

Metzora 2024, Shabbat HaGadol

Lucia and Sydney, you have both done an outstanding job here this morning. You've chanted Torah and Haftarah beautifully, and most especially, you have offered such important wisdom in your divrei Torah on this Shabbat morning.

Sydney, you've called out the idea of the Metzora - a person with the skin, or maybe spiritual, disease called tzara'at - as someone who is ostracized, dehumanized, or considered less than for the ways they are different. You asked: who are we to define any person by their being "not me," as someone who can be thrown away or ignored or is not worthy of our attention and love. You have asked us to take greater care and have more empathy when we consider who is "the other" in society and how they, or we, are treated.

Lucia, you have, in many ways, presented the counterpoint to Sydney. If Sydney is looking outward toward how we treat others, you are looking inward, to how we treat ourselves. You've called out our common inclination to feel embarrassed about our own inner struggles, asking us to be gentle and accepting when we experience depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges. You've suggested that just when our inclination might be to see our house, the home that is our mind, as broken beyond repair, that we should remember that that is a perversion of the truth - and that the very best thing we can do when we are suffering internally, is to shine light on our pain by talking with someone we trust.

Two sides of one coin - how we care for others when they are vulnerable, and how we care for ourselves when we are vulnerable.

Now, Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat before Passover - which is this one right now - is traditionally a Shabbat on which the rabbi gives an epically *gadol* - long - sermon to help the community get ready for Passover. And even though neither of you set out to speak about Passover specifically, you have both stepped into the position of the Shabbat HaGadol darshan - preacher - with great insight for us this year about a primary theme of Passover - freedom.

As you know, Passover celebrates our story of our people becoming free. Of how we were enslaved in Mitzrayim, Ancient Egypt, for hundreds of years, unable to make our own decisions, forbidden from practicing our own faith, speaking our own language, even just resting when we wanted to. We were completely constricted in this place without room to breathe, or be who we were. We were controlled by Pharaoh with very little hope for how it could be different. And then, God remembered that we were meant to be free people, and with signs and wonders, we crossed the Sea of Reeds, dancing and singing toward a better world. Toward freedom.

So what does that have to do with your teachings this morning? Kind of everything. Both of your charges to us - one, that we concern ourselves with others and **their** wholeness and the other, that we concern ourselves with us and **our** wholeness - are required ingredients for what it means to be free people. Without them, I believe, we don't fully understand our own story.

And both of these teachings are found deep inside what is arguably the most fundamental line of our Haggadah. It goes like this: *B'chol dor vador chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatzah mee'mitzrayim*. In every generation, we are each obligated to see ourselves as if we ourselves went out from Mitzrayim, the land of our enslavement. Not to think about this idea or read it in a book, but to feel it in our bones . . . as if the whole story happened not to our ancestors, but to us.

So every single person who sits down at every seder table throughout the world, has to put ourselves in the sandals of our ancestors who were beaten, weakened, starved, forced to labor, had their children taken from them, were made to be afraid, and then had to pass that life onto their children, because they had no other choice. And then, we are asked to imagine finding out that now, we would be redeemed and be free. We could hope again and breathe easily and openly, we could imagine a better future for our children, we could laugh without fear, we could eat and drink and reap the benefits of our own day's work. We could practice our faith and live as Jews.

Let's imagine that these events didn't happen to our ancestors; they happened to us. If we had once been slaves and then, incredulously and with abundant gratitude, were made free - what would be the transformation in us? What deep wisdom would we then know, what truths would become clear to us about humanity, suffering, hope - and about freedom?

I want to suggest that the transformation would be about your two teachings.

Sydney - if it had happened to us, we would know deep in our bones what the Torah tells us 36 times . . . that we may not oppress the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Mitzrayim. We know suffering, and were redeemed from it, so it becomes our job to lift others out of suffering. If we really do see ourselves as the ones who were aching with oppression and then were freed, we would know with our whole bodies that we could not allow anyone else to wallow in that place and that the freedom and wholeness of others was tied intrinsically and inextricably to our own freedom and wholeness. That we could not abandon or ostracize any vulnerable person or make anyone the "other" as we had been made.

And Lucia, your teaching **also** reflects this same fundamental line in the Haggadah and how we understand what it means to live as free people. *B'chol dor vador chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatzah mimitzrayim*.

There's a Chasidic teaching about this verse. We know that the full text is: In every generation, each one of us is obligated to see ourselves as if we ourselves came out from Mitzrayim. But this Chasidic teaching is that the verse is meant to be read only halfway through: *b'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo*. In every generation, each one of us is obligated to see ourselves. Full stop. What is freedom? It is to be able to see who we really are, and with a radical compassion, be that person, wholly and completely and to never be ashamed of what we see when we look at ourselves.

After we left Mitzrayim, we wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. Why so long? So that the generation that knew slavery in their bones would not be the generation that entered the Promised Land. We had to free ourselves of our own mentality that we were less than others, broken beyond repair, worthy of being beaten down and having our spirits crushed. Living free requires that we can see ourselves and accept ourselves exactly as we are and not to put on a mask so as to contort ourselves into being something more acceptable to someone else. That's not freedom.

Like your teachings, this line of the Haggadah is two sides of the same coin. To be truly free is to help others be free and to live freely as our own whole selves. A dearth of either of these components, and we find ourselves shackled again in the grips of oppression.

Now, Passover isn't just about thinking about freedom - it's about doing, tasting, embodying, feeling. So I want to offer you, based on your teachings, one idea for your seder table this year to help us all ritualize what you have taught here today.

Sydney, at the part where we cry out "Let all who are hungry come and eat," a part of our seder that's about inclusiveness and bringing the outsider, the suffering, in, to our table, what if each person at the table made an out loud commitment, or even a donation, to someone or a category of someones whose suffering they will try to ease, to help them be more free this year.

Lucia, at the point when we eat the maror, the bitter herb, and feel it make our mouths and our throats and our chests burn inside of us, what if you asked everyone at your table to share a time from this year when they were suffering inside and didn't tell anyone. And so bring light to that inner turmoil, as you suggested.

If we are going to feel freedom in our bones, it will be because of our choices, our actions, how we see others and how we see ourselves - ultimately how we treat others, and how we treat ourselves. Our freedom is dependent upon how we choose to live life on this side of the Red Sea.

There's a wonderful writer in Jerusalem, Sarah Tuttle Singer, who wrote this past Thursday that a chamsin, a sandstorm, had blown in from Egypt, hot and bothersome, and blinding. She joked that it came right after everyone had washed their cars for Passover, and was Pharaoh's ghost getting us back for the plagues. But I wonder if maybe that blinding chamsin from Egypt, which curled its gritty fingers around our people right before Passover, might be a reminder that freedom doesn't happen just one time and then is done. But that the pull to forget what freedom really means is strong, drawing us back and back toward the grips of Mitzrayim. We are vulnerable to returning to being enslaved - forgetting that we have the power and obligation to help others be free, forgetting that we have the right and responsibility to be free in our own minds and bodies. So, as we sit down to seder this Monday night, I pray that we take your words to heart - and that this year again, as we must do every year, we arrive tired, gasping for breath, and with tears of joy and relief, ready to reclaim the full breadth of our liberation, and find ourselves once again on freedom's shore.