

Beshalach 5786

Jan 31, 2026

Bat Mitzvah of Julia Brilliant

Julia, thank you for connecting the grandest moment in our people's story— the splitting of the sea, the Exodus from Egypt — to manna. It's hard when looking at this portion to get past the part where Moses lifts up his staff and the waters part and the people descend into the sea on dry land with a wall of water on their left and a wall of water on their right and they walk across the sea bed to freedom and turn around and see the waters crash down upon their adversaries, upon their slavers, who drown in the sea. Then they sing a song of celebration that's so important to our people, as we saw today it even looks different in the Torah. The words of that song and the moment it represents are so central to our identity that they are in our prayers every morning and every evening — the prayer we know as Mi Chamocha. That dramatic moment of liberation is so vital that it concludes the third paragraph of the Shema. It's also featured in Kiddush every Friday night. And of course it is the central miracle of the drama told every spring around our Passover tables. You can even find its imprint in the blessings we say when we wake up in the morning, as we describe ourselves as *bnei horin*, children of freedom. People meant to be free.

What a juxtaposition to read of our people's liberation just as we are facing the eclipse of our own freedoms. It is here to tell us:

We have known unfreedom before.

We have known liberation before.

So with all of this drama, commotion, identity-formation, and inspiration in this parashah, it's no wonder that we often give short shrift to another equally wondrous miracle also in the portion, the manna that fell from the sky as soon as we were free.

Thank you, Julia, for teaching us that G-d designed the miracle of manna in such a way that every person would have enough and be satisfied. That no one would go hungry, whether they were strong or weak, whether they were old or young. That no one would go without what they need. Further, G-d designed manna this way to teach us something. There is a long and consistent tradition in Judaism that we are to see G-d's acts like manna as models for us for how we are to behave.

Tanhuma Vayishlach 10 tells us, "When Moses instructed Israel, 'Walk after Adonai your God,' and then reiterated, 'to walk in God's ways,' they said to him, 'Who could walk in God's ways? Does it not say, *God travels in whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the*

*dust on God's feet (Nahum 1:3)?!*... Moses said to Israel, 'God's ways are graciousness, truth and acts of lovingkindness'" As you have shown us today, Julia, we are to look for how, within our own powers, we can be like G-d, acting out of graciousness, truth, and lovingkindness to ensure that every person has what they need.

I'd like to look more deeply at the relationship between G-d's choice to free the Israelites and God's choice to ensure that every Israelite had enough manna to eat, because I think they actually come from the same Divine imperative.

We usually think of the Exodus as if it's primarily about freedom. But the reason God cares about human freedom in the Torah is that God cares about respect for the human person. The reason God cares about respect for the human person is because according to Torah human beings are Gd's own image. Every one of us is created in the image of God. And that means we have infinite inherent dignity and value, every one of us, regardless of immigration status, regardless of economic status, regardless of social status.

It was Pharaoh's disrespect and degradation of the human being — through first speaking of the Israelites as if they were sub-human and as if they were an enemy within, and then oppressing them and enacting violence against them, and then treating them as if their only value was their labor — it was this degradation of the human person that so offended G-d. G-d stands on the side of freedom because G-d stands on the side of human dignity. And while we're on this point let's be clear that it's not just human beings that G-d values. It's all life. This is not our topic today, but Torah teaches that G-d is invested in the entire web of life and the dignity of every living thing.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches: "Pesach [the Exodus story] is about the central Jewish project: constructing a society radically unlike any that had existed before and most that have come into being since. It poses a fundamental question: can we make, on earth, a social order based not on transactions of power but on respect for the human person — each person — as the image of God?"

Such a social order may sound utopian, a model we preach about in our houses of worship but don't actually expect to make real. But Julia, you are calling us to that social order, and you are making the case that it is not out of reach at all. And you are not the only one.

The people of Minneapolis just showed the world what is possible if we simply decide that human dignity is an inviolable value. We all have a lot to learn from the people of

Minneapolis. They have given us everything we need not only to respond to this regime's project of dehumanization, but also to reach for the vision you've set out for us today about the manna, a social order based on respect for the human person, starting with the idea that everyone deserves to have what they need and to be protected.

We have seen Minnesotans risk their safety and their lives for the freedom of their neighbors. Equally important, we have seen Minnesotans work cooperatively by the tens of thousands to feed their neighbors, so that no immigrant who is trapped at home will go hungry. I read that 24,000 immigrant families have received food from their neighbors in the last few weeks. We have seen Minnesotans organize block by block to look out for one another and to take care of one another. Note that to the people of Minneapolis, the agenda of freedom and the agenda of sufficiency — protecting their neighbors and feeding their neighbors — are related. They're both about respect for the human person, about the inherent dignity and worth of every one of us.

Our member Gal Beckerman wrote yesterday in the Atlantic that the people of Minneapolis should properly be called dissidents, which he defined as “not people practicing politics or fighting for regime change. It is, in fact, humanist. These people are not trying to replace one governing order or ideology with another. They are ... reacting to a violation of humanity and deciding to do something about it.” This is consonant with David Brooks's farewell column yesterday, in which he beckoned us to turn toward humanism.

We must understand that this administration's anti-humanist program, its agenda of dehumanization, of disrespect for the human person, is much like Pharaoh's. This administration is hoping that as a nation we will grow accustomed to dehumanization. It has a head start in that effort, because we have allowed the degradation of human beings to persist in this country all of our lives.

You speak of homelessness, Julia. We know that we all live as if homelessness is acceptable. We see unhoused people on the street and just go about our lives. 13 people died on the streets of our own city this last week from the cold. Many of them had been in the city's shelters in the past, meaning they had experienced homelessness. And it seems that many of them froze to death on our streets. When we grow accustomed to people living without shelter such that thirteen can freeze to death on a bitterly cold night, it is not as difficult to grow accustomed to people being dehumanized by ICE.

We grow accustomed to the degradation of the human being when we live as if it's normal that we have the largest carceral system in the world, with 2 million people in

jails and prisons, representing 20 percent of the world's incarcerated population even though we have only 5% of the world's total population. Right here in New York on Rikers Island, 85-90% of the people locked up are pre-trial, meaning they have not been convicted of a crime. In 2023, the median time between when a person arrived on Rikers Island and when they stood trial was 375 days, meaning that people lived in that hell for more than a year before they could even make a case for their innocence. When we grow accustomed to such a reality, it's not as difficult to grow accustomed to the detention of immigrants who have committed no crime. This is all profound disrespect for the human person.

When 48 million Americans, including 14 million children, experience food insecurity in the richest country in the world on an ongoing basis, as if it's normal despite the fact there is more than enough food for everyone, we are all participating in the disrespect of the human person, the disparagement of the image of G-d in the world.

If we valued human life the way G-d does, the way G-d insists that we do, we would decide to change these things forever. We would decide that, given the plenty of this society and our world, every person should have what they need: shelter, food, health care, mental health care, recovery services, and —unless they posed a true threat to others — freedom.

We'd decide that this matters to us more than greed and more than hatred. We wouldn't wait for everyone across our country to agree. It's in our power to start now in our own neighborhoods, as you are showing us, Julia. As the people of Minneapolis are showing us. Because if they can mobilize to feed all of the people who were hungry when ICE was in town, they can feed all of the people who are hungry when ICE isn't in town. And so can we.

One more note. The people of Minneapolis succeeded because they practiced nonviolence. They made clear their opposition by showing up in numbers, by recording the violence perpetrated by federal agents, by patrolling their neighborhoods and defending their neighbors, and by communicating their opposition to the occupation of their city through chants and signs. They did not use guns. They did not riot. Despite extraordinary provocation, they remained nonviolent. And they showed us that nonviolence works. Nonviolence works to challenge the lies of the administration on social media and in the national discourse, nonviolence works to expose the inhumanity of the administration's objectives and methods, and nonviolence works to win over the public who are watching from the sidelines and trying to determine whether to support this regime or oppose it. Nonviolence works because it honors the human person.

At CBE we have so many ways for you to get involved in honoring the human person right now, from making and bringing food to refugees, to standing with our immigrant neighbors in vigils outside of our nearest detention center (MDC), from getting to know our neighbors by standing together for human values, to patrolling Sunset Park to watch for ICE, to accompanying asylum seekers to court, to participating in public marches, to learning the skills of nonviolence, marshaling, and deescalation at a training on February 21. This week there are two trainings of interest: Indivisible Brooklyn is meeting here on February 4 and on the same day RAC-NY is running an immigration legislation workshop on Zoom. All of these opportunities can be found in our weekly email and on our website, or simply ask any member of the clergy to connect you. When you click on the link you'll find a simple registration form which will help our volunteer leaders connect you to the right opportunity. Meanwhile, the NYC Department of Social Services is asking faith communities to look out for any unhoused people on the street and to call 311 for emergency assistance to bring them to warming stations. This is obviously only a very short term solution, but by doing this you could save someone's life.

What did the Israelites learn from their enslavement and their liberation? What will we learn from this terrible time? The Mekhilta tells us that everyone who crossed the sea, even a maidservant, saw the truth more clearly than the great prophet Ezekiel ever did. What did she see? She saw that G-d is real and that G-d is on the side of freedom. That G-d is on the side of respect for the human person, every human person.

Thank you for showing us, Julia, that the Exodus and the manna are connected. Freedom without sufficiency does not work. Sufficiency without freedom does not work. Freedom for some and not others does not work. Enough for us but not for them does not work. As Rav Kook said, we are in an interconnected and interdependent universe. The answer is a social order centered on the dignity of the human person and all life. The answer, as Rambam said, is collective responsibility.

Every one of us is part of that collective. If we have to go through this harrowing time, let's at least learn from it. Let's at least let it change us. Let's become people who protect, feed, and shelter our neighbors. Let's become people who build the kind of social order that respects the human person. When we feel powerless as we stare down the possibility of fascism, let's remember that nothing is stopping us from building that social order right here and right now.

Shabbat Shalom.