

Vayeishev 5780  
"I Wanna Hear a Heartbeat"  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

(Call and response song, "*Heartbeat*," by Alan Goodis):

*Is anybody out there?*

*I don't hear a heartbeat*

*I wanna hear a heartbeat*

*If anybody's out there*

*I wanna hear a heartbeat*

*So I can know I'm breathing*

*I wanna hear a heartbeat*

*If anybody's out there.*

What a sad week of reckoning this was for the United States of America. It came in as we were still pondering our status here, as Jews, following our President's executive order about how Jews should be classified in this country. With the Impeachment looming, Jews were contemplating what it means for us to be called a nation, whether we have been race-ified, and what it means for us to be considered not only, or primarily, a religious group in this country.

The week limped out darker and colder outside *and* inside. I don't know about you, but I can tell you that despite many happy moments this week, at times I felt like crawling into a cave. I work hard to build the sort of world my heart knows is possible, and it can be difficult to sustain my morale when that vision seems to be spiraling further and further out of reach.

On this Shabbat, I'd like to think with you about how we might respond to the events of the past couple of weeks, drawing on our *parashah* and the advent of Hanukkah.

What's the deal with the President's Executive Order about us? Here is my take, with help from David Schraub, a scholar at Berkeley Law School: It seems that for a moment at least, the President wanted to do something helpful about anti-semitism. It turns out that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in programs receiving federal support on the bases of "race, color, or national origin" but not on the basis of religion, and he wanted to address that gap. Now, for many years we have gotten around that distinction, being covered under legal categories of "perceived ancestry or ethnic characteristics" and "actual or perceived residency in a country--in our case, Israel--whose residents share a dominant religion or a distinct religious identity." So it's

not abundantly clear why this move is necessary, but the President's new, executive order more or less formalizes those protections. I would add that It also feels consistent with *our* self-perception that we are more than simply a faith, that Jewish Peoplehood and its cultural and ethnic identifiers matter at least as much, if not more than, our faith practices--which we know are quite diverse.

So why the uproar among Jews? Well, we want to be seen as Americans. *We are* Americans, and we fear what it could mean for our government to relegate us to our own nation, to "other" us from whatever mainstream American society imagines itself to be. We have experienced rejection, scapegoating, and expulsion in our history and we have watched others suffer in like ways. We want to believe we are safe here, and questioning that terrifies us.

Here is the rub: The very concept of nationhood that protects us also alienates us from being seen as full Americans. The entire basis for our Title VI protection falls apart if we are not seen, in some way, as a distinct People. And the same is true for all ethnic groups in this country. The President did not create this problem but his action highlights it and should give us pause. When our President tells us that Israel is our country, Bibi is our Prime Minister, and that disapproval of our President makes us disloyal to our "own" country--Israel--we are wise to wonder about the dark side of our protected status.

The matter gets even more complicated, because the Executive Order also instructs all government agencies tasked with enforcing antidiscrimination law to use the lens of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of anti-Semitism, which seems to be a misappropriation of a definition which was never designed to be used in the realm of civil liability, and is itself both too vague and too problematic, even on its own terms, to be useful in litigating abuses of our civil rights and protections.

*We are* a People, and it is not, in fact, a stretch for us to think of ourselves as a *nation*. In Hebrew, being a People and a Nation are expressed as one and the same: *Am Yisrael*. We began as a family that became a nation with certain cultic practices and a unique set of laws. After the Second Temple was destroyed, and Jews were dispersed, we became a People with a religion AND a culture--a nation without a sovereign state. Now that we have the sovereign State of Israel, something else has changed: Our sense of identity has expanded to include multiple identities within one autonomous self, and diaspora Jews' sense of national connection to the State of Israel is more fraught than it has been at any other time in Jewish history.

Being defined in this country as part of a separate nation makes me nervous and seems out of synch with how I view myself as an American, yet I think it's worth remembering that the being Jewish is a way of being in the world and that involves far more than religious ritual and practice.

The question of what it means to be part of our particular, ancestral family lies at the heart of today's Torah reading. Jacob's sons' don't exactly make us proud to be called "Children of Israel." Jacob brings his family home to Canaan, but the Land will once again cast them out, and he and his children will settle and flourish in Egypt. Joseph, the hero of our narrative, lives much more like an Egyptian than an Israelite by the end of today's reading. Up to this day, we bless our children in the name of Joseph's children--hoping that our children should be like Ephraim and Menashe, Israelite kids about whom we know virtually nothing, other than their having spent their entire lives as Egyptian royalty.

Who, or what *is* the Family of Israel? I think the most we can say--and it's a lot--is that they we are a family, chosen by God for a unique destiny that inspires us and brings light to the world, and yet remains far from its full realization. We have a culture and a way of life. And a country. And, we continue to live in the Peoplehood question, one that is particularly poignant for Jewish people around the globe at this time.

Also at the heart of today's Torah reading is the human yearning for love and connection. The simple, human desire to be loved gets exposed like a raw and wounded nerve in our biblical ancestors' fraught father-son relationships, favoritism, bitterness and rivalry between siblings, violence, and regret. Joseph in the pit symbolizes the depth of alienation and dislocation we experience when we feel cut off and like we are suffering in the dark.

Trust in our relationships and the structures we build to organize our relationships lies at the core of the impeachment of our President this week. I agree with In the Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi when she calls this moment "tragic." Yet as serious as the charges are, the hearings over his abuse of power and obstruction of Congress speak to a broader and more corrosive problem far more tragic: the erosion of a noble vision of what it means to be a decent human being, acting out of respect for human dignity, truth, and civility, especially in the face of human suffering. Our President may feed on that malaise, and some would say he fosters it--but he did not create it. It is a problem of humanity about which the Jewish People, however defined, has much to say which calls for our response.

After Joseph angers his brothers with reports of his dreams of grandeur, Jacob reacts interestingly: *V'aviv Shamar et hadavar*--Jacob kept the matter in mind, or protected it. Some interpret that to mean that Jacob sees Joseph's potential and keeps in his mind a vision, not quite formed, but percolating, of a better reality for all of them.

We learn from Joseph that greatness can emerge from suffering. Coming out of the pit into which his brothers cast him heralds the beginning of Joseph's flourishing into a world-class leader. As Nietzsche writes, "Every major growth is accompanied by a tremendous crumbling and passing away: suffering, the symptoms of decline, belong to the times of tremendous advance." I believe that today may be such a moment, if we take hold of it.

There is so much anger and so much fear in our country today. But there are also deep pockets of love. It is not naïve to believe that goodness and light lie beneath the surface. It is a profoundly Jewish exercise to seek out and share that goodness. That is our sacred task. We must not hide from the challenges of living in dangerous and uncertain times. As much as it might be tempting to crawl into a cave, Torah demands better, God demands better, our People demand better of us.

If there is one enduring message from the juxtaposition of the Joseph story with Hanukkah, it is the miracle that we are still here, and radically present in this world--a blast from the past, a reminder that words matter and shape culture, that our choices make a difference, not only for ourselves but for generations to come. We are noticed, watched, feared, admired, consulted, glorified, privileged, and under attack.

This week, opinion columnist for the NY Times Brett Stephens wrote: "There are people who believe that law, morality, traditions and institutions are at least as important to the preservation of freedom as the will of the people. Such people are called conservative. Now, he is talking about *political* conservatives, but Conservative Judaism (with a Capitol C) was founded on that very principle: Our laws and traditions are part and parcel of our Jewish striving for the dignity of all people in a world built on justice, compassion, and love. All of our rituals, prayers, and practices are designed to cultivate in us a way of being in the world that embodies those values.

On this Shabbat, we are here, in our beautiful spiritual home, *davenning* and *shmoozing* with people we care about and trust, and reminding ourselves who we are.

We must seize this moment for good. So let us catch our breath and then breathe out words and actions that show who we are and why we are here. However you choose to do that is up to you.

And, we can help each other do this work. Can we say “yes” to serving Christmas dinner to our hungry neighbors, and can we put warm socks on homeless people who spend all day outdoors here in Madison? Can we say “yes” to making a minyan so people can remember their loved ones through saying Kaddish?

Can we say “yes” to holding each other up? There is a delightful and wise elf who lives in my building. Her name is Trudy Barash. It seems that just when I am not sure my work is really making a difference, I find a note or trinket from her on my doorstep, letting me know that the sparks of Torah I am putting out there are landing somewhere and kindling other flames. Can we do that for each other--acknowledge and celebrate the good we are trying to do--not because self-congratulation will solve our problems--of course it won't--, but because acknowledging our efforts lifts our spirits, boosts our morale, and because we can learn from each other about how to help? **Can we breathe out blessing in a rousing chorus of YES?**

Starting tomorrow evening, we will publicize the miracle of Hanukkah, declaring to the world each night: There is light even in the darkest of times, a deep and abiding flame that has kept us alive so that we could reach this day. We are a People with the courage to light a flame in the darkness and the tenacity (and sometimes audacity) to keep it burning. Let us trust that sacred fire, even when it feels like we only have enough oil to keep it burning for one day. Let us proclaim the miracle of our existence and make ourselves worthy of our blessings through the love we make, the actions we take, the light we seek, and the light we give.

(Call and response song, “Heartbeat,” by Alan Goodis):

*I taste it in the ocean  
I feel it in the breeze  
I smell it in the fire  
I see it in the trees  
I hear it in your voices  
It lives inside your soul  
I hear it in our voices*

*It lives inside our souls  
And now I hear a heartbeat  
And now I hear your heartbeat  
And now I hear our hearts beat.*

I'll say Amen to that.