

A NEW KING WHO KNEW NOT JOSEPH

January 27, 2017

Shabbat shalom!

And once again welcome to our guests who are with us tonight, students from congregations Ahavath Chesed in Jacksonville, FL; Beth Torah in Kansas City, MO and Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, NY, accompanied by their rabbis Matt Cohen, Javier Catalan and Marc Katz. These students have come all the way to Montgomery to share Shabbat worship with us – and by the way they will also be visiting some of the area’s historic Civil Rights sites. Welcome, and Shabbat shalom!

This has been a tumultuous week in America, one of those nodal points in our history when the ground shifts beneath our feet and we know that the days ahead are going to be so very different from the ones past, though we know not what the future holds for us, for our country, or for our Jewish people.

Though I suspect he doesn’t know it, our new president happened to take office just prior to last week’s Shabbat, when the Torah portion brought us to the story of “a new king who knew not Joseph,” at the beginning of the Book of Exodus. I will admit that I find it tempting to use that text as a jumping off point for a discussion on our new president and the sea changes ahead, but I’ve decided to resist that temptation. For I’ve concluded that ultimately a political discussion will only be unsatisfying, and I’ve been told that a sanctuary should be a place of respite and, literally, a “sanctuary” against the storms outside our walls. Of course, one can argue that it is precisely on the issues of the day that Judaism must give voice, show leadership and provide us with moral perspectives, but on this Shabbat I would take a closer look at the story as we have it in Torah, and see what we can learn.

To set the context: Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob who was hated by his brothers, had been sold off to a passing caravan, and though left for dead by his jealous brothers, he wound up in Egypt. There his ability to interpret dreams eventually brought him to the attention of Pharaoh; when Joseph dreamed that Egypt and the surrounding lands were facing drought, and he advised the Egyptians on ways to plan for the drought, Pharaoh placed Joseph in charge of Egypt’s granaries, making him second-in-command over all of Egypt’s resources. As famine hit the land, Joseph’s brothers made their way to Egypt, where they and their families thrived under Joseph’s enlightened leadership. They multiplied, founded cities and became a major community within Egypt.

But then Joseph died, and we read that “a new king rose over Egypt who knew not Joseph.” You all know the story – whether feeling economically threatened or just hating the new immigrants who were perceived to be undermining their livelihood or national character – the Egyptians quickly turned against the Israelite community, locked them into their sanctuary cities, turned them into slaves. Israelites became a criminal element, not to be tolerated, not to

be allowed to thrive. Though numbering by then in the hundreds of thousands – some say as many as two million, counting women and children – they seemed powerless to act. It was only when God appointed Moses as a reluctant leader did the tide finally begin to turn for the Israelites, as Moses led the way out, along the way creating a new nation.

Even without any parallels between a new Pharaoh as task-master and our new administration in DC – although the 16th century Italian commentator Obadiah Sforza points out that Pharaoh's imposition of a 20% tax on agricultural produce would go directly into the state coffers; see his comments on Genesis 47 – this early part of the Exodus story does teach a core value. Moses's first act as a young adult was an act of extreme social protest. Witnessing an Egyptian slave master beating a fellow Israelite, Moses kills the Egyptian. It is a giant act of social outcry on behalf of his people, even before he hears the call of God. As oppression became extreme, so did his response. And though no one condones murder – indeed later Jewish law found every possible excuse for avoiding the death penalty, let alone condoning an individual taking revenge in this way – Judaism developed a strong and abiding tradition that we go out of our way to seek social justice, economic justice and civil rights for all. Teaching that faith must be manifest by our actions in the world, Judaism has often been a lonely voice of enlightenment, reason and social justice in a world too often characterized by ignorance, prejudice, intolerance and, yes, xenophobia and hatred.

Judaism's core values are taught in many texts, from the Torah and through the ages; many of these are oft-quoted, and quite famous:

“Justice, and only justice shall you pursue,” in Deuteronomy.

“Learn to do good; seek justice, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow!” [Isaiah].

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream!” [Amos].

“By three things is the world sustained – justice, truth and peace.” [That's in “Sayings of the Fathers, from the 2nd century]

“Let justice be done though the heavens fall!” [Talmud]

Nothing angered the prophets more than seeing their people keeping the outward forms of their religion while ignoring the poor, or neglecting strangers or cheating customers at the merchants' scales.

Listen to this teaching of a rabbi named R. Aha, as recorded in a Jewish text about 1,500 years ago. It's one of my favorite quotes: “R. Aha said in the name of R. Tanhum, son of R. Hiyya [the early rabbis always gave their sources!]: ‘Though a person has learned Torah and taught it, observed and performed it, yet if one was able to protest against wrongdoing and did not

protest..., he is considered “cursed” as it is written in Deuteronomy 27, “cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this Torah.””

Thus our religious tradition is clear: Religion is not limited to an individual’s concerns with prayer or ritual celebrations or even one’s individual religious community. Religion is also concerned with sacred obligations, with what we owe to others, to people we might not even know at all.

In the rabbinic view the concern for righting wrong, for looking beyond oneself, is a holy enterprise rooted in the nature of the relationship between God and humanity.

Here’s another text from the Talmud, commenting on a verse in Deuteronomy, “Follow none but the Lord your God...and hold fast to Him”:

“R. Hama, the son of R. Hanina, taught: ‘What is the meaning of “Follow none but the Lord your God...and hold fast to Him”? How can a human being follow and hold fast to God of whom it is said [elsewhere in Deuteronomy] ‘He is “a consuming fire’? “Following the Lord and holding fast to Him” must mean, therefore, imitating his *qualities*.

“He clothes the naked, as it is said in Genesis 3, ‘And the Lord god made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.’ You, too, should clothe the naked.

“The Holy One, blessed be He, visits the sick [as we learn from the story in Genesis 18 when God appears to Abraham soon after Abraham’s circumcision]... You, too, should visit the sick.”

Some would call this “paying forward.” “Holding fast to God” becomes not just an abstract concept, not just a nice-sounding phrase, but something very real: Think of God as the ultimate standard for human action, the moral compass for all that is “good” in ethical situations.” Paying forward becomes a central part of who we are and what we do, helping out those in need.

Moses led the way, so afflicted by the human suffering around him that he felt compelled to act. He could not rest; his soul was filled with the tortured cries of humanity whose freedoms had vanished. Isn’t it interesting, by the way, that the Egyptian sources are silent on these matters; the pharaohs, undoubtedly concerned about their reputation, apparently expunged all reporting of the Israelite presence in their midst from their official records. Only our Torah survives to tell the story.

Some of you have heard me tell the old Hassidic story of a rabbi in the small Polish village of Strikov. Reb Fishel was known for a strange nighttime ritual. Every night before retiring to bed, the rebbe would pour himself a glass of vodka. He would say the blessing over the drink,

take a sip from the glass, and then call aloud to God: “L’Chayim, Lord of the Universe, Source of Life and Life of all the living! A very good night to You, Lord of the Universe!” And then he would wash the glass and go to sleep.

As this practice became more widely rumored, his students came to him for an explanation.

In good Jewish fashion Reb Fishel responded with a question. He asked, “Is God afflicted by human suffering?”

“Yes,” his students answered. “We are taught that God suffers when humans suffer.”

“So,” the rebbe said, “if God is pained by our pain, it stands to reason that God rejoices in our joy. Now if this is true, then if the suffering of the world were to have a night of peace, this would bring God a good night as well, yes?”

“Yes,” his disciples said.

“So,” when I wish God a good night, there is then only one way in which God can arrange for this: to give a night’s rest and peace to all the afflicted of the world!”

Would that it were so easy. Would that we could just all wish each other “Shabbat shalom,” and all would be happy with the world; or that we could wish each other good health and good fortune, and all would be healthy, or have good fortune; or that we could pray for peace, and peace would descend upon all the world. Would that it were so easy.

The message I get from all this – the “take-away” – is that for those who are troubled by injustice in our world – and who shouldn’t be, after all? – taking this as a time for activism is not just the right thing to do; it is the Jewish thing to do: to be a citizen activist; to make it our duty to understand policy and the effect of that policy on our neighbors far and wide. And, once understanding it, to support it or protest it, whichever way our ethics dictate us to do. But NOT to be silent, not to abdicate our responsibilities as citizens and as Jews. It takes work. It takes effort. It takes time. And just as Moses felt compelled by God to act, this is not a time to sit back and let others do what they will without either our support or our protest.