

Given January 15, 2021(Va'era)

Dvar by Nona Solomon-Burt

Shabbat Shalom,

This week Parsha is Va'era, which is from Exodus chapter 6 through Chapter 9. It is also Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday shabbat.

We are in the beginning of Exodus - the Israelites are still slaves in Egypt. God commands Moses to confront Pharaoh and start bringing the plagues if he will not let them go. There are many references to Moses' speech impediment and how he believed it to be the reason he was not right for the job God was trying to give him.

When do any of us think we are the right person for big and hard tasks? If we believed change and things were easy, we could do them without thinking. We forget we are not alone in those struggles. It is so helpful to remember Moses, his struggles and his doubts as we as a group, a society, a country, take on really big tasks.

For decades, the civil rights movement has invoked the Exodus story. We tend to think of liberation as for Bipoc, but white people can also be free from white supremacy and racist ideologies. White people in power chose to ignore the demands of bipoc people such as stopping police brutality, giving more mental health and health care services.

Breaking down the walls of white supremacy is so much harder than it sounds but it is possible if white allies really take the time to listen to the demands of black people. When the walls of white supremacy are so big, listening and taking action are the most important things to be focusing on. It is a wall of ignorance, a wall of assumed reality that is missing the reality of Black people's experience.

Jews and black people have one thing in common, years and years of oppression and feeling like they are less than. Jewish and Black people have been living in fear for over 400 years. Hate crimes, defacing historical figures, name calling, weird looks. For Jews it was hard before the Holocaust, after the Holocaust most people realized that Jews deserve the same respect and treatment as everyone else.

One big difference is at the end of the day most Jews still get to have their white skin which means they still have so much privilege that they can use to help the group that still is oppressed. They are still white, with privilege, the ability to walk away from the police alive, not being followed in a store. Black Jews still don't have the privilege of feeling free because they are still oppressed in one part of their identity. For me personally I can put the Jewish part of me aside but the black person is still there and will be there for the rest of my life.

I am calling on this community to step up and be allies for the black lives matter movement in Eugene and Portland. People often think that being an ally means just going to protests and putting yourself in front of danger but there are so many other ways to help bipoc people. Feeding a bipoc family that needs help,

donating money, helping out at events, educating your friends who might not know what to do.

Black Unity is a great group to be involved in. Black unity does protesting, community outreach, feeds the homeless and tries to stop the sweeps, working with other groups to put on events, kids events and all sorts of other groups. Follow us on any social media to get involved. The Jewish community is good at talking about *tikkun olam* and repairing the world, but they definitely need to apply those values by donating more and showing up and listening to bipoc voices when in need. Showing up no matter if it feels scary.

I have particularly noticed the lack of Jewish presence at many protests at university park. That park is in the neighborhood of many Jewish people that go to this synagogue. A lot of people went to the first protest in May but then stopped showing up and did not acknowledge their privilege either.

It's a privilege to not have to think about if you are going to be alive the next day. White folks get to have the birds and the bees talk but black people have to have the talk which is 'What to do if you get pulled over.'

When we say get out of your homes and into the streets we really mean it. Stop sitting on our privilege and start acting like you care about black lives by really showing up. When the rabbi shows up to put her body in front of black bodies it makes me hopeful, hopeful that people will start seeing how much of an impact one body makes on the movement. I hope by seeing the rabbi being out in the streets it can prompt others to join her.

I want to acknowledge two other members of this community that also have been out on the streets protesting with Black Unity: Abby Gershenzon and Kelley Edwards. Abby has been there protesting with me since July. I appreciate them both for being alongside me on the frontlines and always putting black bodies before them. Abby and I have been to Portland since the federal officers have been there.

Throughout the movement I have had many light bulbs moments. When I first started to protest in Portland I thought that getting tear gassed, shot at, pepperballed was making a statement and I would be accomplishing something if I went to add numbers. But there are bigger things to be doing than putting yourself in unnecessary danger. There was one specific moment for me that changed the way that I look at everything. I was talking to someone at the Red House in Portland, and they pointed out "this is a direct action, even though you are just sitting around a campfire, making sure a family doesn't get evicted. You don't have to get tear-gassed to make a difference."

Being in a movement means doing things to help such as going to food drives, buy black events, buy from black owned businesses, support black led protests or protest that benefits a person of color. These are also ways for white allies to get involved because I know from conversation that people think that being a white ally just means putting your body in danger. Protecting black bodies is so important but it could even mean defending a black person who's being harassed online.

A big thing that people don't know is really helpful is when you see a person of color getting pulled over is to pull on the side of the road and take out our phone and film them so if anything happens to them there is a witness and a person filming. There have been so many amazing things that this movement has done for Bipoc people. In Portland there has been a family who was given a new house because people raised enough money for her.

Here in Eugene, Black Unity has organized many feeds for the homeless people and supply drives, donating money to bipoc youth and people who need it for school or rent, clothing drives, food drives and even school supply drives. This movement has brought people together because we work together to get everyone's needs met.

If anything this movement has taught me a lot about listening. Listening to people's stories, listening to the demands of this movement. Even if I am a black person, listening and taking in the stories of others because they can be helpful. I can apply my learning to the community to teach others what steps you need to take to be an ally. Being a part of this movement there is so much to learn and apply to day to day life.

The biggest thing I've learned and I have said this multiple times is that it's so important is to always listen to black leadership. Listen to them at a protest, on social media, in person, at the store, anywhere. Listening through discomfort, listening through guilt, listening through disbelief. They deserve all of the

recognition for the years of not taking them seriously and decrediting them. A big part of being a white ally is listening. Anti-racism isn't just saying you are not racist it's really doing that education, listening and showing up.

My big ask from this community is to show up. Even if it makes you feel uncomfortable a huge part of being a white ally is feeling uncomfortable because that's how you learn. Listen and engage in conversation with the bipoc community, show up to protests, donate to a bipoc family in need, give supplies to people who need it. For it to be a true exodus and liberation, it has to permeate every part of life. It is not a liberation for it to be sometimes, when it is convenient or not uncomfortable. It has to be a life change. It is not enough to give of your time or money when a BIPOC person stands in front of you asking you to join them or reminding you about the Racism that slips our mind.

At the very beginning of this portion, Moses tries to refuse the task. He doesn't want to confront Pharaoh. He says, "I can't speak well." And God basically says, "You have to do this anyway, and I will be with you."

Today the bondage of Racism holds us all captive. We are all constrained when we accept what is, thinking we ourselves are not strong enough or can't make enough of a difference to be noticeable. When a few people show up to a protest they are less protected than if 100's or 1000's of people show up. And those people could be you.

So like Moses, please remember: you can do hard things. And if you step up, you will not be alone.

Thank you, and Shabbat shalom.