

“Who Am I to Go to Pharaoh”ⁱ
A Sermon Following the Storming of the Capital January 2021
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Shabbat shalom. We have had a scary few days as we witnessed the greatest attack on our democracy in the history of our nation when an angry mob stormed the capital intent on subverting the results of the presidential election, incited by the loser of that election, our current sitting President.

Our Torah reading today, beginning the book of Exodus, Parshat Shemot, speaks on many levels about what we, as a nation, faced this past week and how we can navigate the challenges ahead together. But I would like to focus on just two points:

A new king has arisen in Egypt who did not know Joseph and all he had done for the Egyptian people. This king enslaves Joseph’s people, the Israelites, and places hard labor upon them, so much so that they cry out to God. God hears them and sends them help, in the person of Moses.

The first thing God tells Moses when he comes to examine a bush that is burning but not consumed, is to remove his shoes because he is on holy ground.

We, too, have holy ground. The synagogue, and all houses of worship, certainly are holy ground. Yet, as a secular nation, we also have institutions, and the buildings that house them, that serve as our holy ground. I was on a Zoom meeting yesterday with Jewish Representatives and Senators, during which Florida Representative Debbie Wasserman Shultz referred to the Capital building as the Temple of democracy for the entire world. That Temple’s inner sanctum is the chambers of the House and Senate, the sacred space where the serious and critical work of doing the people’s business of democracy takes place and thus worthy of respect, protection, and veneration. That is why it was such a shock to our national psyche to see the halls of Congress breached.

The second thing God tells Moses is he is to go to confront Pharaoh and demand he let the Israelites go. Moses responds in a very human way: “*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?*” (Exodus 3:11)”

Each of us are confronted with Pharaohs at some point in our lives: individuals with power and influence who pursue self-interest and promote injustice, who use intimidation and the promise of rewards, and spread half-truths and lies, like Pharaoh did in lying about the danger Israelites posed Egyptians as a fifth column, to get people to follow them, actively support them, and enable them by not standing up to them and calling them out, and holding them accountable, for their misdeeds.

God holds each of us accountable, in this world and the next, for our actions and inactions in facing down the Pharaohs of the world. This is one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism as well as many other of our world's religions. Like Moses, we may think, "Who am I that I should go up against Pharaoh?" Yet God tells each of us what God told Moses so long ago, "I will be with you (Exodus 3:12)..." God is telling Moses he is stronger, braver, more effective than he ever thought he could be, because he is not alone and because there is strength in doing right especially on behalf of others.

God is with us, too, guiding us and strengthening us when we marshal our courage and moral rectitude to confront the Pharaohs of this world. If it wasn't clear before this past Wednesday during the attack on our Capital, incited by our sitting President, it is now. Like Moses, God is calling to us, as individuals and as a nation, to stand up together against this new Pharaoh who has arisen among us. May we do so courageously and wisely. And let us say, Amen.

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