

JEWISH WAYS OF DEATH AND MOURNING



taught by

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Sundays, 11 am

January 10, 17, 24

Want to learn more about Jewish approaches to death, burial and mourning? Wonder about your choices and options? This class will explore you both traditional and modern approaches to this important issue. The epidemic reminds us of our mortality, so use this opportunity to reflect more deeply on your choices.



Jan 6, 2021
23 Tevet 5781 ט"ב

Hello Temple Sinai,

Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for it, everyone would swallow his neighbor alive. Pirkei Avot 3:2

...anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's townspeople and does not, is punished for the transgressions of the townspeople... Talmud Shabbat 54b

It is odd when an event is shocking, and at the same time utterly expected and predictable. Watching the images from the Capitol today was shocking, but it was less the shock of surprise, and more the stomach-sinking shock of realizing the thing you had feared is now actually happening in front of you.

I stayed up far too late last night trying to write something thoughtful, insightful, and spiritual in response to the event in Washington, but at about 3am, I gave up. I feel like I'm stating what others have already said and I don't have any great new insights to offer. I'm still feeling that way, but I am going to share it anyway because at times like this, we need to reflect and share perspectives. Here are some of mine.

There have been and will be countless statements condemning today's events, including from Jewish groups. For example, this is from today's statement by Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the ADL:

As ADL has said again and again, extremists must be taken at their word. First there was volatile rhetoric online, then explicit calls to violence and now people are acting on those calls in the nation's capital and flagrantly breaking the law. It must end now...The President has promoted sedition and incited violence...More than anything, what is happening right now at the Capitol is a direct result of the fear and disinformation that has been spewed consistently from the Oval Office. President Trump has a responsibility to call for an end to this violence and unrest that he has sowed. His campaign of disinformation is a clear and present danger to our democracy.

While I personally agree with this, I worry about a tendency to reduce the rioters to "extremists" and "dangers to democracy", in short to people 'not like us.' That accusation has too easily and too often lobbed at any group that organizes for change. I suppose I want to say that I think the people that stormed the white

house are more like us than we want to admit, and while the President bears tremendous responsibility in fomenting discord and discontent, my mind keeps going back to people who drove days, slept in cars, to protest and fight, in their minds, to protect democracy. It's baffling for me to try and understand how they so strongly believe that it is Biden's win that threatens our nation, I can see my own passions in them.

I keep thinking about my own emotions and anger during the AIDS protests I was part of. There were many times that I and the people around me felt such rage and betrayal from the lack of the government taking our claims and deaths seriously that violence *felt* like the right thing to do. Fortunately, we had leadership, group rules and trainings to keep us from giving into the power of that feeling. If our leaders had been egging us on, I have little doubt that scenes like the one we saw yesterday might have played out. Yes, minus the guns and with much more fabulous colorful drag, but the angry faces and the passionate sense of mission would have been much the same.

During AIDS protests, there were many people who were convinced that the HIV virus had been created in government labs deliberately to kill gay men. They saw a sinister 'deep state' plot to destroy us. Unlike most protesters, these people weren't there to push a good system to improve and hear them; they were there because they had come to believe that the system was so corrupt that it needed to be torn down. They weren't evil; they were scared, angry, desperate, and deluded. They were so convinced of their truth that all the evidence to the contrary was seen as part of the 'big lie' that was fooling everyone, while they had awakened to see the truth.

Enlightenment is intoxicating. It is thrilling to feel one has some piece of the truth, and others can't see it yet. One of life's peak experiences is the moment we learn something profound we hadn't before realized and our way of seeing the world is shifted in an instant. It is what made college so powerful for many of us. Learning is a profoundly spiritual experience that lies at the heart of most religious and political movements. Revolutionary zeal is almost always rooted in it, but so is the human drive to understand the world around us.

The problem is that the sense of enlightenment can be used for great good or great evil. It can muster people to fight for equal rights and justice, but can also muster people to unravel societies or participate in genocide and feel pious doing it.

The rabbis were very aware of the danger of charismatic leaders and the aftermath of failed revolutions. They were aware of the dangers of populism, and

so advocated for patience, for reflection, for action but not to the point where society unraveled or became unstable. Peace and stability had great value that shouldn't be quickly overlooked. The rabbis also believed in debate, deliberation, and reflection. They believed we have a sacred obligation to speak up and protest wrong when we are able, or else we also bear responsibility for the wrong. One had to fight injustice, but if the method of fighting created more injustice, it should be avoided. We had to balance these competing needs and be strategic in choosing our path. That is often not very emotionally satisfying. It is not nearly as sexy as certainty.

Being the underdog who wins is also intoxicating, exhilarating, sexy. It hits a deeply emotional button in many of us. I feel it when I think about America's victory in the Revolutionary War, Israel's victory in the War of Independence, or the success of the movement for LGBT rights. As Americans, we bathe in an entertainment culture in which the underdog, the one everyone has discounted as 'crazy' or deluded actually is right and saves the universe from danger. Think about it: Star Wars, Harry Potter, Silkwood, Independence Day, Aliens, Mission Impossible ...the lists goes on and on. There is a part of each of us that believes that we might understand something others don't, and that in the right circumstances, we could be action-movie heroes. This larger cultural trope that those in charge are pompous hard-hearted fools, and that the truth lies with the disenfranchised pervades our culture, and as Jews, we know that story very well. After all, the story of our confronting Pharaoh and leaving Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land is perhaps the greatest example of the displaced and 'crazy' being the ultimate winners. Simply put, 'you are all terribly wrong and we are right' is a hook each of us has. Whether it is religion, politics, exercise, diet, or gardening – we want to be part of the group that has the truth and we want to believe that the truth will set us free.

Truth is much more complex than that. Some epiphanies are true and lasting, and I am deeply grateful for them. Other truths are complex, plodding, and require looking at tons of numbers and evidence to understand. In the case of the election, the simple narrative that 'they stole the election' is much more gratifying than the wonky details of the byzantine American electoral system.

Both sides of the aisle too often think we have the simple truth, the obvious ethical truth, but here again, I think the rabbis of the Talmud offer us another path to understanding, one that requires tremendous study and analysis. They believed that even when "the truth" had been revealed by God at Sinai, we still had an obligation to debate it, understand it, probe its complexity, and arrive at less simple, but more profound truths about what it means to be human.

Shalom,

David

SERVICES THIS WEEK -

KABBALAT SHABBAT FRIDAY NIGHT at 6:30

We'll share shabbat peace amidst this turmoil. Our usual song-filled shabbat will include special prayers and songs for peace. We will remember Shifra and Puah and their courage in refusing to go along with the Pharaoh.

SATURDAY MORNING SERVICE AND TORAH STUDY

We will have our chanted **Shacharit** service at **9:30**.

TORAH STUDY begins at **10:30**. This week, we complete the Book of Genesis with our study of **Shemot**, the beginning of Exodus, where a new pharaoh enslaves the Israelites and Moses is born and grows up. Click [HERE](#) to jump to the URJ page on this portion, and [HERE](#) for the text itself on Sefaria.

Join us!