

Parashat Vayakhel-Pikeudei

23 Adar 5778 | March 11, 2018

I remember shortly after the election last year,
seeing people post about the book 1984.
And how the world we were living in had morphed into a reality
with these really haunting echoes of the dystopian society
described in Orwell's classic book.

I nodded every time I saw this,
recognizing the parallels of that book and now,
and at once felt both
a sort of twisted *comfort*,
that this time had already been written about,
and a sickening grotesque,
that these fascist literary predictions were coming true.

And then I saw another post,
which led me down a path towards the topic that I want to discuss today:

A couple friends - friends whose political and spiritual analysis I deeply trust
Posted an article whose headline read:
"Parable Of The Sower – Not 1984 – Is The Dystopia For Our Age."

I was intrigued and so I went onto Amazon -
where by the way, 1984 had become the number one on Amazon's best-selling book list
-
And ordered Parable of the Sower.

What I found when I opened that book,
was that each page was a sort of medicine.

Centered around a young black girl
trying on leadership in brilliant and vulnerable and creative ways,
Octavia Butler's masterpiece is set in the early 2020s,
in the throes of hyper climate change, growing wealth inequality, vengeful populism, and
brutal corporate/political rule.

Butler's protagonist, fifteen year old Lauren Oya Olamina,

is a deeply spiritual and resourceful young person living on the outskirts of Los Angeles,
whose clear heart and earth-based faith
Attracts *to her* a whole band of characters,
Who together attempt to survive and escape their apocalyptic reality.

To read that book, for me,
was an act of defiance,
an act of healing,
and an experiment in imagination.

A black female author,
writing about a high-school aged black female protagonist,
whose greatest strength and weakness is a condition,
known as hyperempathy,
where she feels physically,
the pain felt by others around her.
A deeply rooted process-theology and spirituality,
And the founding of a new society with her voice and leadership at the center.

This was the kind of radical reimagination and reordering of society
I felt like the world needed, and needs.

Parable of the Sower led me to Emergent Strategy -
A nature-based organizing and adaptive-leadership spirit manual
rooted in the canon of Butler's work -
which awakened within me, amongst many other things,
a new understanding of science-fiction as revolutionary,
and creative production as a tool for liberation.

"All organizing is science fiction,"
says adrienne maree brown, author of Emergent Strategy.
All organizing is science fiction, since justice work,
by its very nature, is about creating systems of dignity and conditions for equity
that don't currently exist.

We notice there is something wrong,
we imagine a better way of doing things,
a better way for the world to be,
and we organize for that future.

Science fiction is the idea of black people being free while slavery was still in full force.
Or the idea of a black president 20 years ago.
Or a living wage or universal health care or full gun control or full control for women over their bodies or no more borders -
all science fiction from where we're sitting today.

brown call this "radical imagination,"
and says that we're currently in a society-wide imagination battle,
that right now, we're living inside someone else's creative architecture,
someone else's imagination -
for how this world should be -
how it should work,
how power can function,
how we relate to resources, to each other, and all the rest.

brown reasons:

"If there is an imagination that created these conservative, inhumane conditions,
then we need to have a radical imagination that moves us through and out of them.

We have to be able to see something other than the normative truths of this place,
something that is not here."

That's science fiction.

Last week our very own Dara Resnik posted an article from Sunday's New York Times,
written by author Lindy West,
that I think is speaking to this same impulse around visionary fiction,
and is challenging us to push our imagination for justice.

West writes about the imagination battle happening in Hollywood right now,
Showcased last week at the Oscars:

"the first Oscars" - shes says,
since powerful men started falling to #MeToo,
a Trump-era Oscars,
a #TimesUp Oscars,
an Oscars in the shadow of "Black Panther."

An Oscars featuring Get Out, Lady Bird, and Call Me By Your Name,

With nominees Jordan Peele, Greta Gerwig, and Yance Ford.

West says:

“TV and film are in the thick of an unprecedented sociopolitical reckoning, the first ever of such scale and ferocity, a microcosm of our ever-more-literal national culture war.”

She continues:

“Hollywood is both a perfect and bizarre vanguard in the war for cultural change. Perfect because its reach is so vast, its influence so potent; bizarre because television and movies are how a great many toxic ideas embedded themselves inside of us in the first place.”

She then recounts the myriad ways that Hollywood’s movie culture has impacted her as a woman -
when 82.4 percent of film directors are white men
and where only about half of the movies that are made
pass the Bechdel test -
with at least two named female characters
who talk to each other
about something other than a man.

And finally, she offers a striking metaphor that I want to share:

You know those noise-cancelling headphones? she asks.

Do you know how they work?

Apparently, they measure the noise all around us,
and then add into our headphones
an exact inversion of that outside noise -
When a frequency meets its inverse —
when the peaks of one sound wave match up with the valleys of another —
the result is called *phase cancellation*.
The two waves cancel each other out.
Silence.”

She continues: “What we could really use from Hollywood is about 100 years of phase cancellation.

I feel like all around us, in all aspects of our life,
from the science fiction of Hollywood, and paperback books,
to the science fiction on the streets and in the home,
we've got to methodically and forcefully phase cancel,
increasing the volume
on the inverted sound waves we hear
and voices we listen to
and stories we tell -
stories that we *do* want around us,

So that piping between us -
through our ears
And in our hearts
And on the breeze
Are songs of transformation, liberation, and love.

"The movement can't just disrupt the culture,"
West says,
"it has to become the culture."

And that's where the mishkan comes in.

This week we conclude the book of Exodus,
And the instructions on how to build the mishkan,
the wandering Tabernacle,
with the double portion, Vayakhel-Pikeudei.

Now, if you've been following along in the story the last few weeks,
you'll know that the mishkan is an immensely intricate construction project.
We're not talking IKEA-style, a few instructions, an Allen wrench, badda bing badda
boom.

We're talking precise measurements and strictly detailed design.

And we're talking Israelites,
Former slaves,
experts in the repetitive drone of brick building and brick placement,
now voluntarily fashioning their sacred shrine with artful craftsmanship,

The same Israelites who, just last week, were tossing their gold in the fire to produce an idol,

The mishkan was built, the text tells us:

“by every person whose heart stirred,
and whose giving spirit moved them.”

RamBAN tells us: None of the Israelites had ever learnt these skills before from any teacher,

nor had ever practiced them.

But each one discovered their own natural talent or aptitude for the task,
each heart rising as it were to the Divine challenge,
enabling each person to say “I can do it.”

In this moment of radical imagination,
the Israelites jump paradigms -

From the idea of God as king, above and distant,
The subjects of an authoritarian ruler -

To God as approachable,

Godess,

dwelling especially near,

in a holy of holies

Accompanying the people all places they go,

Each person, doing their part,

Each person, offering their gifts, their wisdom, their generosity,

Finding within themselves, giving from themselves,

summoning their spirit and their vision and their confidence

To fashion a home and central meeting place for Divinity and the community

That will keep them centered and in alignment with their highest values and aspirations
for the journey ahead.

The creative potential of the Israelites -

forged in the fires of suppressive slavery -

Unleashed here, realizing that previous circumstances do not forever dictate one's
future.

The Israelite community winning the imagination battle against themselves,

Within themselves, science fiction writers all of them.

When the tent was finally erected, Moses blessed the people:
“May it be God’s will,
that the Shekhinah rest within the labors of your hands.”
And the people replied:
“Let the graciousness of God be upon us.”

I wish for us all, that the Shekhinah rests within the labors of our hands, and that the graciousness of God be upon us.

As adrienne maree brown writes, finally: We are creating a world we have never seen. We are whispering it to each other cuddled in the dark, and we are screaming it at people who are so scared of it that they dress themselves in war regalia to turn, and face us.

To the extent that our present conditions
are the result
of a failure of our imagination,
I wish us all the confidence and vision, to, together,
Fashion a Tabernacle of collective dignity, and love, and justice unlike the world has
ever known,
The fulfillment of our wildest, most exquisite dreams.