

SERMON June 12, 2020 - Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai

SHAKE OFF YOUR DUST – WAKE UP!

When we talk about Lecha Dodi, the center of the Friday Night Kabbalat Shabbat, we usually talk about love, about greeting the bride, and about the peace of Shabbat when our divided selves come together.

That is all true, but there is another aspect to the poetry of Lecha Dodi that seems quite relevant these days. Perhaps this other aspect could best be explained this way: It's your wedding day, and the wedding is at your house and the bride is on her way. It starts at noon, and the house is still a mess and upside down. So where are you? Cleaning up your act? No. You are still in bed, with the covers pulled over your head, trapped and overwhelmed.

We've all had days where we just don't want to face the world and get up.

Lecha Dodi was written by Jews who had fled the Spanish expulsions, and arrived at the "promised land" only to find it depressed, asleep, a mess, and the Jews there demoralized and trapped in a way of thinking about their situation.

The words, in some of the verses we don't usually sing, tell them to "Shake off your dust! Arise! Wake up! Stop feeling sorry for yourselves. You have the power to change your situation, with God's help.

In this nation, we have been stuck at home literally for months, often in our sweatpants and things have gotten a bit messy. (I know, some of you have Marie Condo-ed yourselves, but many of the rest of us have let some things go.) But we have also, as a nation, been under the covers and asleep for decades. We have largely shrugged and watched TV as income disparity grew much worse, as social media radically changed how we relate to one another, as our police and our population has become more militarized, armed, polarized and threatened. And as we have seen the killing and mass incarceration of black people our authorities fill private prisons and destroy inner city neighborhoods.

And then, with the killing of George Floyd, something has stirred. Led by the African American community, communities have begun shaking off the dust and standing up and raising their voices.

It is a scary thing to see a movement awake. When we look back, we see it as a time of inspiration and innovation, but in the moment, it is scary and threatening. We sometimes forget that the 60's was not mostly about love and Woodstock. It was about upheaval, waking up, rising up, and making a change, and we are all, whatever the side of that culture war you or your parents were on, we have all lived most of our lives in the world created by that upheaval.

The "good times" of the past decades were created by that upheaval.

If we want to have a society that is holy, that is good, that reflects the image of God in every human being, then we have to be prepared for upheaval and mistakes and messiness as we try to clean up a much older and deeper mess. Destruction is always part of change. That destruction is not right or fair or helpful much of the time, but it is part of the messiness of humans in groups trying to get things right. What is important is to keep our eyes on the values and change we are aiming for, to keep our eyes on the prize.

I know the quoting MLK has become controversial in itself, but I can't get these words out of my mind:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom...

There is much about the ways these protests and uprising are being handled that I don't like. I don't like the tone of much of the language that I think creates division instead of alliances. I don't like the antiSemitism and Israel-bashing that seems to get a free-pass at these demonstrations. I don't like the "you're either with us or against us," "woke or not woke' us vs them mentality. I don't like the reductionism.

But I also know when we started Gay Rights and ACT-UP protests, many people said the exact same thing, and they were correct, but still those protests changed

something much deeper and insidious. One of the things they changed was the sense of pride, agency, and worth that the LGBT community felt; we felt our own voice arising.

If these protests help young African-Americans find and grow that voice, and shake a sense of despair, then it will only lead to good, for God speaks through us as we shake off despair and shame and find our inner worth.

There is another song by a Jewish prophet that also talks about waking up in a time of upheaval, anger, and change. It's words aren't kind, and they aren't "feel good," but they do reflect what such times are like as they are happening around us, and they remind us that change is going to happen whether we like it or not. I want to blend Lecha Dodi with this other song, because I think it reflects both the excitement, the hope but also the sense of displacement and fear that these times are creating in us, often at the same time.

We will start with a verse from Lecha Dodi that I think speaks to the power of protest, the power of speaking up. Just as the prophets taught us, speaking truth to power is a holy act, and allows God's presence into the world.

Wake yourself, Wake yourself! for your light has come; Get up and shine! Wake up! Wake up! Let your voice be heard. God's presence is revealed through you.