“For You, Not for Me” – Shabbat *HaChodesh*

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, March 20, 2020

This week we read a special additional Torah portion because it is the Shabbat that precedes the new Hebrew month in which Passover falls.  (Yes, Passover comes in two and a half weeks!)  Will it help us to think about the big picture as we struggle to stabilize our overturned lives in the wake of the viral pandemic?  Will it help us to cope a bit better?  Let’s see.

That special passage, from Exodus chapter 12, tells the famous story of Moses instructing the Israelites to stay self-quarantined in their homes while God passes through Egypt delivering the fateful tenth plague (the slaying of the Egyptian first born).  Each Israelite household is told to slaughter a lamb, paint the doorposts with the lamb’s blood, and then barbeque the lamb and eat it with bitter herbs and matzah.  They are not to go outdoors during that awful night.  In the morning, they will all leave Egyptian slavery together – forever.

One way to read the text is to assume that God wants to fly around from house to house like Santa Claus, looking at doorposts to see who is an Israelite and who is not.  It’s as if only in this way will God know whom to strike with the fatal plague.

The great medieval rabbi Rashi invites us to look at the text more closely.  What does it really say?  It says “The blood shall be a sign *for you.*” *Lachem.* Rashi interprets this to mean that God wants the blood on the door to be “a sign *for you and not for others*.” So why does God tell Moses that “I will see the blood and pass over your houses?” Is God really looking that closely?

Rashi figures that since God would already know whether the blood had been put on the doorpost without having to look, what God is really looking for is “whether you [Israelites] are engaged in the performance of commandments” or not.

In other words, the blood on the doorpost has no magic effect.  It doesn’t make the plague go away.  It doesn’t tell God anything that God wouldn’t already know.  It doesn’t “protect” the people inside.

So why do it?  For *ourselves*.  Not to make us feel better, and not to keep us from getting sick or dying of some other plague, but simply to allow us to *remind*ourselves that we are committed to the larger life of principled goodness that the Torah calls us to live.  The blood is our way of saying that no matter what happens tonight or tomorrow morning, we agree to bind ourselves to the Torah’s cause.

That’s why we will somehow figure out a way to have seders in our homes this year, even if we have to connect to our extended families by Zoom in order to do it.  That’s why we will continue to put a mezuzah on our door, not to “protect” the house, but to remind ourselves of who we are and how we try to live.  They are signs *for us.*

Only medical science, good healthcare infrastructures, proper caution and adequate testing will keep us from getting the virus.  But the Passover seder and the mezuzah on the door will help us to remind *ourselves* that we need to care for the vulnerable in our communities, both with small individual acts of compassion and with sweeping societal initiatives.

All of Jewish life, essentially, is a sign - not for God, but for us.  A people who can see that sign is a people worthy of leaving slavery and heading forth on a journey toward Sinai.