

Salvation's Source May Be a Surprise

Shabbat Shemot 5777

January 20, 2017

Rabbi Barry Block

Vayakom melech chadash, and a new king arose. Though our nation inaugurated a President today, and emphatically not a monarch, no Torah portion could include a phrase more appropriate to Inauguration Day.

The full sentence is: "There arose a new king who did not know Joseph." Our sages assume that Pharaoh must have heard about Joseph's life-saving work, so they conclude that he chooses to ignore the unique legacy of the great man who brought the Children of Israel to Egypt. Depending on one's point of view, that moral judgment on the new King may apply either to the President who took the oath of office today or the one who left for a California vacation.

Does our new President blind himself to the fragile victories of the Civil Rights Movement, the one that took root six decades ago and the one that has made great strides toward LGBT equality in the last decade, and is he indifferent to the action required to sustain that progress? Does he not see the millions of Americans who now have health insurance, thanks to the Affordable Care Act; or is he laser-focused only on Obamacare's flaws? Does he avert his eyes from the fears of young people, brought to this country illegally as children, who know only America as home; or the terror of Muslims who wonder if they still have a place in this diverse nation? Is he deaf to his own demeaning words about women?

Or is the willfully blind President the man who moved out of the White House today? Has he pretended not to see the Americans whose jobs have disappeared through no fault of their own? Has he blinded himself to the strain that Obamacare places on individuals and families whose health care costs have risen dramatically since ACA became law? Has he been insensitive to the dislocation of Americans who find their own nation unrecognizable in light of their sincerely-held religious beliefs? Was he willfully ignorant of the scourge of crime and its principal victims, our nation's most vulnerable citizens?

Whichever of these widely divergent views any of us holds, we may all agree that today is a day for patriotic celebration. The peaceful transition of power is not to be taken for granted in 2017 any more than it was in 1801, when a President of one party first took over from the leader of another.

We may all agree that protest, even opposing the President, can be patriotic.

And none can deny that our nation is bitterly divided and sorely in need of healing. We may see America's greatest problem as inadequate support for public schools or insufficient alternatives to them, crumbling infrastructure or moral bankruptcy, climate change or environmental regulations. We may agree with President Trump's dark assessment of our nation's health; or we may rejoice that no president in over twenty years has taken office with a better economy – including rising growth, falling unemployment, and zero net illegal immigration from Mexico. Yet we all acknowledge that America has problems, and that those failings must be addressed.

That shared view is consistent with the core message of Judaism: We live in an unredeemed world, and our job is to fix it. Jews absolutely must not believe that a messiah has come because the very purpose of a Jew's life is to change this world for the better, to bring about messianic redemption.

Approximately half of voting Americans voted for Donald Trump, because they believed that he could change our nation for the better in ways they themselves could not. Approximately half of our nation's people have despaired since November 8, because they conclude that all is lost, and none of us can do anything about it. This week's Torah portion teaches that both groups are wrong. Instead, each one of us has a role to play in healing our nation and repairing the world, just like the biblical characters who partner with God to bring salvation at the outset of Exodus.

Pharaoh certainly doesn't expect the midwives to flout his command to kill every newborn baby boy of the Israelites. The King of Egypt has enlisted his subjects to carry out his wicked, genocidal scheme. Rabbi Ana Bonnheim wonders if Pharaoh's plot includes misogyny. Why does he want a generation only of Hebrew women? Perhaps he and his male courtiers are eager to abuse them.

This past fall, we saw footage of the man who is now our President, dehumanizing women with disgusting words, describing abusive behavior which he bragged about having carried out. When confronted, he defended himself, saying that was "just locker room talk." While the President might indeed never have performed the sexual violations he discussed, his response to the controversy suggested that his language was commonplace among men when no woman is present.

Mr. Trump probably did not expect what followed, any more than Pharaoh imagines that Shifrah and Puah will come up with an excuse for not having killed those baby boys. Famous professional athletes proclaimed that they had been in many locker rooms, where they had never heard and would never condone such language.

Even if those athletes were accurately describing their own experience, they weren't telling the whole truth. When men are alone among men, especially but not only in locker rooms, boastful and demeaning talk about women is not uncommon. Therefore, men who are much more ordinary than those millionaire sports stars began to step forward, sharing emails and social media posts that demonstrated denigration of women, often shared by whole teams, even at elite and supposedly liberal colleges and universities. We do not know the identities of the whistleblowers among Harvard soccer players or Amherst cross country runners, among others. We do know that, like Shifrah and Puah, they shared their stories at great personal risk to themselves.

Many conclude that something is terribly wrong with America, to have elected a president who could not deny those vile utterances. His election doubtless grants license to other men eager to emulate him. At the same time, we have reason to hope that the controversy was not for naught. America's consciousness was raised, and people stuck out their necks in an effort to put an end to misogyny. Our nation is better off because of the ordinary men as well as the superstars who made themselves spiritual descendants of Shifrah and Puah.

Torah conveys a profound message when Pharaoh's daughter pulls a basket out of the Nile, finds a Hebrew baby boy inside, and decides to raise him as her own, right there in the palace. I am reminded of Ivanka Trump, who invited Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio to Trump Tower to discuss climate change. I may be overstating the comparison. Moreover, Pharaoh's daughter has no expectation that this innocent, crying baby will grow up to be God's partner in delivering the Children of Israel from Egypt, with plagues upon her native land. Still, in Senate hearings of Cabinet nominees, several men who previously denied the teaching of science have now affirmed that that humans cause problematic climate change. It's only a start, but so was pulling a basket out of the Nile. On Inauguration Day, even the most vehement opponent of our new President must pray that he brings blessing to America and must confess that he or others on his team may do so.

And what of Moses himself? Why does God choose him to demand of Pharaoh, "Let my people go?" Moses, after all, has responded to slavery by killing

an overseer. He then escapes into the desert to live a private life as a shepherd, married to the daughter of an idolatrous priest. Then, when God calls him into service, Moses summons every argument to decline. He begins his career as a liberator with exceeding reluctance. The point of the story is clear: One need not be a perfect person, or even particularly willing, to be God's partner in bringing salvation.

Let's hope that the four years ahead will not call upon us, as God calls upon Moses. But if our Muslim neighbors have to register, then we must be ready to answer the call. If mass deportations are ordered, then we must provide sanctuary. If African Americans' voting rights continue to be eroded, we may have to accompany them to the polls, as members of Reform congregations did in many communities in November. If poor women cannot afford reproductive health care, and our society will no longer contribute collectively, then we will have to pony up personally.

Shifrah and Puah, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses all engage in civil disobedience, some at greater risk than others. All stand up to that Pharaoh who forgot Joseph. On this Inauguration Day, let each and every one of us hope and pray that good things will come to America in the next four years and beyond. Let us pledge to do our part to assure that, when bringing blessing requires partnering with our President and when it requires patriotic protest. Then, like God rewards Shifrah and Puah, and as God is Moses's guide, may God bless our efforts and may God bless America.

Amen.