

Shabbat Drash B'har - Proclaim Liberty for Us All

Leviticus

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Shabbat Shalom! Next week, May 28th, will mark the 10th anniversary of the death of the renowned writer, poet, and activist, Maya Angelou. Many of us may know parts of her work, including perhaps her seminal autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The title of this book comes from the poem *Sympathy*, written by Paul Laurence Dunbar, himself a prolific African-American writer and poet. Dunbar uses the experience of a bird trapped in a cage as a metaphor for the experience of African-Americans in the United States. This is the final stanza of the poem:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!¹

The caged bird, kept in captivity, unable to fly about, cries out to the universe as a prayer, a plea for a better tomorrow. For a future filled with freedom, with dignity, with liberty.

Remarkably, in our Torah this week, in Parashat B'har, we find another connection between a bird and freedom. וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ לְכָל-יְשֻׁבֵיהָ, “And you shall proclaim דְּרוֹר, you shall proclaim liberty, throughout the land for all its inhabitants.”² This verse is in reference to the jubilee year, the period every 49 years in which no work is to be done, all debts are forgiven, and land is reapportioned more fairly. This proclamation of דְּרוֹר, of liberty, is concerned with a societal-wide reckoning and addressing of the ways in which we treat one

¹ Paul Laurence Dunbar. “Sympathy.” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46459/sympathy-56d22658afbc0>.

² Leviticus 25:10

another, ensuring that each individual is in control of their lives. As Rabbi David Kasher notes, Rashi, our commentator from the 11th century, draws a connection between דרור and דירה, or dwelling, meaning that they may dwell in any place they please, and that they are “not under the control of others.”³

In the context of our Torah this week, דרור is explicitly about liberty. However, in Proverbs, our book of wisdom and guidance, דרור is translated as a swallow, a type of bird: כַּצִּפּוֹר לְנוֹד כַּדְרוֹר לְעוֹף, “As a sparrow must flit and a swallow must fly...”⁴ Ibn Ezra, writing in the 12th century, notes both of these definitions: “The meaning of the word *deror* is known. It means liberty. And, the flying swallow (*deror*) (Prov. 26:2) refers to a small bird that produces music when it is free.” Ibn Ezra draws the connection for us, defining דרור as both liberty and as a bird, a swallow that sings when free. This is both similar and different to the connection made between Dunbar and Angelou, who express a caged bird crying out for freedom, regardless of its liberatory status. It is a relentless cry, a prayer for that דרור, that bird, to experience דרור, true liberty.

In a much more modern context, this verse from our Torah, “And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants”, may be familiar to those of us who have visited the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. This verse was chosen as the inscription on the bell by Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, Isaac Norris, in 1751 in order to honor the ideas of religious liberty and political self-government.⁵ Of course, those democratic ideas did not extend to enslaved Africans at the time. This inscription, however, eventually became an important rallying cry for abolitionists fighting to end slavery in the United States. And we hear echoes of our Torah in the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he preaches to “let freedom ring” from all across the country.⁶

And yet, for as much as this verse from Torah has been woven into our country’s fabric, we remain so incredibly far from everyone, every person, being

³ Rabbi David Kasher. “The Fragrance of Freedom.” <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/fragrance-freedom>.

⁴ Proverbs 26:2

⁵ National Park Service. “The Liberty Bell.” <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/stories-libertybell.htm>.

⁶ Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “I Have A Dream.” <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>.

able to truly feel that proclamation of liberty. Tomorrow, May 25th, this Shabbat, will mark four years since the slow, cruel, painful murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Many of us will remember where we were when we first saw the video, heard his story. His last cries, from the harsh ground, "I can't breathe." Where was his proclamation of liberty? What about Ahmaud Arbery, the Black man killed while running through his neighborhood in Georgia, or Breonna Taylor, the Black woman killed by police while sleeping in her apartment. Where were their proclamations of liberty? Did our Torah, did the ringing of freedom from the Liberty Bell stop short just for them? Or for all Black people in this country? During the summer of 2020, the chants of "Black Lives Matter" throughout this country, and around the world, came too few, too late for these beautiful souls.

Our Torah teaches us, "And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants." Liberty was sorely, impossibly lacking in Minneapolis four years ago. But it seems clear from that day, from our Torah, that liberty for all people is not a given - it is something we must choose. We must choose to proclaim liberty for each and every person, for all of God's creatures. We must proclaim liberty from the sidewalks of Minneapolis, and Ferguson, and Staten Island, from the neighborhoods of Florida, from the playgrounds of Cleveland, from the cars of Texas, from the apartments of Louisville, from the streets of Georgia, from each and every place in this land. And after we proclaim this liberty, after we say "Black Lives Matter", we must proclaim liberty through our policies, through our votes, through all of our actions, each and every day. Only then, God-willing, by proclaiming liberty throughout and within the land, will see the bars of that cage shatter, and witness that beautiful singing bird fly outward, fly into the sky of possibility, of hope, of joy, and of peace. Shabbat Shalom.