

SERMON VAYEHI – Jan 10, 2020

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LIVING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN GENESIS AND EXODUS

This week, we finish reading the book of *Breishit*, Genesis. Think, for a moment, about how much of the world's literature is rooted in the stories of Genesis. In many ways, the stories in Genesis with their heroic but deeply flawed characters, messy family dynamics, dashed hopes and rising from adversity – these capture so much that is fundamental about what it means to be human.

But there is one aspect of Genesis that feels particularly touching today. All through Genesis, our characters make major changes, and things go very well for a while, but then something happens that reverses their fortunes and they have to rise all over again. Nowhere is this more clear than in the poignant dramatic irony that frames the very end of the book.

Joseph has buried his father Jacob, and has reassured his brothers that they have nothing to worry about from Joseph, despite what they had done to him, that he will sustain and protect them. And so the Children of Israel move to Egypt, to the land of Goshen and live blessed lives. They are safe. They are wealthy.

And then we read the final line: ***Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.***

Joseph dies as the ultimate “Jew from a shtetl that makes it big and dies a *machar*.” You can hear his nephews bragging, “Did you see Joseph's fancy-shmancy funeral? The tomb? All Gold. And you wouldn't believe how many people came to his funeral! “

But we the readers know what is to come just a few verses later:
“A Pharaoh arose the did not know Joseph, ...so they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor”

This becomes one of the paradigms of Jewish history, moving to a country to be welcome and even privileged for a while, only to have things suddenly reverse and we are oppressed, hated, kicked out, or worse.

This year, I’m teaching the Kitah Vav students (who did a great service last Shabbat) Jewish history, and we have already covered some of these reversals in Jewish fortune, but I noticed that the narrative we usually tell, and our textbooks tell, is one that jumps from a flourishing community to a community on the run and living in fear. There is not much of a description of what it was like for people living through the transition.

We read about the “Golden Age of Judaism” with Maimonides and Yehuda ha Levi, and then we jump to the Spanish Expulsion. But as my students pointed out, “But wait, there a lot of years between those.”

What was it like for those Jews living during the transition?

What was it like for Joseph’s descendants that lived between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, those that lived as people began to look at the Israelites with disdain and fear, started to harass them, organize against them, exclude them from institutions of government?

When did it start to dawn on them that something fundamental had changed?

How do you know? How do you know when history has made a turn?

We have grown up much like Joseph and his children and grandchildren. We have been blessed with privilege, freedom, access to the institutions of state, and relatively safe. And now many of us wonder if the rise in anti-Semitism in the world, and especially here at home, is part of some larger trend? The hairs on the back of our neck stand up sometimes, and there is this nagging question, a vestigial dread.

At the URJ Biennial, at the meeting of the CCAR Reform Rabbis, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the Union of Reform Judaism, shared a story of him talking to a group of teenagers in NFTY, and he was talking about anti-Semitism a bit and one of the teenagers asked him if he had ever experienced a direct act of anti-Semitism. Rabbi Jacobs thought about it and had to answer “no” because he had grown up in the Jewish enclaves of the US and never experienced any serious incidents. Then he decided to ask the teenagers if any of them had experienced anti-Semitism. He said that almost every hand in the room went up.

I don't have the answer to predicting history. We don't have prophets any more. But I wanted to at least stop and witness that we are living right now in this question, in the space between Genesis and Exodus, and it is a spiritually anxious place to be.

I want us to pause and acknowledge this. To look at it and not flinch from it. To name it as something we are carrying these days. To share it in this sanctuary.

We can't know the future. But we can stand up, be proud, speak up and work to combat anti-Semitism and bigotry and incivility in our society. We are doing that in part by simply being here and doing the work we do in our community.

But we can also hold this worry together. We can share it together. As a spiritual awareness and as a community. We can be together. We can pray together and remind ourselves of the larger good in the world and in one another. We can do what our ancestors have done: Pray for help and work for safety. Together.

To that end, I want to sing the traditional prayer for safety for Jews who are facing trouble and danger. It is in your handout. Please sing with me.

HAVE MERCY ON JEWS IN DANGER

Acheinu kol beit Yisrael, Acheinu kol beit
Yisrael
han'tunim b'tzara
b'tzara uvashivyah, haomdim bein bayam
uvein bayabasha.

Hamakom Y'racheim Y'racheim Aleihem
v'yotziem mitzara lirvacha, um'afaila l'orah
umishiabud lig'ulah, hashta ba'agala
uvizman kariv.

אחינו כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַנְּתוּנִים
בְּצָרָה וּבַשְּׁבִיָּה, הָעוֹמְדִים בֵּין בָּיִם
וּבֵין בִּיבְשָׁה, הַמְּקוּם יְרַחֵם
עֲלֵיהֶם, וַיּוֹצִיאֵם מִצָּרָה לְרִנְחָה,
וּמִשְׁעָבוֹד לְגֵאֻלָּה, הַשְּׂמָא בְּעֵגְלָא וּבְזִמְן
קָרִיב.

As for our people, the whole house of Israel, who are given over to trouble or captivity, whether they abide on the sea or on the dry land:

May the All-Present have mercy upon them, and bring them forth from trouble to flourishing, from darkness to light, and from oppression to redemption, now speedily and soon.

AMEN.