

Passover and Parkland

I am writing a few days after the horror of violence that took place at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida which left 18 people dead, a community in mourning and a shocked nation seemingly unable to find an effective way to stop the carnage. This is the eighteenth school shooting in 2018, and I wonder if there will be another one in the time that it takes for these words to be published and read? Will the nation have moved on to some other issue, relegating the Parkland school massacre to a fading memory, like Sandy Hook or Columbine? After the dead are buried, and all of the makeshift memorials are swept away; when all of the poignant words are spoken, will we return to our lives believing that nothing can change in the United States of America in 2018? These are the questions that go through my mind as I read the biographies of the victims, see the pain of the families and hear other parents around the country saying that they are afraid to drop off their children at school in the morning. Are we really chained to this violent reality, or is there another path possible for our nation?

Passover is coming.

In a short time, we will gather around the Seder table and tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt and explore the meaning of freedom and enslavement. One of the things that our tradition teaches is that there are chains that our overlords place upon us and those that we put on our ourselves. While Pharaoh was responsible for placing the Israelites in physical bondage, the Israelites engaged in their own internal enslavement; losing all hope in the possibility of freedom. There is a verse in the book of Exodus that reads:

And it came to pass in the process of time, that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage and they cried, and their cry came up to God by reason of their bondage. (Exodus 2:23)

The Rabbis wonder why the Torah tells us that the people were sighing in this particular moment. Were they not crying out during all of their enslavement? Their answer is instructive. They say that the people had long given up on being freed and were resigned to their slavery. However, when the Pharaoh died, there was a moment when they allowed themselves to see their situation for what it was and dream of a moment of freedom, and so they sighed. In that moment, God heard their cries and responded, and thus, the redemption began. The message that the Rabbis wanted us to understand from this is that our destiny is in our hands. Nothing was going to change as long as the people were resigned to their reality. In order for the Israelites to break the chains of the Egyptians, they had to first address their internal bondage and choose to believe that change was possible. They had to make themselves worthy of redemption.

The parallels to our own age are striking. The constant refrain that we hear in the wake of this latest American shooting is that nothing is going to change.

- The gun lobby is too strong, and politicians are unwilling to move beyond their rhetoric to meaningful action
- Americans are too attached to their guns to even consider any change in legislation
- Mental health challenges are growing in our society and we do not have resources to address them effectively.
- We continue to devalue human life by glorifying violence in American society

If we truly believe that things cannot be different, then we are a nation in bondage. What is clear is that God is not going to prevent such things from happening in the future. We are going to have to take the risks, fight the fight, and walk forward as a nation, discovering that the impossible really is possible one step at a time. We must be willing to make ourselves worthy of our own redemption.

This Passover, make this a discussion topic around your table. Consider the consequences for a people who had given up hope, so resigned to their reality that they forgot how to sigh. Go around the table and ask each person to name something that is in desperate need of change in this country. Rather than allowing the discussion to devolve into all of the reasons that things will never change, let us consider the people who are impacted and think together of the steps necessary to create a different reality. Let us listen to each other and consider our own self-imposed chains. Let us discuss a next step that would allow us to embrace our own destiny as a nation and not wait for some miracle, or just hope that the next school massacre will not affect any of your loved ones. May we fulfill the promise of Passover in our time so that our nation will never again sigh in the face of such a tragedy, feeling powerless; and no parent will ever again have to cry at the loss of a child murdered at school.

Michael Siegel,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MS', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

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