

Beshallah 5784

January 27, 2024

16 weeks after October 7

B'not mitzvah of Sylvie Kunreuther and Leah McGee

Sylvie and Leah, what sophisticated and thoughtful divrei Torah. You won the parasha lottery, with probably the most famous Torah portion of all, and you both chose to take our epic story and ask incredibly difficult questions that affect us deeply today. My challenge is to respond to you both on your massive theological queries, while also addressing the fact that it was Tu Bishvat this week and is Holocaust Remembrance Day today, and that this is Shabbat Shirah, and also of course I need to address the war in Israel/Gaza— this will be, I believe, my fourteenth sermon on that topic – and I'm going to try to do all of this in under 10 minutes. Ready set go.

Sylvie: In this parasha, you showed us that Gd ruled with violence and fear, but unlike Pharaoh, Gd also ruled with respect, and what respect looked like was caring about the needs of the Israelites. Indeed, the word yirah means fear and describes the fear that the Israelites had for Gd from seeing the violence against the Egyptians, and the song they sing at the sea reflects this: it is a song about Gd's might, Gd's power that enabled the defeat of their tormentors, but it is also a song about Gd's love and care for them, which leads to the other meaning of the word yirah, awe. They are singing in awe that there is a force in the universe that is both so powerful and therefore dangerous, but also so caring. Who are they, finite human beings, slaves even, to be cared for in that way? That is the awe or wow that fuels their song. It's the wow of "You, mighty unimaginable force, you care about us?" That wow aligns with the Avot and Gevurot prayers we sang earlier in our service, which describe Gd as using might to care for the most vulnerable in the society. We sing those prayers in order to remind us to emulate Gd's example, to use our power, whatever power we have, for the purpose of caring for others, in particular the vulnerable. That's the kind of power that is worthy of respect, just as you taught us, Sylvie.

Leah: you ask, what happened to this Gd who splits the sea for slaves to go free? Where was this Gd during the Holocaust and where was this Gd on October 7th and where is this Gd now? As I mentioned, this is Holocaust Remembrance Day, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and on this day we remember the 6 million among our people who perished at the hands of the Nazis. Now Leah you brought us three, really four, post-Holocaust Jewish theologies to address this central theological problem that our people have lived with since those dark days. Together, the thinkers you brought offer multiple theories: perhaps Gd refrains from intervening in human affairs in order to preserve free will, perhaps Gd cannot intervene in human affairs because Gd has limited power, perhaps Gd is not limited but an absolute in covenant with us and Gd's inaction is simply mysterious and inexplicable, and finally perhaps Gd is not a power outside of us but the ground of our being: a presence within and expressed through every living thing. You then gave us your theology: a persistent belief in an absolute Gd along with a recognition that our concepts of Gd need to change as we change.

I would argue that the Gd of the time of Torah is not at all dead but very much still present. We, however, limited as we are, are continually changing in our perception and ability to apprehend what, who, and how Gd is. Our ancestors saw and heard differently than we do now. They focused on different questions and qualities, had different needs and different language and concepts through which they understood the world. The Rabbis of old tell us that Torah was written in human language, meaning that the Torah was written for our limited minds and our limited ability to understand. An example is Tu Bishvat, the holiday on which we celebrate trees. Originally, we understood this holiday to be commanded of us as a way to give a percentage of the produce of the trees back to the Temple, basically to remember that all of our food comes from Gd and to express our gratitude for and dependence on Gd by returning a percentage of Gd's gifts. Later, this holiday became an expression of our mystical awareness of Gd's qualities in all of creation, qualities like lovingkindness and might/power (the same qualities, by the way, that we talked about in the song of the sea). Our mystical ancestors saw those qualities expressed

through Gd's design of fruits and nuts and also Gd's design of human beings, and they made Tu Bishvat a celebration of that. And now, this generation experiences Tu Bishvat as an opportunity to recognize that as human beings our domination of nature is imperiling us, and that instead we and trees are interdependent, part of a single living system created by and filled with Gd's presence. So just through the lens of Tu Bishvat we can see that since Biblical times, we've moved from hearing Gd tell us to have a hierarchical relationship with trees, to a mystical relationship with trees, in which their produce were representations of Gd's qualities, to now seeing Gd's presence within a relationship of interdependence between humans and trees, a relationship that requires teshuva on our part, and healing.

OK, back to the Exodus and the Holocaust and October 7th, and the question of where is Gd now? I am not a literalist when I read Torah, but even if we take the story literally, I want to remind us that the Israelites were enslaved for 400 years before Gd got visibly involved. We don't know a lot of details about those 400 years. In the beginning, Torah tells us that the population continued to increase despite the oppression, but Pharaoh responded by imposing even worse forced labor that was so difficult that the Israelites' lives became totally disposable and many died under the burden of the bricks and mortar. And then, Pharaoh decreed a policy to murder all of the Hebrew baby boys, fifty percent of the population. We don't know how many babies were murdered or how many workers were whipped to death or died building Pharaoh's cities. We don't know how long, for how many generations, people wondered, where is this Gd our ancestors told us about? This Gd that seems utterly silent and absent? We do know that by the time Moses showed up speaking on Gd's behalf, the people did not believe that this Gd was real. It's possible that by the time the people stood at the sea in our parasha, ready to walk to freedom, only a small fraction of the original population remained. Maybe it was not too dissimilar to the remnant of world Jewry that was still alive at the end of the Holocaust and the liberation of the camps.

We tend to tell the Exodus story as Gd taking us out with a strong hand and outstretched arm, as if the Israelites did nothing. But we could also tell the

story emphasizing human action, like the Israelites putting the blood on the doorposts, Moses repeatedly going to Pharaoh, and Nachshon's courageous choice to walk into the sea until it reached his throat. We could choose to see Gd in the allied armies and the Russian winter, and also the righteous gentiles, the resistance fighters, and ghetto uprisings. I am not saying that we should just wait and see, and eventually in 400 years the next sea will split. On the contrary, I am saying that the message of this story is that behind everything there is a force for justice and freedom in this world, even when it seems utterly absent. And some aspects of that force run through our bodies and our hearts and our minds. I am saying that we have no idea how the horrors of the 20th century or now compare to the horrors of this story. I am saying that this story tells us that what seems totally impossible is actually possible. That when it seems there is no hope, there is actually hope.

I am saying that when we look at Israel right now, everything, absolutely everything, seems terrible, and for many the pathway out from here seems impossible.

The freeing of the hostages might sometimes seem impossible.

The end of Hamas's reign of terror might sometimes seem impossible.

The end to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza might sometimes seem impossible.

The end to the war might sometimes seem impossible.

The destruction of all of the tunnels and the rebuilding of Gaza for life and the wellbeing of Palestinians might sometimes seem impossible.

The rebuilding of Southern Israel and the restoration Israelis' sense of security might sometimes seem impossible.

The end of Hezbollah's reign of terror might sometimes seem impossible.

The end of the Houthis' reign of terror might sometimes seem impossible.

The end of Iran's reign of terror might sometimes seem impossible.

The end of global antisemitism often seems impossible.

The worldwide acknowledgement of the Jewish people's right to safe self-governance in our ancient homeland sometimes seems impossible.

The end of Islamophobia and racism in Israel and here sometimes seems impossible.

The establishment of a democratic, accountable, peace-seeking Palestinian government in Gaza might sometimes seem impossible.

The establishment of a democratic, accountable, peace-seeking Palestinian government in the West Bank might sometimes seem impossible.

The election of a democratic, accountable, peace-seeking government in Israel might sometimes seem impossible.

The end of right wing and religious extremism in Israel might sometimes seem impossible.

The removal of the Israeli settlers and Israeli settlements from the West Bank might sometimes seem impossible.

The design of and agreement to a two state solution that is just, coherent, and secure, granting both peoples freedom, self-determination, and safety might sometimes seem impossible.

But you could argue, and some do, that we are closer to that two state solution in this moment than we have ever been in our lifetimes.

That is exactly why we have this Torah portion. That is exactly why we sing the song of this portion every morning and every night. Because it is so difficult to believe that the seemingly impossible is actually possible. But nothing that I just listed is actually impossible. Everything that I just listed is actually possible. This Torah portion is our declaration that when it all seems utterly hopeless, we must hope.

We are the people who tell this story and sing this song and pray this prayer again and again and again every single day because we know that hope is everything. That life is change. That our people have seen the impossible become possible, and we will always believe that it can happen again. We don't know much of anything about how Gd works, or why the world is full of horror and evil. And still we assert that in the biggest of pictures Gd is aiming us, pulling us, enticing us, impelling us and our world toward justice, toward freedom, and yes, even toward peace.

Shabbat Shalom.