

Bo 2021 : The State of our Nation in Light of the 10 Plagues: Post Inauguration Shabbat.

Shabbat Shalom

“These are the times that try men’s souls...”
These words, written by American Patriot and social commentator Thomas Paine, were published just five short months after the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

We, too, are living through times that try our souls. Two weeks ago we witnessed an insurrection inspired and abetted by some of the very people pledged to uphold the Constitution that was targeted. For most of this last year, we have been rocked not only by the deadly plague of COVID, by an epidemic of misinformation that undermined our nation’s response to COVID and whipped the insurrectionists and all those who support them to a frenzy, and by the plague of institutionalized racial inequity.

The good news is that the peaceful transfer of power took place this past Wednesday as President Joe Biden was sworn in as our next President along with VP Kamala Harris, the first woman elected to national office 100 years after women won the vote,

and the first black and Asian Vice President, and bringing with her the first Jewish second gentleman!

The bad news is that many of those who incited the attack on the Capitol continue to spread their tropes of hate and division, whether out of misinformed or misanthropic conviction, moral cowardice, or, worse, a desire to harness the rage we saw on Jan. 6 for personal advantage.

On this first post-Inauguration Shabbat, it behooves us to look to our sacred texts and traditions for insight, wisdom and guidance, as thousands of generations of Jews have done before us when faced with times that tried their souls. So what I want to do this morning is explore how the lessons of the Ten Plagues can inform our understanding of the State of our Nation, the challenges facing us, and how we might move forward toward the more perfect union promised by our Founders and envisioned by our ancestors who sought freedom and success here, as did so many immigrants who built this nation.

Last week we read how, on being warned about the 7th plague of hail, some of Pharaoh's courtiers brought their cattle indoors as they were warned to do by Moses, but they were not yet willing to

confront Pharaoh. They were too intimidated to confront, or even advise Pharaoh, though they clearly know what is at stake and seek ways to protect themselves, though as they abandon their responsibility to the Egyptian people.

Now, this week, in Parsha Bo, Moses warns about the coming 8th plague of locusts. Cognizant of the devastation and famine a plague of locust would bring, Pharaoh's courtiers ask him to let the people go. They successfully move Pharaoh to offer Moses what appears to be a compromise, that he can go with the men but he must leave the women, children and elderly behind as his hostages so the men will return. We know what happens next: the plague of locust strikes the land, part of a continuing cycle of severity as Pharaoh continues to refuse God's demand to 'Let My People Go' and as the courtiers remain too intimidated to push their point.

Did you ever notice that within the word intimidation is the word timid? I feel bad for the courtiers, working for a leader like Pharaoh who would change his mind on a whim and probably could have them killed or at least removed from office. But that is the psychology of how the Pharaohs, the autocrats and dictators of history,

succeed, intimidating others so they are more concerned about their own success and well being than that the well being of the people for whom they are responsible. Being timid, giving in to intimidation, is just another way of enabling or helping to perpetrate, injustice.

This is one of the lessons of the 10 plagues for our times, a reminder really, that moral courage is required of each of us to stand up to bullies and braggards, especially when they have power over us and threaten others. One of the lasting contributions of Judaism as a faith is the sense that each person must account to our Maker and Ultimate Moral Authority in heaven, for the choices we make. If an order is unethical, saying you were just following orders is never an excuse. Not in Pharaoh's court. Not in the halls of commerce or government. And not at the bank of the Red Sea. That is why God drowns Pharaoh's whole army. Because following orders is never an excuse to perpetrate or collude with injustice.

I heard a news report in the other day leading up to the inauguration that was both comforting and terrifying about whether the outgoing President could trigger an emergency by using his power to

launch a nuclear weapon. I was comforted that the military expert explained that a President could not just launch such missiles without a legal reason to do so and that military leaders could not do anything illegal. The terrifying part was that if the President refused to listen to them, all they could do was resign. I wondered how many iterations of resignations would it take to find someone who would ultimately go along, like Pharoah's advisors did?

I would like to believe we are better than that, as a nation of people of good will and conscience. I would like to believe that our elected officials of all parties are better than that. I was heartened by the Republicans who spoke up after the attack on the Capitol, including Republican leaders like Rep. Liz Cheney and Sen. Mitch McConnell, and disheartened by those who continued to support the Big Lie that predicated the Capitol attack.

Sen McConnell especially has been criticized for doing too little too late. But it is never too late to do the right thing. The true test will be whether he, and our other Republican leaders, will do their part moving forward to help navigate the challenges facing us: the literal plague of COVID-19, that has taken more lives just in the past year in the US than

all the American lives lost during WWII, and the figurative plague of hate and misinformation that undermines the fabric of our democracy and civil society.

Did you know that before the very first plague, God, from whom we cannot hide our true natures, tells Moses that Pharaoh is stubborn? The Hebrew term is **kaveid lev**: he has an insensible heart, not a heavy heart like we think of it, as a heart weighed down by troubles, but like a heavy hand, better translated as hardhearted.

This is what President Biden referred to in his Inaugural address, calling on all of us to open our souls to each other instead of hardening our hearts, by showing tolerance and humility and trying to stand in each other's shoes, as his mother taught our new President to do. In the words of our President, "There's no accounting for what fate will deal you. Some days... you need a hand,.. others days ...we're called to lend a hand." That is what our tradition also tells us to do repeatedly throughout the Torah: we are to remember the stranger for we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This leads me to the last lesson for our times from the 10 plagues that we have time to discuss this morning. There is a scene we seldom focus on in Chapter 11 of our parsha, in which God tells Moses to tell the people to approach their neighbors and ask them for silver and gold (the Hebrew here is *yeeshaalu*, from the root to ask). Why is this scene so important? Up until this time, the people of Egypt have been bystanders, if not perpetrators, in the crime of the enslavement of the Jewish people. Now they have a chance to make an act of restitution. Silver and gold can never make up for the horror and pain of slavery. But it is a concrete expression that something wrong was done by neighbor to neighbor and provides a way forward to begin to build a sense of common cause and reconciliation.

Did it work? I don't think it is an accident that of all Israel's historic enemies, only the Egyptian people reappear often as among Israel's first allies. Reconciliation is not achieved by sweeping injustice and resentment under the rug. That is why God instructed the Israelites to turn TO their neighbors. In other words, honest reconciliation, is when those who did wrong seek to understand and acknowledge what they did and why it was wrong and then seek to

substantially change their ways. This is the cornerstone to Judaism's view of teshuvah, repentance, improving ourselves and our society.

I think that is what our founding fathers, close readers of our Hebrew Scripture, also envisioned for the nation they were building, that succeeding generations would continue to strive to improve, perfect, the union they created.

As President Biden told us all Wednesday, we are facing “a time of peril and possibility... Jan. 6th reminded us how fragile and precious is.... our democracy....[and that] we face one of the most challenging times of our history...” Though he did not use the word reconciliation, he spoke to it, asking something of each of us, to join in being Americans together, to stop shouting at each other and instead listen to each other with courtesy, dignity. He called upon us to see each other, especially those with whom we may disagree, as neighbors, just as Jews and Egyptians were called upon so long ago to see each other as neighbors.

We Jews know how important it is to listen to each other not just as a way of bridging differences but of drawing on each others' strengths to solve the incredible challenges that face us. Such listening and

civil debate lies at the heart of all Jewish learning and has contributed to our ability to make impactful contributions to science and society beyond our small numbers. We do this by keeping open minds and open hearts. That is what Pres. Biden has asked of each of us, so we can move ahead together.

Holocaust survivor and Congressman Tom Lantos, of blessed memory, who I had the honor of interviewing for a series of films on the Holocaust would often say, “The veneer of civilization is paper thin. We are its guardians, and we can never rest.”

We were reminded just how thin civilization is two weeks ago as rioters stormed the capital intent on lynching Vice President Pence. These are indeed times that try our souls, in facing the danger of political unrest, the injustice of racial inequity, and a very real plague that has killed over 408,000 Americans and left misery in its wake.

The story leading up to, through and after the Ten Plagues gives us hope, that by turning to our neighbors, by acting with humility in the cause of kindness and justice, and by walking together towards a better future, we can make it not just through these times that try our souls, but along the journey, we can come out stronger and better able to

perfect our nation and the world, if we all do our parts.

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