

Shemot 5781 The Inflection Point
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There's an ancient Jewish idea that through the dark night of suffering, redemption will come: yeridah l'tzorekh aliyah. In the shadow of violent insurrection, we stand at the inflection point between the death spiral and the promised redemption. There's a lot of responsibility to go around—but through honesty and accountability, we can turn this weepy night into a joyous morning.

There is a powerful, very old Jewish idea: *Yeridah l'tzorekh Aliyah*—descent comes in the service of ascent. It's a spiritual idea: Hasidic teachers like Degel Machaneh Efraim have taught that the experience of darkness and alienation is itself a fuel for our desire to return—*yeridah l'tzorekh aliyah*. This is descriptive, not prescriptive. It's not a justification for suffering, but a recognition that as painful as things are—today's struggle will only make tomorrow's redemption sweeter.

If we pay attention to the literary thrust of the Torah we see that it progresses along this trajectory:

The Torah begins in *gan eden* -- the Garden of Eden, a place of utter perfection—empty of suffering, longing and loss.

But from the height of physical and spiritual fulfillment, the Book of Genesis quickly becomes a narrative of descent and exile, punishment and devastation, conflict between nations and conflict within families.

Genesis concludes with our ancestors' descent into Egypt—set in motion by a series of explicitly descending events: Joseph is thrown into the pit, the brothers sell him down into slavery, he is imprisoned in Egypt, famine leads the brothers to follow him seeking food, they all ultimately relocate to Egypt. Ultimately, the book of Genesis, which began at the height of intimacy with God in the Garden, ends with Joseph, dead in a coffin sunk to the bottom of the Nile in Egypt.

And all of this descent, we know, sets the context for the drama of the first few verses of the book of Exodus, which we read this shabbat, when the people are brought even lower by a Pharaoh who doesn't recognize them, who feels only threatened by them, whose craven need for absolute power leads to hundreds of years of torture and enslavement of the Israelite people.

But of course our story doesn't end there. Generations of debasement and cruelty are granted a few sparse lines in our text, before the birth of our redemption begins. From the deep night of slavery, degradation, humiliation, ours becomes a story of resistance, people rediscovering their agency and rising up against tyranny. It is a story of miracles, of plagues and wonders, a redemption story that culminates in a renewed covenant between God and the people.

This story arc is embedded into our spiritual practice and stands at the heart of Jewish theology. *Yeridah l'tzorekh aliyah*—remember through the suffering, that redemption will come.

Or, in the language of the Psalmist (30:6), lifted up by our friend Rev. Raphael Warnock, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church this week when it became clear that he had been elected the first ever Black senator from Georgia: *joy comes in the morning*. The full verse makes clear exactly why that joyous morning is so holy and welcome: בְּעֶרְבַּי לֵילִי בָכִי וּלְבֹקֶר רִנָּה *We may lie down weeping in the night, but joy comes in the morning*. Out of your oppression, redemption. From your tears, laughter. From your sorrow, new life, new love, new blessing.

When I woke up on Wednesday morning this week, it took the full force of my will to resist immediately opening my phone to see what had unfolded in the six hours while we slept. Instead, I closed my eyes and held Raphael's words from the night before in my heart. And I smiled: a Black preacher and Jewish journalist, poised to head to the US senate after a powerful, multiracial, multifaith force revealed what's possible when we overcome the forces committed to turning us against one another, and instead lead together with our shared values. Joy comes in the morning indeed.

A few hours later, a violent insurrection began at the Capitol building, incited by the president and designed to wreak havoc and disrupt the certification process that would cement President-Elect Joe Biden's win.

As that coup attempt unfolded, it became achingly clear to me: the joyous morning, hard won as it was, was not yet with us.

This week, as we read Parashat Shemot, we stand at the inflection point between the death spiral—the weeping night—of Genesis and the promised redemption—the joyous morning—of Exodus.

And our nation, too, stands between a bitter end and the promise of a new, redemptive beginning.

What is required of us to transform the yeridah to Aliyah, the weeping night to joyous morning?

After four little girls were murdered in 16th street Baptist church in Birmingham, Dr. King said:

We must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderer.

The fire burning in America in this moment was fueled by a tyrant. A person who has used every moment of his public stage, starting years before he entered public office, fueling racist conspiracies and promoting his uniquely awful brand of brazen criminality and toxic masculinity.

Egypt, too, was under the ill-fated leadership of a narcissist, a man hungry for power whose trajectory and character hewed so closely to our own president that shortly after inauguration several of my rabbinic colleagues were told they were not to mention the word Pharaoh because it appeared to be an implicit critique of the new president.

But our Torah is clear that Pharaoh was not alone. He surrounded himself with an army of task masters, ready to do his bidding. And it was not only the task masters but the Egyptian people were brought into Pharaoh's cruel designs for the Israelites, who became complicit in Israelite enslavement and even in the murder of their first born baby boys. Why did Pharaoh enlist these forces? He wanted to ensure that there was no Egyptian without blood on his hands.

Just as Egypt was not about one man, neither is America. Blaming the president alone would be far too simple.

The deeper question we need to ask: what is the system, the way of life, the philosophy that produced the fire? Who is responsible?

I will not minimize the responsibility of the vice president, the cabinet and the president's craven enablers in the Senate and House, who handed over the reigns of our fragile democracy to a man hell-bent on destroying it all for his own personal profit. Nor will I minimize the responsibility of those who travelled to our nation's capital to fill the halls of Congress with violence and broken glass. Surely they must all be held accountable.

But if we're honest, and it's long past time to be honest: their culpability is shared by many.

What we saw this week was the natural result of generations of heresy bearing down on our nation's soul.

From before our nation's founding, its mythology was being furiously crafted. For generations, children fed on a diet of racist lies. Raised on the heresy that God loves them more. Taught that they'd be diminished in a more just, equitable and compassionate America. Millions became intoxicated by the lie of white supremacy, a spiritual cancer that has metastasized at the heart of our nation. A morally bankrupt politics that claims that patriotism depends on the suppression, criminalization and dehumanization of fellow citizens.

And that heresy—the lie of white supremacy—is so much a part of the system, of the water we drink in America, that the culpability for this disastrous moment reaches far into the population. Who is responsible?

Every person who stood silently as the lies festered and the violence was fueled these past many years. By those who demurred when children were separated from their families [at the border](#), and those who talked about [law and order](#) when peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters were targeted and teargassed, beaten and brutalized. Those who engaged in homiletical acrobatics to muddy the abundantly clear [“fine people on both sides,”](#) and those who shrugged when terrorists stormed the statehouse and plotted to [kidnap and execute the Governor of Michigan](#). Those who those who said, again and again, “I don't like what he says, but I like what he does.” Those who ignored his overt embrace of white nationalists because, well, he's good for Israel. Oh, and taxes. Those who justified, excused, obfuscated and pointed fingers at everyone but the architects of the machinery of fear and division that is breaking our nation, leaving the most vulnerable to stand alone on the front lines defending their lives and democracy.

Yesterday Politico reported that off-duty officers and members of the military were among the rioters and flash their badges and ID cards as they overran the building. “If these people can storm the capital building with no regard to punishment,” one metro DC police officer wrote, “then you have to wonder how much they abuse their powers when they put on their uniforms.”

We must not underestimate the weight of these images, rioters and insurrectionists, white supremacists holding Confederate and Nazi flags, bearing tshirts that screamed

6MWE (6 million wasn't enough) and Camp Auschwitz, planting gallows on the Capitol lawn and breaching sacred ground with impunity. These images struck a body blow. The trauma is deep and real. As Rev Jacqui Lewis put it so perfectly: *So damn tired of living in a country that treats Black grief as a threat and white rage as a sacrament.*

Yes, the responsibility is vast. But because we stand at this inflection point, because I so desperately want for us to emerge from the weepy night into the morning, because I so believe that we are on the cusp of this yeridah transforming into an aliyah, we have to be honest.

In Shemot the transformation *m'afeilah l' orah*, from darkness to light, is one that has to take hold in the hearts of every person before it can transform the society: From Moses, who, in order to emerge as a leader had to grow and change and see what he couldn't see before, to the Israelite people, who had suffered for so long under weight of oppression that they had to be convinced that this time was different. That the redemption was finally near. To even some in Egyptian society. The text is clear: while the Egyptian people were fully complicit in the oppression, when the Israelites ultimately leave, an *erev rav* leaves with them. This is a mixed multitude of people who shifted alliance from the oppressors to the oppressed. They realized that none of us is free until all are free. These are the people who grew to understand that racial justice is not a marginal issue, but a foundational one. That you can't have a just society until all people granted lifted up as images of the divine, treated with dignity and love.

That's a heavy lift. And it's the only way to walk toward freedom.

We can't treat what happened in America this week as a dangerous anomaly, simply hoping that a new administration will move us into a new chapter of healing.

A new dawn will never emerge until we eradicate the pernicious forces that normalized this toxicity over generations so that it could erupt as it did this week.

There's no shortcut here. It's not only the recklessness, fecklessness and shocking criminality of the few that got us here. Silence and complicity are among the deadliest of sins. As I've said many times before—we all have a choice to make: either we work to dismantle oppressive systems, or our inaction becomes the mortar that sustains them.

I still believe that *joy will come in the morning*. We were cheated our celebration this week—the news from Georgia is no bottom right corner news. And yet clearly we're not fully ready to enter this moment, with all its promise. In order to transform the tearful

night into a joyous morning, in order to bring forward the new dawn, we are going to have to be honest, reflective and fair. We will need to be visionary, steadfast and fiercely principled.

Our Rabbis taught that the deepest darkness is the moment just before the dawn. The aliyah is *predicated* on a yeridah.

The contours of the joyous morning we yearn for will be shaped by the boldest and most imaginative dreams we allow ourselves to dream from within the weepy night. This is no end, it's a new beginning.