

“The Worst of Times”

D’var Torah for Par’shat B’ha’a lot’cha May 29. 2021

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Our Torah portion introduces itself with an image that projects “the best of times.” It starts with this hopeful – and surely familiar - picture: *b’ha’a lot’cha et hanerot el mul p’nai ham’norah, ya’iru*. “When you get up on the ladder to light the menorah each night, let it shine!” It’s as if the entire Jewish enterprise could be encapsulated in this beautifully symbolic gesture. *Rise up, hold the torch, light the lamp, let it shine forth. Repeat. Night after night, throughout your generations. Be a light to the nations.*

Inspiring. *Ya’iru!* Let it shine!

But if I may, I’d like to take us to the middle and end of the parashah, to what has to be one of the most deflating, hopeless, depressing scenes in all of the Torah, short of the Golden Calf.

Reading it, one hears echoes of our own time: disheartened and disenfranchised individuals crying out to be heard; plagues confounding physical well-being; leaders’ credibility questioned; leaders’ patience tested to the core. Confusion and disorientation. No clear pathway toward the future. No shining menorah beckoning from the holy tent of meeting. Mostly just darkness and uncharted wilderness.

I’m thinking of the frightening spate of anti-Semitism coming at us from all sides in the past days, from the so-called Left as well as the so-called Right. And of the

sickening scenes of death in Gaza, as well as in Israel. And of the irksome international praise for Hamas as if it had the best interests of Palestinians in mind. As if the faces of those dead children we saw on the front page of yesterday's New York Times brought tears of pain and regret to the operatives of Hamas.

And of the international condemnation of Israel for defending itself against rocket attacks on its civilians. And of the disgraceful behavior of Israeli Jews and Arabs toward one another in those towns where both ethnicities have long lived cooperatively and made viable communities. (My own relatives in the north of Israel, all of them Arabic speakers and good friends of many in the Palestinian community of Acco, are sick at heart, along with their Arab neighbors.)

And of our official Jewish community's stubborn denial of Israel's central role in egging on those tensions and creating maddening inequities in its social structures and legal policies. And of Israel's apparent inability to stand up to a rigid religious fundamentalist grip on its own government.

Not that any of this is by any means responsible for what's happening, either to Israel or to us over here in America, but that it is certainly making matters worse.

So much to fret about. But back to our parashah:

Our parashah will offer us three touchstones via this challenging narrative. They are: *1) listening attentively; 2) sharing the burden; and 3) leading with humility.* I am suggesting that these three moves in combination can go a long way toward helping us deal with our own collective *tzooris*.

Here is the story: A year has passed since the Exodus from Egypt. Now the time has come for the people to leave the nurturing shadow of Mount Sinai and to begin the trek through the unknown.

They panic. They murmur. They long for the garlic, leeks, melons, and onions of Egypt. They fear whatever might be expected of them. They rebel against Moses, against God, against the entire enterprise. *Vayitz'ak ha'am el Moshe*. "They scream at Moses" and against his authority. They really are rudderless.

Listen to the Torah's response: *vayishma Moshe et ha'am bocheh*. "Moses listens to the people *crying* as they stand at the entrance of their tents, family by family." *Vayichar af ado-nai*. God is angered to see the expedition coming unraveled. But Moses, closer to the ground, sees and hears. *Uv'eyney Moshe ra'*. "Moses sees how bad things have gotten." Moses hears, and sees, and because he can somehow keep his ego out of his own way, he gets it. He empathizes. He may even empathize too much for his own good.

Moses turns to God, pleading for assistance, pointing out that by himself he can no longer bear this heavy burden of the people's needs and fears. He even begs for death as an alternative to going on in this way.

God's response – God's *empathic* response - is to summon seventy elders, people of both administrative and spiritual experience, from throughout the Israelite camp. God breathes into them an ability to share authority, inspiration, and decision-making with Moses and with one another.

In so doing, God saves Moses's life *and* the lives of the people of Israel by showing them how to form *partnerships*; how to include the talents and efforts of a broad swath of the community in the effort to rescue them from ruination.

Sure, the challenges continue; mistrust persists; more horrors await; no one is truly happy. But the crisis is averted for the time being, and a modicum of calm slowly returns. The calm – the “cease fire” if you will – gives everyone a chance to breathe and re-think.

But soon after, Moses’s siblings Aaron and Miriam lose patience, as we suppose is normal under the strain of the times. They crack. They lash out at their brother. They challenge his authority. They say hurtful things. Regrettable things. Racist things.

Miriam contracts *tzara’at*, a horrible skin disorder. Moses could have responded with “hah, you deserved it! *Magia lach!* Instead, he prays for her recovery. *Eil na r’fa na lah.* “Please, good God, do heal her.”

God then notes that Moses is the humblest, most faithful person alive. Again, the crisis is averted, largely because Moses has responded not with vengeance but with generosity. With humility. Not self-effacement, true, but also not with self-righteousness.

As for us, the only way through intractable crises like those of our own time is to practice attentive listening to the cries of others; to share the burden of attending to the enormity of suffering (i.e., to be empathic even while we are defending our own position); and to acknowledge our own imperfections and frailties, and in doing so perhaps to invite others to acknowledge their own fallibility. To be humble like Moses our Teacher. To stop tripping over our own collective ego.

So much has changed for the better since a year ago. We are not experiencing “the worst of times” in any respect. Nonetheless, “good times” per se are not around the bend. “I am not a prophet nor the child of a prophet” – *lo navi anochi v’lo ben navi* – but I don’t believe you need me to announce a spoiler alert before proclaiming that more *tzooris* lurks on the horizon.

There will be more challenges to meet, more uncharted wildernesses to traverse. We need to hear each other, help each other, and know our inner selves. And yes, we need to stand together, even in our differences. Even in our *irresolvable* differences we need to stand together – as humans, for sure, and as fellow Jews no less so.

We can do all of that. The Torah shows us how. It doesn’t take our hand and lead us there, but it does, as it were, shine a light on the path forward.

*That* is the menorah, the imposing lamp, that our Torah commands us to rise up and light in the darkness of our time. *B’ha’a lot’cha et hanerot...ya’iru. Reach up, light the light, and shine forth.* Not with heat, of which there is sadly no shortage, but with light, of which there is precious little. Indeed, shine forth not with heat, but with light.