

Bo 5786

January 24, 2026

Bar Mitzvah of Giovanni Shachtman

Gio, thank you for reminding us to see miracles. You reminded us that miracles are part of our daily lives, if only we would notice, if only we would see them. The Baal Shem Tov taught that when something happens once we call it a miracle but when it happens often we call it nature. Sometimes we get a flash of amazement and it's so obvious that the world is replete with wonders, and when we see that we don't understand how we could ever not see it that way. But then we forget and the world becomes ordinary again to our eyes, until the next time we're reminded. No one can keep it in their mind all of the time, so the secret really is to be reminded again and again and again. To seek out reminders, to remind ourselves, to turn ourselves toward that kind of remembering, so that awe becomes part of the pattern of our regular lives.

Your message is particularly important right now, when we are in a state of national and global dysregulation. Before the part of your parasha that you chanted and spoke about, the country of Egypt is going through the plagues. Every day, it seems, something worse happens. It's so fast that it's hard to even absorb or keep track of what is going on. It's overwhelming. They are stunned, it's simply unfathomable that there could be more, that it could get worse. And then the next thing happens and the next thing happens. By the time our parasha opens, seven plagues have already befallen them. Their livestock are already dead from disease, their river which is their water source has already turned to blood, fire has fallen from the sky like hail. The world that they'd known before is totally upside down. Can we imagine how disorienting and destabilizing that would be?

I think we can. Reading this parasha this year I have the vertiginous feeling of relating to both the Israelites seeking their freedom and the Egyptians watching their society be destroyed. While the shocking changes afflicting Egypt were for the purpose of ending tyranny and the shocking changes we're experiencing here are for the purpose of establishing tyranny, we know the feeling of living in a world that is suddenly and dramatically being turned upside down. We know what

it's like to watch whole systems and structures that we took for granted crumble in front of our eyes. And we find ourselves asking "Is that how the world works now?"

You can just brazenly kidnap the leader of another nation and put him in jail down the street? You can just say you need a foreign country, that you want to buy it, and threaten your allies, and they start negotiating with you to give you part of that country? You can override all existing international bodies to put yourself personally in charge of rebuilding one of the most devastated and complicated places on earth, without consent of the people who live there, and everyone is just going to let you? That's how the world works now?

Historian and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Robert Kagan, wrote a piece in *The Atlantic* this week entitled "America vs. the World," in which he said that Trump's behavior means that Americans are "entering the most dangerous world they have known since World War II... with multiple great powers and metastasizing competition and conflict. The U.S will have no reliable friends or allies," he wrote, "and will have to depend entirely on its own strength to survive and prosper.... Americans are neither materially nor psychologically ready for this future," he wrote. "Americans are so accustomed to this basically peaceful, prosperous, and open world that they tend to think it is the normal state of international affairs, likely to continue indefinitely. They can't imagine it unraveling, much less what that unraveling will look like for them."

This is the same Robert Kagan, an influential neoconservative voice during the George W Bush administration, who wrote a piece almost exactly ten years ago entitled, "This is How Fascism Comes to America." He wrote this when Donald Trump was a candidate for the Republican nomination in 2016:

"If he wins the election, his legions will likely comprise a near majority of the nation. Imagine the power he'll wield then in addition to all that comes from being the leader of a mass following. He will also have the immense powers of the American presidency at his command, the Justice Department, the FBI, the intelligence services, the military. Who would dare to oppose him then? Certainly not a Republican party that lay down before him even when he was comparatively weak. ...This is how fascism comes to America, not with jackboots and salutes, but with a television huckster, a phony billionaire, a textbook egomaniac tapping into popular resentments and insecurities. And with an entire

national political party, out of ambition or blind party loyalty or simply out of fear, falling into line behind him.”

Kagan was on the New Yorker Radio Hour this week commenting on that 2016 prediction. “The only thing I was wrong about,” he said, “is that there *are* jackboots now. That was a failure of imagination on my part.” He also said that the fascist project is “virtually complete.”

“What we’re seeing in Minnesota,” he said, “is both a dress rehearsal [and] also an effort to desensitize the country to the idea of using overwhelming force by the federal government to effectively invade states, especially democratic states, and take control. There is no chance that Donald Trump will allow himself to lose in November. It is perfectly obvious that where we’re heading in ten months is sending ICE in, provoking riots through their brutal behavior … and thereby providing a …phony justification for the deployment of the Insurrection Act and then if necessary seizing ballots. Unless they got up on the rooftops and said, ‘We are going to subvert the 2026 election,’ they could not be more obvious about what they are planning.”

“The administration is trying to militarize American society. They are trying to make the military his personal weapon. ICE is a paramilitary organization like any fascist military organization, reporting strictly to him. As is the Justice Department and CIA. They are getting Americans used to the idea that it’s about military power. Being in a state of war provides opportunities.

The only hope for the survival of liberalism in the world, that battle is occurring right here in the United States, and this militarization of American foreign policy has domestic purposes. In a simple sense, if we are at war, it gives the executive branch, which already has enormous power, even more power and the courts can do nothing about it.”

I have been cautious about bringing you voices like Kagan’s because I do not want to contribute to your fear, especially on Shabbat, especially in this sanctuary where people come for comfort and safety. Fear is often unhelpful and there is already so much of it. Fear can be an obstacle to the kind of clear-eyed action we need.

We have no way to assess whether Kagan’s predictions will come true. It’s possible that a huge electoral wave will overwhelm attempts to subvert the

election this fall and Congress will become a separate power again able to block the worst of this administration's agenda, and it is possible that a landslide three years from now will oust this regime from office, sending the fascists back under their rocks.

Fear is unhelpful. But preparedness is helpful. What if we knew for certain that Kagan was right? What if we knew that within ten months what's happening in Minneapolis will be happening in New York and other cities, what if we knew that a paramilitary force is coming to our neighborhood, that we're going to be unable to walk down the street without encountering untrained armed masked men with an arrest quota, that we'll be unable to go to the grocery store without worrying that a van full of them is going to swerve around a corner and pull up to snatch people? What if we're going to lose our right to protest, what if people we know are going to get thrown to the ground and brutalized for simply trying to protect their neighbors nonviolently, what if our streets are going to be full of tear gas? What if like in Minnesota, our neighbors are going to be in lockdown unable to leave the house for food? And what if we won't have the power to vote for a new majority in Congress, or to vote out this president in three years, *what would we want to have done now?*

Here are some ideas:

1. For starters, we would want to flood the Senate with phone calls this Monday. This week, the Senate has the power to block funding for ICE. You might think that it would take a miracle for the Senate to stand up to this administration, but as you taught us Gio miracles are real and they happen every day. Voting to block funding for ICE is not a difficult vote. In the most recent Times/Siena poll, 61% of Americans say that ICE has gone too far. Every one of us and everyone we know should call the Senate on Monday and demand a full stop to ICE funding.

2. If we knew that our right to protest would be gone, wouldn't we want to have taken every opportunity to march peacefully in the streets while it was still safe, to demonstrate our noncooperation with this regime? Marching gives hope to people who are watching, letting them know they're not alone and giving them the courage to join in. CBE participates in marches practically every week. Rabbi Kolin just spoke at yesterday's anti-ICE march. The No Kings March in October

was the single biggest march in American history. That is a miracle. Every time a new person finds the courage to join a march it is another miracle.

3. If we knew that paramilitary forces would be in our streets by November, we would want to have built relationships with immigrant communities so that we would know how best to keep each other safe. That is why every Tuesday night we stand with the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and the Reverend Juan Carlos Ruiz in a vigil outside of the Metropolitan Detention Center in Sunset Park where some of their members are currently being held simply for being immigrants. Forging a relationship between a progressive Zionist synagogue and a progressive Latino church after October 7th and the Gaza war, in the midst of rampant antisemitism and xenophobia, that is a miracle. And we're doing it.

4. If we knew that paramilitary forces would be in our streets by November, we would want to have built relationships with our nearest neighbors so that we have each other when we need each other. That is why every Thursday evening we stand in vigil at Grand Army Plaza as part of Shine the Light. It's just a half an hour, it's joyful, it's sweet. The fact that people gather every week with home made signs for freedom and love and democracy, that is a beautiful miracle. And in this way we're getting to know our neighbors.

5. If we knew that paramilitary forces would be in our streets by November, we would want to have trained in how to create an atmosphere of strict nonviolence and mutual support in the face of state violence. That's why we started holding trainings in December and will be holding more. The fact that Minnesotans are completely taking care of one another across all of their differences, neighbors are patrolling the streets, warning one another of danger, feeding each other, buying diapers for each other, fully caring for one another in an utterly nonviolent way despite every provocation, that is a miracle. Truly a miracle!

When the ninth plague, the plague of darkness, descended upon Egypt it was, the Torah tells us, a darkness that could be touched. **לֹא־רָאָו אִישׁ אֶת־אֶחָיו**
“A person could not see his brother.”

Ramban says “this darkness was not a mere absence of sunlight where the sun set and it was like night” “a great darkness ...descend[ed] upon them and ...extinguish[ed] every light”

Or HaMeir teaches that when the Torah tells us that “people could not see one another,” it means “that they did not consider them... They did not take to heart how much they could learn from the goodness of their neighbors.” The people of Minnesota have refused that darkness. They have refused to be turned against one another, or to be indifferent to the plight of their neighbors. They are like the Israelites, of whom the verse says, “but all of the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.”

If we knew that this was coming for us, we would want to build that kind of community here now. We’d form pods in this congregation so everyone has someone they can call and no one is alone, and we know how to find each other and look out for each other.

All of these opportunities to meet this moment through CBE are easy to access. They’re listed every week in the weekly email with a simple sign up form. You can ask me or any member of the clergy and we will connect you.

6. Finally, if we knew that paramilitary forces would be in our streets by November, we would want, like the Israelites, to have ritual in community, to have spiritual practice woven into our days, to guide us, to gird us, to sustain us, to hold us. In our parasha, which tells the dramatic liberation of our people, 53 verses are dedicated to the plagues and the account of our liberation and 52 verses are dedicated to the ritual commemorating the story and teaching it to future generations.

Gio, you asked why we still observe the Biblical traditions. This parasha tells us that ritual in community is as important as the original event. 53 verses for the original event, 52 verses for the ritual throughout time. Telling our story, remembering who we are and what we serve, what our lives are about, is as important as the action itself. Every time people fill this sanctuary to sing together, to tell the story of the Exodus through our prayers and express their longings to serve something greater than themselves, every time we remember that the world is still full of wonders as you taught us, Gio, that is a miracle.

And if Robert Kagan and Masha Gessen and Timothy Snyder and a host of experts turn out to be totally wrong, and this nightmare is over in the next few years, will we regret that we did these things? Will we regret marching peacefully

against fascism? Will we regret getting to know the immigrant communities next door? Will we regret getting to know one another better, or developing our ritual lives as a source of strength? I doubt it.

And if they are right and we are actually descending into full-fledged fascism, how does it end?

It ends the way the tyranny of Pharaoh ended. As the parasha says, **וְגַם־עַרְבָּה גַּבְּרָה עַלְּהָ אֶתְּנָם** a great mixed multitude rose up with them. In some countries it happens quickly and in some countries it takes decades, but the way it ends is that the people come together across their differences and decide that they don't want this anymore. And when enough people decide to stop cooperating with the regime, it ends.

It ends with a great mixed multitude taking their future into their own hands, putting their unrisen bread on their backs, and turning together toward freedom.

Ken Yehi Ratzon