

Parashat Sh'mot 5781

Shabbat Shalom. This Shabbat we begin the book of Sh'mot, called Exodus in English. This book is fundamental in terms of our self-understanding of our history and of what it means to be Jewish. It speaks about our two most formative components of our self-understanding throughout our history. First, that our ancestors were slaves in Egypt. So much of our ethical mitzvot refer to that experience. A good thirty-six times in the Torah we are told to be kind to the stranger for we “know the feelings of the stranger” for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. In the Talmud we are referred to as *rakhamanim b'nei rakhamanim* – compassionate people who are the children of compassionate people. This is one of the reasons that we are considered worthy of redemption according to our sages. It is our experience of persecution that sensitizes us to others who are persecuted. Unfortunately, not all of our people are sensitive to the persecution of others. Some of our people think that we should only care about ourselves. Partially, I believe, that comes from the bitter experience that others have not cared for us when we've been persecuted – which, sadly, is much of our history. However, the Torah does not say “love your neighbor as yourself” (but only if they do the same). We do what is morally compelling because it is the right thing to do and not for “enlightened self-interest.”

There is so much in this portion that warrants discussion, but I can only touch on a few parts. Throughout our entire history we have looked back to our sacred literature in order to understand the world and to teach lessons of how we are to respond to the world around us and to what is happening in our day. I know some people want to see “religion” and “spirituality” as an escape from the world around us. Our rabbis, our sages of blessed memory, never did that. Just the opposite – *aderaba*, as they would say. Our sacred literature must teach us to be better people **in the** world, not to escape from it. So, we have the story of Moses (Moshe) which begins in this Shabbat's parasha. Moses has initially run away to save his life. But then he has made a nice life for himself in Midian – he has a wife and two children and a decent profession (okay he was not a doctor, but he was a shepherd like a lot of our great biblical ancestors).

When he has the encounter with the burning bush in this Shabbat's Parasha, he does not want to go back to Egypt and take on the role of the redeemer of his people. He wants to stay in Midian. He gives all these reasons why he should not be the one to do it. But before he gives his reasons for not being qualified for the task, he has shown himself to be a compassionate person.

He stops the Egyptian from beating a Jew. He tries to stop the two Jews from fighting with each other. His first act in Midian occurs when he first arrives and he sees other shepherds driving away the seven daughters of Yitro (Jethro) who have come to water their father's flock and protects Yitro's daughters. Our sages say that part of what qualified Moses to redeem his people was his caring about each animal in his flock – that he accidentally happened upon the burning bush because he pursued one kid that wandered away from the flock. By the way, one of the names used in our prayers to refer to G!d is *Harakhaman* (the Compassionate One).

Before I forget I want to mention that the other major component of our self-identity throughout our tradition has been the revelation of G!d at Mount Sinai and the receiving of the Torah. In the ten commandments themselves, the first five have to do with mitzvot between humans and G!d and the next five between humans themselves. Our sages saw our ethical life as part and parcel of our spiritual life. The way we act and interact in the world is essential to what it means to live as a Jew in the world – it's not only how we relate to G!d.

The question is how we live in the world and what kind of world do we want to live in. I cannot in good conscience ignore what happened a mere two days ago in our nation's capital in the Capitol building itself. As I said, I know some people want to escape from the unpleasant things in the world around us at a service. However the shock of what happened requires something of a response. I imagine every one of us is shocked and saddened by what we witnessed – and maybe angered too. But I have to say, that anyone who is surprised has not been paying attention during the last four years. If Charlottesville was not a wake-up call, it should have been. (Not to mention many other events also). It is very unhealthy for our nation to be this divided and for so many people to believe, erroneously, that the elections were fraudulent. And it is incredibly and dangerously irresponsible for people in the media and government to perpetrate these lies. This is where it leads. If they did not think that would be the case, they have not been paying attention. There is also among the extremists who broke into the Capitol Building a lot of white supremacists and people who believe in the conspiracy theories of Qanon and there is a strong undercurrent of anti-Semitism among them. I saw a clip from a Jewish media source of someone harassing an Israel television journalist. There were plenty of people among the domestic terrorists in the Capitol building wearing t-shirts that said "6MWE" – which stands for "six million wasn't enough" referring to the holocaust of course. Of course, many of the white supremacists are also holocaust deniers. Many people thought that these forces of hate

and bigotry could be controlled. I hope that they realize that enabling these forces to fester and grow is extremely dangerous to the health and welfare of our country. We've taken a great deal for granted in terms of the stability of our democracy, but the last number of years should tell us that we cannot take it for granted.

If we look at Jewish history we see that there have been times in our various places in the diaspora where things were good for a while before persecution got worse. But again, it is not only about us. If we see injustice, the Torah tells us we cannot stand by idly, just as Moses did not stand by idly.

I mentioned earlier that our rabbis, teachers, and sages have always looked back to our sacred literature to help us understand the world around us and to give us a language with which to discuss it. Pharaoh and Egypt have been symbols for us for thousands of years of what to avoid. Egypt as described in the Torah and Talmud is seen as a totally corrupt country, in which spirituality is minimum and materiality is primary. Pharaoh is seen as a tyrant, the paradigm of powerful king who oppresses others. Who are the Pharaohs in our world today? When Moses tells Pharaoh that Ad!nai, the G!d of the Hebrews has appeared to our ancestors and that we should be allowed to worship our G!d, Pharaoh responds with a response that has been quoted by our rabbis for thousands of years: "Who is Ad!nai that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know Ad!nai, nor will I let Israel go." His saying "I do not know Ad!nai" said it all to our sages. They saw this as an expression of his lack of reverence for anything greater than himself or other than himself and as an expression of his lack of compassion for other people. This phenomenon still exists in our world and it is a real danger to everything we cherish.

Shabbat shalom.