious for 400 years - white bodies code as "right", and black as "wrong." The Black body is perceived as menacing and less-than, the white body as worthy, entitled. There are two Americas, one of privilege, the other oppression. This is nothing new.

White Jews (and white people), we are Moses, caught between two Egypts/Americas. if we are unable or unwilling to cast away the robes of white supremacy that we all wear, in order to fully align with the plight of the oppressed, we are not worthy of calling ourselves the descendants of Moses and the Children of Israel. Even worse than still being stuck as slaves is Egypt, we are forced to accept the identity as the Egyptian taskmasters themselves. This is our faith's worst nightmare.

After what we witnessed yesterday, and each day that white supremacy (in which we, white people, are all complicit) continues to perpetuate two Americas, we need to take a long look in the mirror and ask ourselves "מי אלה? - Who are they/WE?!"

