Sh'mot 5783
Living the Dream
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Liberation is fundamental to Jewish consciousness. How fitting it is to have begun reading our foundational liberation narrative this week, as our nation prepares to celebrate the life and work of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And how necessary it is for us to encounter this narrative year after year, to learn from it and measure ourselves in relation to the dream of liberation it holds.

God does not lead to an all-inclusive resort when God takes us out of Egypt. No, God leads us to Mt. Horeb, a.k.a. Sinai, to give us the Law. We learn fast that the walk of freedom is tantamount to living with purpose through conscientious spiritual and behavioral choices. Today, we will examine what God's redemption promises meant to our ancestors and the potential they hold for us today.

God makes four promises of redemption.

The first is והוצאת: I will free you. This means no more forced labor and commences with the first Plague, blood.

Next comes והצלתי: I will deliver you. This means that we stand in our own integrity and dignity as a people among the nations. But it does not mean we do not fear for our security. In the Exodus story this promise is realized six months after forced labor ceases (based on midrashic calendar work). It happens after the Tenth Plague. At that point, we are free to leave Egypt, a people in our own right, no longer bound to a foreign ruler, but very much looking over our shoulders as we head off into the wilderness.

The third promise is וגאלתי: I will redeem you. It means that irrevocable delivery from danger replaces fear, allowing us to feel that we are really free. It is the radical change in the order of things when we cross the Sea of Reeds, it closes over the Egyptian army, and we taste the joy of liberation.

So far so good! We celebrate the fruition of these promises at Pesach and recall them throughout our liturgy and every time we recite Kiddush, together with the fourth promise,ולקחתי: I will take you to be my people. This is Revelation, when we experience God fully. We give over our egos and are completely subsumed by God's power and glory. We attune ourselves fully to the Divine impulse and attach ourselves to it in adoration, humility and commitment to live out God's dream for us on earth. At that moment we fully grasp that liberty is meant to empower us to make conscious,

intentional choices about our lives and how we want to affect our world. We say "נעשה ונשמע," we will do and we will hear, allowing God to take us into the Divine consciousness. God has prepared in advance for this event and imposes 613 mitzvot upon us.

Now, that is frightening. We were "down" for no more oppression–but radical transcendence and the call to a way of life the world had never seen is something else, and downright intimidating to say the least. At Sinai, our ancestors shrink back from the mountain in fear, unwilling and unable to hear nearly all of God's Law, and ever since, we have been learning Torah secondhand–from words transmitted to us, not heard directly.

Most of us yearn for moments of closeness with the Divine: flashes of attunement, inspiration, and connection to the essential truth of our lives. Yet it is incredibly hard to let go of our sense of how things are, what we know and what we have and trust that we'll be okay. Our ancestors missed familiarity so much they believed they would die and demanded to go back to Egypt! They never fully let themselves be taken into a transcendent way of being in the world, although at various times they tried to come close, as people sometimes do.

We must ask what it means to be charged with carrying out God's dream for us. The Torah is adamant about many things but it is persistently insistent about few. The commandment to care for strangers, to love them and not oppress or wrong those who are vulnerable repeats over and over, 36 times in the Torah–double חי (Babylonian Talmud, Bava M'tzia 59b)-- way more than any other command–more than the command to love God, or to pray, or not to eat pork.

And we are told exactly what should motivate us: We were strangers in the land of Egypt. God is calling us to radical empathy and demanding that we manifest it in our actions. Or, to put it differently, our collective memory is supposed to sensitize us to the plight of others in our midst.

We encounter God's will in this emphatic command as a text. That makes it hard to metabolize, to be taken by it, even as it repeats itself 36–and some say 46–times in the Torah. To inhabit that core *mitzvah* requires radical letting go and faith that we can do it, and survive it. Until now we have eluded the charge. We may love the idea of radical compassion and justice, but we need to work at internalizing it in our beings.

Well, what else stands out in the Torah? Next in line for most-repeated commandments is the commandment not to be afraid, which appears 20 times in the Torah, plus over 70

other times in our Tanakh (13 from Psalms; 26 from Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah; and the rest (30+) spread out in other books of the Hebrew Bible).

I don't think it's a coincidence that we are enjoined most persistently about these two things: to care for vulnerable people and not to be afraid. What do we fear? We fear what we do not know or comprehend. We fear what we don't know how to do, changing the way things are, and we fear giving up stuff. We tend to feel more comfortable in a transactional, material world. This is how we are built. We want to feel that we are part of something larger than ourselves, yet we keep ourselves from transcendence, meaning attunement to the Divine, which brings with it radical love and concern for all of God's creations. We struggle to trust in the idea that boundless compassion can possibly be more valuable than production and material stability, or that justice can be more life-giving than the security we feel the status quo provides. Living God's dream requires a challenging mix of moral courage, prioritization of resources, and fortitude.

Recently I listened to a podcast in which a pulpit rabbi talked about his career. He related that people assume that he spends much of his time teaching people about Moses and inspiring them to be like Moses, he related. I had to laugh because sometimes people ask me if that's what I spend most of my time doing as a rabbi, too.

Christians preach through stories of Jesus. Rabbis teach about Moses, but rarely do we preach *through* Moses. He remains a character in the Torah, not an eternal presence in our lives. Show me a Jew who walks around asking themself "What would Moses do?" and I'll show you a purple goose.

But when it comes to talking about combating racism and discrimination against People of Color and Black people especially, we often invoke a prophetic teacher of Torah–not Moses, but Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who taught us that as Jews, we cannot rest until all people are free. We speak proudly of Heschel, whose 50th yahrzeit was this past week, as if we have absorbed his truths and made his path our path.

Heschel shifted many American Jews' guiding ideals. And we need to know that most Jews and most Jewish organizations, nonetheless, did not take action, despite his inspiring example. I hope that the day is dawning for us to learn and be transformed by what Heschel preached, to allow ourselves to be taken by his Torah and make it part of how we act in the world. Let's explore that a bit.

Heschel saw the battle between Moshe and Pharaoh which we read this morning as a paradigmatic conflict, not limited to the Jewish People. The fight for freedom is universal and ongoing, he taught. In "Religion and Race," he wrote, "The outcome of that summit

meeting [between Moses and Pharaoh] has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses…" (*Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 85-86).

Heschel is saying here that our liberation from bondage was a beginning, a model for all of humanity to enact. He writes: "God is One, and humanity is one…God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or of no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man." Any god concerned with me but not with you is an idol. To follow God is to identify with God's concern for all people equally." We make a mistake by centering our own freedom in this story. In the Torah, God chooses us because the Torah is about our covenant with God, but that does not imply that God chooses us *over* others.

Heschel was deeply troubled by humanity's "denial of transcendence" and "decreased sensitivity to the imponderable quality of the spirit. He observed, and we know, that we follow traditions without doing the inner work that transforms us into better people who make living with compassion and pursuing justice our priorities, not just in thought and prayer, but in *deed* outside of sanctuaries of worship.

We have become so masterful at subduing the earth and producing goods, and it seems that our material security matters more to us than our moral aspirations. We need to rediscover radical amazement in being alive and regain the ability to "stand in awe before the mystery of the world" (*Who is Man*, Ch. 5). In other words, our pragmatism has diminished our capacity for genuine encounter. We can do better. We know that we can make ourselves sources of meaning and value because there are times when we do. When we allow ourselves to be open to those as-yet unscientific dimensions of consciousness and morality, our concerns align with the Divine impulse, the dream of God, Who is concerned with those who need our help.

This dream is the one our hearts know is possible, the same dream of which King said, "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together" and "when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: *My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty…from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"* It is the same dream of which King said, "when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: [–which is based on the dream that begins in our Torah, in today's parasha:] "*Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*"

Ultimately, each of us must learn for ourselves how to trust in that dream, to allow for the possibility of transcendence, to feel awe and wonder, to give ourselves over to God's dream for us, to be taken into it. But I do have some suggestions.

I'll start where we often do: We can learn more information.
If you have not taken the Black History for a New Day course, take it. Also read books and articles and listen to podcasts.
Join our Adult Education mini-series, "Racism in the American Jewish Story" this February. Join us on Zoom to hear Jerome Dillard of the local organization EXPO talk about the work of his organization, with whom our own Confronting Racism group has connected and begun to build a relationship.

And after we have learned a whole lot more, maybe we will finally understand that filling our heads with information, while an important step, has never and will never change the way things are. Our sages ask which is greater, learning or action and reach the conclusion that study is greater, for it leads to action. We are meant to learn so that we will be transformed by our learning and act differently based on it (BT Kiddushin 40b).

We internalize the dream by living it, however impossible it may seem. I recently learned the following Hasidic principle which I find beautiful: When we are aware of our own limitations, that is the moment we are being called to act. And guess what: the source for that is today's parashah, when Moshe tells God at the Burning Bush that Moshe cannot possibly speak to Pharaoh–when in fact he can and does. The hasidic masters teach that we are being called to action precisely when we doubt that our actions can make a difference. When we despair of transcendence, that is precisely the moment when we are being called closer to the impenetrable reality of our lives. Something about being a human being drives us to yearn to be larger than ourselves–because just maybe, we are–and that is why we are tempted to dream the Divine dream and commit our hands, our voices, and our faces to making it real on earth.

To be human is to be limited. Our task is to not let that stop us from the Divine command. Moshe found his voice. Many of us are finding our voices, too, with regard to combating racism.

Only once we have allowed ourselves to be taken into the dream can we hope for God's final promise. There is a fifth one: *V'heiveiti*– I will bring you into the Land. When we create a world we can all inhabit, we will be home. This is our challenge: to put trust above fear, the dream above the obstacles before us, to strive wholeheartedly to live in God's dream for us.

This is not an outlandish idea. We live in dreams all the time. This moment calls us to shake ourselves and ask what dream we are living and if it will be the one that saves us all.

To be truly at home in a world we share with our siblings of every race and creed: that is what it means to “walk down to Freedom Land,” to live as people who have been redeemed. That is my dream, and my most earnest prayer for us is that we can walk that path together.

We know it is God’s will. So may it be ours.

Amen.