



AWAKENING THE SCREAM
Parashat Vayikra 5781—March 20, 2021
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White supremacy and racist violence, gender-based violence, gun violence—these crises have long plagued our nation. On the cusp of Passover, the celebration of our liberation, there is yet another mass shooting—this time an attack on Asian American women. The scream has been awakened in us. But this is no cry of despair. It is a cry of wakefulness. It is rooted in the awareness that silence in the face of evil renders us complicit to that evil, and in the belief that we can and must do better. May this cry be the beginning of our collective redemption.

As we gather around seder tables next weekend, we have one real objective: to tell a story. This story is our meta-narrative—a story so foundational that it has sustained us for thousands of years, through trial, tragedy and triumph.

This is the story of *yetziat mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt, and it tells how our people suffered hundreds of years of brutality, affliction and abuse, and then walked triumphantly from enslavement to liberation, from darkness to light. From degradation to dignity, from narrowness to expansiveness, paralysis to possibility.

This story is central to Jewish memory and liturgy, ritual and experience. And it’s not only precious to us—it is ubiquitous, inspiring people across time and space who yearn for freedom. The religious philosopher Michael Walzer attests that “one can find the Exodus almost everywhere. Wherever people know the Bible, and experience oppression, the Exodus has sustained their spirits and inspired their resistance.”

And perhaps it’s precisely because of the eternity of this story that we look to every detail, every word of the narrative to uncover deep truths and enduring messages for our time.

It is in that spirit that I invite us to take a look at one particular piece of this narrative, one of the turning point moments in our ancestors’ journey toward liberation (Exodus 2:23-25):

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיִּמָּת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־ (כג)
 וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־ (כה) וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב: (כד) הָעֲבֹדָה:
 (בני ישראל וַיִּזְעֻקוּ וַיִּזְעֻקוּ אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים: (ס)

(23) A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Children of Israel were groaning under the bondage and cried out, and the cry for help from bondage rose up to God. (24) God heard their moaning, and God remembered God’s covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. (25) God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

I’ve spent a good deal of time with these verses, trying to understand the nature of the Israelites’ cry. What happened, after hundreds of years of suffering, that finally made the people cry out? And what made it so in that moment God was able to hear their cry and felt compelled to act in history toward their redemption?

To attempt to answer this question, the Rabbis key in to one detail from the very beginning of our verse: וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם *A long time after that, the king of Egypt died.* Ramban explains that our ancestors, like anyone living under a tyrant, put all their hope on the end of the tyrant's reign. They knew one day he'd either die or be forced from power, and then they would finally be free.

But when Pharaoh died and their problems weren't solved immediately, they wept and they wailed.

Listen, I can relate. I know what it means to live under a terrible regime—one that violates your most basic understanding of right and wrong, that subverts the truth and heartlessly and shamelessly targets those most vulnerable. I know what it's like to find comfort in the knowledge that this cannot last forever. The awareness that whenever this tyrant finally leaves, we will emerge from the terror he has inflicted on our people and our democracy, and we will rebuild. A few years ago, in a particularly dark moment for our country, my very wise father-in-law wrote a letter to his children and grandchildren saying as much. This moment is painful for all of us, he said. But I have lived a long time, and I have seen many hard chapters for this country. I promise you, we will emerge from this.

I, too, have taken refuge in the idea of the long arc of the moral universe ultimately bending toward justice. And I understand how painful it is when one finally begins to emerge from the horror, to realize that the suffering has not instantaneously disappeared.

According to Ramban, the Israelites cried tears of despair, determining that they'd choose death over life under this kind of oppression. And it is those tears that ultimately activate God to intervene on their behalf.

Of course, this is no moral message. No one preaches: "When things are bad, wait until they get worse... so much worse that there's literally no hope! Then cry out to God. Only then will God hear you." Ramban's interpretation is hardly an inspiring sermon for a people in the grips of suffering.

Instead, I offer you a reading from the Mei HaShiloah, the Ishbitzer Rebbe, writing in Poland in the 1800s. The cry that elicited God's compassion was not a cry of despair. It was a cry of wakefulness. He writes: *כי עד כאן לא היה בהם שום התעוררות לזעוק ולהתפלל – Until this moment, they weren't awake enough to scream and to pray.*

The pain had been there for hundreds of years. Generation after generation, the Israelites suffered under the weight of Egyptian oppression. They saw their elders beaten and their babies slaughtered. Their backs broke with hard labor.

But for all of that heartache, they didn't cry out. Until *התעורר בהם זעקה – the scream was awakened in them.*

For the Ishbitzer, this cry was a cry of recognition that things ought not be—they MUST NOT be—as they have been. "This is the beginning of redemption," he concludes. "When a person is roused to scream to God."

What does it take for the scream to be awakened in us?

Many white people in America described the murder of George Floyd as an awakening. Even some Black activists have written and spoken about their awakening during this time, to how deeply embedded the threat of racist violence is in our systems. I have spoken about my own growing awareness around the systemic nature of racial injustice, and the need not only for reform, but for a radical rethinking. A reimagining.

I have similarly heard Charlottesville, where Nazis and white nationalists chanted “Jews will not replace us,” described by many Jews as a wake-up call. And for those who hit snooze and tried to doze back off, it wasn’t long before the shootings at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the Chabad in Poway—abrupt endings to the fantasy of the American Golden Age. A call to awareness of our vulnerability as Jews, even here.

This week, our country has had another wake-up call. We have been warned for the past year of the rise in violent anti-Asian hate crimes (whether they are classified as such by the authorities or not).

We know that in the past year alone, there have been 3,800 reported incidents of violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, or AAPIs. We also know that there is a long, tortured [history](#) of racist violence in this country, not only specifically targeting Black and Native American people, but targeting all people of color, including AAPIs, which began even before the Civil War.

There was the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese Internment. There was violence spurred by angry white mobs (like the massacre of Chinese Angelinos in the late 1800s and attacks on Vietnamese workers by the KKK one hundred years later, in the 1980s) and aggression sparked by government officials (like the imposed restrictions during the bubonic plague of 1900 in San Francisco).

We learned this history in school. We knew all of this, but perhaps we didn’t KNOW it. It lived in our brains, but not in our hearts. Until this week, when we were awakened by an act of domestic terror targeting Asian women in Atlanta.

Many even in the AAPI community are describing this as an awakening—it’s not that it’s new, but the overt racism and the immediate willingness to excuse or minimize the horror of the attacks has compelled many people to speak out loud what has previously been said only in a whisper: that *this country is profoundly unwell. We are profoundly unwell.*

...That it’s not safe here, for AAPIs, and especially for AAPI women.

...That horrible videos from the past year of elderly Asian men being thrown to the concrete while they go out for a walk are not anomalous, but part of a long history of unaddressed abuse, bigotry and cruelty.

...That the myth of the model minority has made it even harder for people to understand the vulnerability experienced by a broad and diverse community—many of whom are also a part of our Jewish community—that is again and again targeted by hate.

...That this population was already vulnerable when last year the most powerful man in the world used his bully pulpit not only to reinforce racist stereotypes, but to racialize the pandemic altogether. To take our suffering, our fear and our anguish and direct it toward an easy scapegoat, a community already seen by many as perpetual outsiders, or, as [Eric Nam](#), a Korean-American singer-songwriter from Atlanta

put it this week, a community already “excluded, interned, vilified, emasculated, fetishized and murdered.”

Nam describes his own growing realization that his community must not submit to the normalization of racism against them: “To grow up believing we needed to be O.K. with racism in order to have a seat at the table is not O.K.. To internalize racism at such a young age, in retrospect, warped my sense of normality... This is how confusing and convoluted growing up AAPI can be.”

And Nam is not alone. The events of this week have led to an outpouring of grief and horror, solidarity and love. There is a different cry being heard this week—a cry of wakefulness. Of unwillingness to let the past go without a reckoning, without some truth telling. Without real change.

In a strange but I think meaningful coincidence, eight years ago when we came to Parashat Vayikra, which we read today, I gave a sermon on gun violence after six-month-old child was shot five times on the south side of Chicago as her father changed her diaper. I noted that at the beginning of our Torah portion, God calls out with a booming voice—it’s as clear as day! But for reasons we don’t fully understand, only can Moses hear. I said that day that one day, something would finally turn the tide of history and awaken our nation, so that we could finally end the curse of gun violence and hate in this country.

Five years later, I stood before our community on Parashat Vayikra and gave sermon in aftermath of Parkland massacre at Marjorie Stoneman Douglass High School. We sat in grief that day, and looked at the Torah’s instruction (Leviticus 4:13-15) regarding what to do in a case in which “the whole community of Israel has erred without the community realizing it... and they are guilty.” We had some hard conversations, about how gun violence, racism, misogyny only persist in a society through our complicity. As Abraham Joshua Heschel famously wrote in 1963: *An honest estimation of the moral state of our society will disclose: Some are guilty, but all are responsible.* (Religion and Race” 14).

Would Parkland be the tragedy to wake us up to that reality? Would the murder of our children in school not prove to us, once and for all, that silence in the face of evil renders us complicit to that evil?

The very next year, on Parashat Vayikra, we grieved together following the terror attacks targeting Muslims in New Zealand. 49 people, murdered while they prayed. We lifted our voices in solidarity with the victims and their families, friends, loved ones, and the millions of Muslims around world with anguished hearts.

And now, here we are again, two years later, reading Parashat Vayikra after another mass shooting. Another terror attack fueled by the intersection of white supremacy, misogyny and easy access to weapons of war.

It’s not that I believe that this time—as we begin the book of Leviticus and prepare for Passover—is a particularly auspicious time for horrific acts of violence. But the coincidence of this timing does put a fine point on it: we know well that these moments can pass without any meaningful change. We know that we can—and often do—leave the survivors and victims’ families to hold their grief in isolation, to bang their heads against the brick wall of Congress, where gerrymandering and flawed Senate rules have rendered it essentially impossible to affect meaningful change.

But maybe now, finally, the scream will be awakened in us. Maybe now we will rise up and together demand the reckoning we so desperately need.

The people of this country are waking up. White supremacy and racist violence, gender-based violence, gun violence—these crises have long plagued our nation. Let the historians unpack the confluence of events that made these years—2020, 2021—a turning point in our nation’s history.

For now, I beg us not to suppress the scream that has been awakened in us. This cry, of anger and anguish, is not a despairing cry. It is a hopeful cry. A wakeful cry. A loving cry. May it be the beginning of our collective redemption.

In memory of:

Soon Chung Park

Hyun Jung Kim

Suncha Kim

Yong Ae Yue

Xiaojie Tan

Daoyou Feng

Delaina Ashley Yaun

Paul Andre Michels