

Shabbat shalom!

This week we read from Parashat Bo, the third Torah Portion in the Book of Exodus. This book contains the last and most severe of plagues that strike Egypt, including a particularly difficult theological question that Noah Lieberman will be tackling in his dvar Torah tomorrow. It also contains the moment when Pharaoh relents and the Israelites finally do leave.

Before that, however, at the beginning of Chapter 12 in Exodus, the narrative deviates from plagues and arguments with Pharaoh for some instructions from God to the Jewish people. God first tells Moses, ‘Hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chodashim’ - this month for you shall be the first of months.” This statement, given in the 12th chapter of the second book of Torah, is the first mitzvah, the first commandment, given to the Jewish people as a people. God is telling the people through Moses that as of this point, they are to mark their calendar according to God’s time, not by Pharaoh’s time. This month of Nissan, the month in which they will be liberated, is to be the first month.

What particularly fascinates me is that God doesn’t give this commandment as the Israelites are leaving Egypt, or after they cross the Red Sea. In fact, these instructions come *before* the final plague occurs in Egypt. At this point, in the eyes of the average Israelite, it doesn’t necessarily feel like they are on the verge of liberation. It probably feels more that Pharaoh has proved himself through nine plagues to be so very intransigent that liberation is nothing more than a distant, inconceivable dream.

But this is the moment when God says, “Stop living on slave time. Get ready to set your clocks to liberation time.” It’s as if God requires some sort of mental transformation as a prerequisite for freedom.

This point is underscored by the next set of instructions. God commands the Israelites, each household, to slaughter a lamb on the 14th day of the month, in front of their homes. They are to put the blood on their doorposts, and then to roast the lamb at twilight, eating it all. Any family too poor or too small to do this as a family unit should join with another family, so that every Israelite household takes part in the feast.

Of course, many of us recognize this as the original seder, the reason that we put a shankbone on the seder plate - or in my case, growing up in a vegetarian household, we used a beet, the only vegetable that bleeds. This is also the reason that the English name of the holiday commemorating these events is "Passover," because, I was taught as a child, the angel of death "passed over" but did not enter the homes that had blood on their doorposts.

But in the context of ancient Egypt, there is something else going on. The Egyptians worshipped sheep and cattle, and despised shepherds. This is mentioned back in Genesis, and it is mentioned again in Chapter 8 of Exodus, when Pharaoh attempts to negotiate and tells Moses that the Israelites can have a festival and sacrifice to their God as long as they do it in Egypt. Moses responds that they have to leave, saying, in Chapter 8, verse 26, "If we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their very eyes, will they not stone us?" Back in Chapter 8, the Israelites wouldn't dream of sacrificing what the Egyptians held sacred, on Egyptian ground.

And yet, now in Chapter 12, we see God commanding that every household do just that. As Maimonides, the great medieval Spanish sage comments, "The Egyptians were accustomed to worshipping the Zodiacal sign of the lamb. That was why they forbade the slaughter of cattle and despised shepherds..."

For this reason we were commanded to slaughter a lamb on Pesach and sprinkle its blood in Egypt on the doors outside - to cleanse ourselves of these ideas and demonstrate publicly our rejection of them. . .”

So not only are the Israelites supposed to start living on God’s time, but we are supposed to publicly and visibly repudiate the values of the culture that has enslaved us, says God, even though this is something the Israelites have not dared to do in 400 years of living in Egypt. On top of all of that, despite facing plagues, uncertainty, and the threat of reprisal for public desecration of the Egyptian taboo, we are supposed to have a *banquet!*

On one hand, how on earth could the Israelites have had the courage to do this?

On the other hand, perhaps it was finding the courage to do this that made liberation a fact.

Because our history has taught that there are many kinds of liberation. While the memory of our people’s divine escape from Egypt has defined our rituals and holidays for thousands of years, we have spent most of our history as minorities dominated under other cultures. It has not been the ability to flee that has sustained us - though that has certainly been important to our survival at various points. It has rather been our ability to live our culture and our values even when the dominant culture is sending quite different messages - and our ability to celebrate: finding joy, relaxation, and community, with Shabbat, holidays and life-cycles - even in the absence of larger good news or hope. It is in short, the ability to live according to God’s time, and the courage to break the taboos of the oppressive majority, that have kept the legacy and therefore the fact of our liberation alive.

As a great contemporary prophet, Ta Nehisi Coates, who is speaking in Eugene this evening, wrote to his son in *Between the World and Me*, “You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact. . . You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable.” Of course, Coates was not writing about Judaism, but his words about the importance of embracing one’s identity are ones we all need to hear.

Coates also wrote: “History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle: not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.”

And we are called to struggle now. The work of liberation today is twofold, just as it has always been. We must now struggle against unjust executive orders and legislated policies that would deny the humanity of people in our community, and that would sell off the commons built by many hands for private profit. But we must also struggle, as we are taught in this parasha, to live on God’s time, to live in our bodies as if liberation were already an established fact. To make time for banquets, and celebration, and living into the world as it should be. To be faithful, not despairing, to be inspired rather than exhausted. May we all have the vision to live on God’s time.