

Bo 5781 To Uproot Injustice

Like Pharaoh, we must learn that there is no compromise with injustice. Oppressive, supremacist ideologies cannot be accommodated, they must be eradicated. This is the prophetic imperative: to uproot injustice. Until the malignancies of racism, misogyny and greed are uprooted—from our hearts and from our institutions—the work is not yet done.

Well, friends, we've come a long way—

This week, we the first woman, first Black woman, first South Asian American woman was sworn in as Vice President of the United States! This will be the first ever all female White House communications team! A Black preacher and a Jew were sworn in as senators from Georgia, the heart of the Confederacy, for many years a bastion of racism and antisemitism. And here in California, our first ever Latino Senator.

In the days ahead, we will very likely see the most diverse Cabinet in history-- with people of all racial, gender, and sexual orientation backgrounds: The first publicly-out LGBTQ Cabinet secretary. The first Latino to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. The first Native American to serve as Interior Secretary. The first Black man to lead the Environmental Protection Agency. The first woman, and the first Jewish woman to serve as Treasury Secretary. The first openly transgender federal official as Asst Secretary of Health.

And that's not all.

22-year-old Amanda Gorman helped us see this week that “even as we grieved, we grew, even as we hurt, we hoped, that even as we tired, we tried” and “there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it.”

The President of Navajo nation and his wife were invited to offer their blessing at the National Inaugural Prayer Service and Bishop Barber preached the need for a Third Reconstruction, addressing the interlocking devastations of poverty, racism, ecological devastation, a war economy and a false moral narrative of religious nationalism.

And on his very first day, the President rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement.

Yes, we've come a long way. It was a good week, for those who care about justice, who yearn for a more fair, equitable, just America.

But I have to tell you today: we're not there yet.

This is an inflection point. We are on a journey toward redemption. We can feel the change in our bodies. We must now resist the urge to rest, because we are not there yet. Our work is not yet done.

And what we do now matters profoundly.

I want to tell you a story today. A very old story, which holds a mirror up to the moral challenges we're facing today.

This story comes from the tenth chapter of Shemot, the Book of Exodus. Moses and Aaron stand before Pharaoh. After hundreds of years of enslavement, degradation and humiliation, their demand is bold and unequivocal:

שְׁלַח עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי:

Let My people go, so that they may serve Me. (Ex 10:2)

Pharaoh is a stubborn man, but his advisors can see where this is going. After seven terrible plagues, each one taking a brutal toll on the people, devastating the morale of the empire, they beg him to loosen his grip on power. It's over! they say. "Let the men go!"

Somehow, their words pierce Pharaoh's armor—which makes you wonder: what if they had spoken up sooner? What if they had they shown some hint of integrity, moral concern—could they have avoided the enslavement altogether? Would those babies have drowned in the sea? Surely it would have taken longer to build the fine cities of Ramses and Pitom, they would have amassed less profit, but perhaps Pharaoh would have been remembered more favorably by history.

In any case, that's (literally) ancient history. Today the advisors spoke out, and it worked. Fine, Pharaoh says: "You can go. Some of you. Give me names."

No, Moses, replies. Maybe you didn't hear me the first seven times. All of us will go. Not only the leaders, not only the men, but everyone. "Young and old, sons and daughters, with our flocks and herds." (Ex. 10:9)

These are the conditions of our release. Until all of us are free, Moses explains, we are, none of us, free.

Think for a moment about the Israelite men—offered the chance to escape the hellscape of Egyptian bondage after all those years. But no, they say. We're in this together. We will not take the privilege we're offered, if it means that some of our family will remain behind in bondage.

Of course, Pharaoh can't accept such radical conditions, and the eighth plague, the locust swarm, descends. God's hand against the empire. The force of this plague was unmatched. In a kind of inverted creation story, every single tree, every blade of grass, every field, every green thing in all the land is devoured by locusts.

Pharaoh is momentarily chastened.

וַיִּמְהַר פְּרֹעֹה לִקְרֹא לְמֹשֶׁה וְלֵאהֲרֹן

And Pharaoh rushed out to meet Moses and Aaron... (Ex 10:16)

...to beg them to make it stop. It almost sounds like *teshuvah*. For a moment, he's very presidential: I accept responsibility! Please forgive me. Just make this plague end!

Our Rabbis pick up on the word *maher*—Pharaoh didn't just go out to meet them, he *rushed* to meet them. Why the rush?

Here 16th century Italian commentator Sforino offers that Pharaoh saw that the locusts had destroyed everything above ground. He knew he had to reach Moses and Aaron *before they also destroyed the underground roots of the wheat and spelt and plants they had been devouring*.

OK, Pharaoh finally recognized that he had done wrong. His fiercest desire: to mute the impact of the punishment. We've suffered enough already—lesson learned! But going at the roots... that would spoil the chance of a future return to greatness!

I have to tell you, Moses is compelled by Pharaoh's pleas. Maybe he, too, gets swept up, momentarily, in the desire to just move on. We've all suffered. Let's look to the future! So he goes back to God and begs and pleads on Pharaoh's behalf, and God creates a powerful west wind that pushes the locusts out to the sea.

But we know that it's not over. As soon as the threat of real consequences is lifted, even momentarily, the stubborn king is back to his cruelties. Pharaoh decides against liberating the Israelites after all.

It is then that the plague of darkness hits. A darkness so thick, so tangible that the people are paralyzed. Frozen in terror. Broken wide open.

Once again, the pain awakens Pharaoh's conscience, or at least his strategic awareness. GO!, he says. You *and your children*. Take nothing else with you... but just get out of here! (10:24)

Now think about it: given how they'd suffered, how brutal and unrelenting the taskmasters had been, how the enslavement broke their bodies and their spirits, shamed their elders and tormented their little ones, wouldn't you think at this point they'd just go?

But Moses stands before Pharaoh and says: we're not going anywhere without our livestock. And by the way, you're going to provide us with **זָבָחִים וְעֹלֹת**, with sacrifices and burnt offerings too (10:25). After all, how else will we serve God in the desert?

Really? Not only are we insisting on the women and children, and even our livestock... but we're expecting them to give us the stuff of sacrifice too?

YES. Because Moses understands: for justice to be served, we need to be released not broken and broke, desperate and dependent. From this place, we leave with our dignity! We need and we deserve to be rightly compensated for our many years of slave labor.

Friends, our ancestors are demanding REPARATIONS for their enslavement! There is no justice without accountability. You cannot lie, cheat and steal, and then turn the page. First, justice must be done. And justice is not the absence of oppression. It is the presence of dignity.

Well, you know what happens next. Pharaoh is not looking for a real reckoning. He wants a temporary fix. Wants to move on. Talk about healing. Start a new chapter. He finds the demand for justice an audacious overreach.

What he doesn't realize is that there is no temporary fix when it comes to injustice, to the dehumanization and desecration of human beings created in God's own image. The oppressive, supremacist ideology itself must be eradicated so that justice can truly be served for there to be a future for Egypt. What a shame that Pharaoh, consumed by narcissism and megalomania, fails to realize that this is his chance too. Had he made a different choice, he could have saved many lives, and written a very different story, for his people and ours. He may have been the first, but he would not be the last to be blinded by power and privilege.

There is one last plague, the most punishing of all.

And the LORD said to Moses,
I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt;
after that he shall let you go from here; indeed,

כִּשְׁלַחֹו כְּלֵה גְרֵשׁ יִגְרֵשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה:

when he lets you go, **it will be complete**. He will drive you out of here. (Ex 11:1)

It will be *complete*. Our freedom will be won, we will achieve the redemption we seek.

Do you hear what I'm telling you today? Moses could have brought the people out sooner. Again and again he was given the opportunity to go. But he insisted on more. He knew that the people needed more. Justice is no extravagance. It is a basic necessity.

That final plague devastated Egypt. It punished not only the adults, but the children, the roots of the future. It's hard for us to stomach this part of the story, but what it's clear what the Torah is trying to teach us: supremacy and cruelty must not be accommodated. They must be *eradicated*.

That is the only way to deal with a supremacist ideology. This is the birth of the prophetic imperative: to uproot injustice.

It was a good week, friends. The pace of change this week is head-spinning. Science and medicine are once again at the heart of decisions regarding public health. Experts in education are now making decisions about the best ways to keep our kids learning and healthy, physically and emotionally. Governing officials look a lot more like America this week than last. We're giving ourselves one last shot at saving our precious earth.

And all of that is wonderful. Thank God.

But the work is not nearly done. We're not ready to turn a corner on the past, not just yet. The dream of a new America, a justice-driven, multiracial democracy, can be realized only once we recognize, like Moses did, that everyone, *everyone*, must be lifted up in this era. Only once we start to really believe that we belong to one another. As long as there are millions of parents in this country who put their children to bed with empty bellies, as long as ten million people fear eviction and we—or our neighbors—fear for our safety, as long as we continue to invest more in our prisons than our schools, as long as the heresy of white supremacy remains the unspoken driving force behind our systems and institutions, the work is not done.

Yes, breathe well this shabbat. We've come a long way. But remember as you do: in the new world we're building, there is room for every person, but not every idea.

Kohelet, Ecclesiastes teaches: To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot what has been planted. A lot of toxic ideas have been planted in this land, nurtured and fed over centuries. This has led to generations of violence and cruelty, oppression and suppression. The roots run deep, and threaten to corrupt the whole harvest. We are planters, not destroyers, and yet this is the time to uproot injustice and the ideologies that rationalize it.

This will not be over until the malignancies of racism, misogyny and greed are uprooted—from our hearts, from our Congress, from our institutions. Until then, all of us are called to the work. Called to dismantle racism and break the machinery of fear and division. All of us, called to lift up a vision for a new America, built on love, rooted in justice and propelled by our moral imagination.

Shabbat shalom.