



Torah for Turbulent Times

"Freedom & Service"

The weight of the past week's violent turmoil in our nation's Capital sits heavily on our shoulders. I listened to the House debate while making dinner last night, and as I write, we're awaiting the results of another upcoming vote on impeachment. What a start to 2021! Taking a much needed break this morning from the news cycle (take a deep breath with me), I pause to put down my thoughts for today's article. With a few moments of reflection, I find meaning in anticipating the upcoming holiday of MLK Day and its correspondence with beginning anew in our Shabbat reading from the book of Exodus.

The contemporary flames of violence burned amidst the fire of the Capitol last week. In the ancient origin story of our people we learn about a different fire. In this fire G-d appeared to Moses from the flames of revelation that burned amidst the fire of a bush. In one of my favorite scenes from the Torah, G-d's dramatic introduction from a bush that burns but isn't consumed catches Moses' attention. From here we learn of one of G-d's most unique names, "*eheyeh asher eheyeh*/I will be who I will be." We also witness G-d's empathy and the promotion of Moses from shepherd to liberator of his people. The Torah relays that G-d has heard the cries of oppression from the Israelites, as they suffer at the hands of their oppressor. Moses gets his marching orders to confront Pharaoh and to say boldly, "Let my people go!" (3:7-14, 5:1) From amidst the biblical burning bush we understand that the flames of freedom are to be fanned, forever, and for everyone.

The narrative of the Exodus was a theme in Martin Luther King's speeches. He saw himself following in Moses' shadow and fought for freedom against the Pharaoh of his

day. In this quote from Dr. King's speech, he advocated for the power of unity to outsmart Pharaoh. "We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity." ("[I've Been to the Mountaintop](#)" April 3, 1968, Memphis, Tennessee)

Upon hearing his task from G-d, Moses was hesitant and humble. "*Mi anochi* Who am I," to be the one to approach Pharaoh. "What if the Israelites don't believe me," he continues. Self-described as slow of speech and never a man of words, Moses suggests that G-d please appoint someone else. As I read it, he's not avoiding the task. Rather, he's saying that he needs help and support in order to make such a monumental move. He can't do it alone. Thus, he and his brother Aaron stood together in unity against Pharaoh. Taking a lesson from here, we too can't do it alone. We can only defeat the Pharaohs of our own time by standing together in unity as a community and with others.

With this in mind we turn our focus to the upcoming day's themes of freedom and service. Our people's central trajectory towards liberation requires us to stand up for what we believe in and to struggle against oppression. As the saying goes, none of us is free until we are all free. From tradition we also learn the Jewish idea that the world is sustained by three pillars: *Torah, avodah and gemilut hasadim*/learning, dedicated service and acts of kindness. Let's commit to working with intention to practice "dedicated service." For Monday January 18th, let's be unified in mobilizing and committing to individual actions on behalf of our entire community.

We can do this in so many different ways. Reach out to a neighbor, do an extra good deed, make a Tzedakah donation to a cause, offer to help with groceries or around the house. Please share with me your ideas and successes in following through with this commitment (rabbi@uvjc.org). "Let my people go," Moses argued, not just to be free, but to be free to celebrate, to worship, to sacrifice and to serve. From every mountain top of our country and from every household of our community, let's appreciate the gift of our freedom by using it to serve and to work for the freedom of all.

-Rabbi Mark