

Shabbat Bo 5786

The Strength Pharaoh Never Understood

Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Exactly two weeks ago, it was a *wonderful* day for the Jewish community. Right here in this room, we had a Bar Mitzvah to celebrate our youth; two aufrufs to celebrate upcoming weddings; and a 90th birthday, to celebrate our senior citizens. What a day!

Exactly two weeks ago, it was a *devastating* day for the Jewish community. Jackson, Mississippi's only synagogue, Beth Israel Congregation, was set ablaze by an antisemitic arsonist. While nobody was hurt, the fire destroyed the synagogue's library and two Torah scrolls. What a day.

As Ecclesiastes says, *Et Livkot V'Et LisHok* - that day was a time for weeping and a time for laughing.

Just last Friday night, the Beth Israel community gathered for its first Shabbat service since the fire. About 170 congregants filled Northminster Baptist Church, after the church generously loaned its space to the Jewish community. It turns out that more than 10 churches had offered to host the synagogue for Shabbat. These days antisemitism boils at record-high levels, but we must never forget that the Jewish community still has so many allies as our supporters, like these churches.

A brief tangent about this specific church: in the mid-1960's, this Baptist congregation split. A breakaway group sought a church that was no longer racially segregated. They had the people to grow a new church, but not a place. It was Congregation Beth Israel that opened its doors to this Baptist community until they could find a permanent home. 60 years later, the neighborly interfaith partnership endures.

Meanwhile, the larger Jewish community's reflex to care for each other, to be responsible for each other, was evident as well. The New York Times reported that "Temple B'Nai Israel, a Reform synagogue in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, lent the community a Torah as well as 50 prayer books. A synagogue in Memphis, Tennessee, sent another 100 prayer books. The *Oneg* [Kiddush] after services was provided by Touro Synagogue in New Orleans, Louisiana, and included a pecan praline challah king cake, a Jewish twist on the traditional Mardi Gras dessert."

In last week's Thursday Beth El email, we included a link for our congregants to donate directly to rebuilding costs, so we too can support our fellow Jews.

The Jackson, Mississippi congregation is led by a student rabbi Benjamin Russell. I want to quote part of his Shabbat sermon for you: "We will not only survive, we will thrive. A few days ago, someone tried to wound us. What they failed to understand is that we are not made of wood and paper and shelves. We are made of Torah, memory, community, stubborn love and 3000 years of defiance. Beth Israel is still here, Jewish life in Jackson is still here, and we are not going anywhere, because the opposite of fear is not bravery, it is presence. Every time we gather, every time we pray, every time we teach a child to read Aleph Bet, every time we put on a Tallis, every time we celebrate a Bat Mitzvah or mourn with the family, we are safe. We belong, we matter, we will outlive every Pharaoh history produces."

Ah, Pharaoh.

Perhaps Rabbi Russell mentioned Pharaoh because we're reading about the wicked despot in the Torah these days. Or perhaps because he sees a deeper connection - as I do - between this despicable attack and the Egyptian tyrant.

Like the arsonist, Pharaoh miscalculated the source of Jewish strength and power. For Pharaoh, it was *Jewish men* who represented the danger. So if they could be eliminated, his thinking went, that would take care of the Jewish problem.

This is why, in Exodus chapter 1, he instructs the midwives to drown the Jewish baby *boys* specifically, not the baby girls. The 13th century rabbi Hizkuni points out that *only the boys* would grow up to be soldiers. That is, Pharaoh was concerned only with physical power, the source of which would be male fighters. This was his blind spot.

The Etz Hayyim Humash commentary adds: "Pharaoh assumed that the only threat to his power would be *physical* resistance by Israelite males. He could not conceive of the power of *spiritual* resistance, exemplified by the role women play in the Exodus narrative." Indeed, it was five heroic women who enabled Moses to take the stage:

Shifra and Pua, the Hebrew midwives, defy Pharaoh's edict to drown the Jewish baby boys in the Nile. Yocheved, Moses's mother, gives birth to a Jewish child during this very dangerous time. Miriam, Moses's sister, watches over baby Moses floating in the wicker basket on the Nile. And Pharaoh's own daughter raises the child as her adopted son.

Jewish strength was always about more than its brawn.

In today's reading, Bo, we find ourselves in the middle of the ten plagues. After the seventh plague, Pharaoh is finally cracking under the pressure. He briefly relents, telling Moses and Aaron they can go for three days to celebrate a festival: "Go, worship the L-rd your G-d. Who are the ones to go?"

בְּנֵעֶרֶינוּ וּבְזָקָנִינוּ נָלַךְ בְּבָנֵינוּ וּבְבָנֹתֵינוּ בְּצָאָנוּ וּבְבָקָרֵנוּ נָלַךְ קַיְחָה 'לְנוּ: Moses answers
"With our young ones and our elders, we will go. With our sons and our daughters, our flocks and our herds, we will go to celebrate the L-rd's festival."

Pharaoh objects: "No. You men can go and serve the L-rd, as that is what you seek" (Ex. 10:7-11). But not everybody.

Obviously this did not satisfy Moses, and the plagues continued.

Let's look closely at both their responses. First, Pharaoh: Why would he be OK letting the men go at all? The 12th century Midrash collection called Sechel Tov observes that keeping the women and kids in Egypt - essentially holding them hostage - would ensure that the Jewish men would return after their desert festival instead of escaping for good. No surprise there.

But there's more to it. The 17th century rabbi Kli Yakar points out that in the Egyptian worldview, only men participated in sacrificial services. Women had no role in religious life whatsoever. So if the Israelites were going to sacrifice to G-d, as they claimed, Pharaoh concluded only men were eligible for participation.

Moses rejects this worldview out of hand. Here he doesn't merely negotiate logistics but articulates a theology of community."

When he answers: "With our young ones and our elders, we will go. With our sons and our daughters, our flocks and our herds, we will go" of course he affirms that they are all deserving of freedom. He also asserts that *all* of them have an important role in Jewish religious life. Every last person in the community - young and old, woman and man - is needed to serve G-d and celebrate the festivals. Each of these groups plays a different role, but every role is vital in making the community whole. *This* is the source of Jewish strength: we are a community where *everybody* is valued, where *everybody* has a role to play.

The 20th century Hasidic Rabbi Yosef Kahneman of Ponovitz writes why leaving the children back in Egypt was a non-starter for Moses: "This would make Israel an orphan

nation. A child without parents is an orphan. And a nation without children is an orphan people.” For Jewish children are the guarantors of our future as a Jewish people.

Pharaoh miscalculated when he briefly considered that only the Jewish men could leave Egypt. He did not grasp that Jewish strength is sourced in the indivisibility of our community. That it’s our people, *all* our people, that are the beating heart of Judaism.

What happened in Jackson, Mississippi two weeks ago was truly devastating. And the perfect response to that despicable attack was what happened here at Beth El: Men and women, children, adults, and elders gathered here to celebrate Shabbat, a Bar Mitzvah, two aufrufs, and a significant birthday. It was just as Moses described: “With our young ones and our elders, we will go. With our sons and our daughters, we will go.” This continues to be exactly the way forward for our people, then, now, and always.

Congregation Beth Israel is led by a rabbi, of course, as well as volunteer leaders. One of them, Sarah Thomas, observed: “The [synagogue building] is not what makes up our community. Our community is made up of the people. We’re going to be in other places, and we’ll make that our home. But really together, we the people are going to be home to one another.”

Shabbat Shalom.