

Parashat Bo 1/23/2021 Rabbi Chai Levy, Congregation Netivot Shalom

This week's inauguration felt like a Yom Tov,  
a sacred day of ritual, liturgy, and song to enact a collective transformation,  
to express a communal hope, to take a shared breath and cry a shared tear.  
It had all the elements of a holy day:  
a much needed Yizkor service, where we paused to feel our pain and grieve our losses;  
Torah and prophetic passages were recited, as President Biden  
referenced our own parasha, calling upon us not to harden our hearts;  
The breathtaking Amanda Gorman was our haftarah:  
*"When day comes we step out of the shade,  
aflame and unafraid  
The new dawn blooms as we free it  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it";*  
Lady Gaga's singing of the National Anthem felt sacred,  
Like the chanting of Kol Nidre on the holiest day of the year;  
And our president's citing of Psalms:  
*"weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning,"*  
a page out of our own siddur:  
*Ba'erev yalin bechi, v'laboker rina.*  
(yes, it's on p. 120 of our siddur, fittingly, a Psalm for the dedication of the House,  
*Mizmor Shir Hanukat HaBayit LeDavid*)

A Hanukat HaBayit, A dedication of the House, a rededication, like Hanukkah,  
Where the sacred Temple is rededicated, purified, after a time of defilement.  
Amanda Gorman spoke beautifully of this in her interview with [Anderson Cooper on CNN](#).  
She said she wanted her words to serve to purify, to re-sanctify  
not only the Capitol after its recent violation,  
but she wanted to re-sanctify words, the power of words of themselves  
after a time of words being violated and misappropriated.  
And indeed, she did, as we all witnessed and felt:  
She, through her stunning poetry and expression  
reminded us of the beauty, power, and sacredness of words.

And this is the Torah that I want to explore today,  
As Amanda's exquisite message is pre-echoed here in parashat Bo.  
The story of the Exodus continues with the last three plagues,  
With Pharaoh's hardened heart and with the telling of the first Passover –  
The eating of matzah, the pascal lamb, its blood on the doorposts of the Israelite homes,  
and the instruction for this pass-over to be observed for all times.  
Three times in our parasha (plus a fourth in Deuteronomy),  
the Torah emphasizes that the way to observe this Passover is by telling the story,

specifically by telling the story to our children:

*v'higadeta l'vincha bayom hahu leimor ba'avor zeh asa Adonai li b'tzeiti mimitzrayim*

(Ex 13:8. Also 12:27 and 13:14, Deut 6:20)

When our children ask us "what do these rituals mean?"

We are instructed these four times to tell them:

it is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt.

*V'higadeta l'vincha* – tell your child the story.

Of course, these four tellings make their way into our seder as the four children.

And indeed, the focus of the whole seder is (not the matzah ball soup!)

But the Haggadah, which means: "the telling."

And the centerpiece of the Haggadah is Maggid, which means "telling" the story.

The whole point of Pesach is to tell the story of the exodus,

To sanctify with the power of the spoken word our collective memory of freedom,

To speak poetry into reality through the power of telling

to shape our shared vision of liberation from oppression.

That is why the Haggadah reads:

"the more one expands the story of the exodus from Egypt, the more commendable."

"Even if one is wise and a scholar and knows the whole story, it's still a mitzvah to TELL it."

Why?

Because of the power of speech, the power of words to create our world,  
to instill our faith, to hold our memory, and to shape our future.

The same reasons that Amanda Gorman's poetry touched our souls and lifted our hearts,  
especially after the degradation of speech that has defiled public discourse.

The rabbis teach that as we elaborate on the story of the exodus,

the flow of the Haggadah should be that we "start with degradation and end with praise;"

the telling should lift us up, elevate us;

the telling itself should be redemptive, the form expressing the content.

How is speech itself redemptive?

The Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, in his sefer *Netivot Shalom*,

taught about the Maggid of the Haggadah:

"The more one tells, the more one draws the light of the redemption from Egypt..."

When we were exiled in Egypt, Speech itself was in exile, as it says in the holy Zohar...

Moses said: How will Pharaoh listen to me? I am of impeded speech; I am not a man of words.

The beginning of redemption from Egypt was when speech came out of exile...

So the mitzvah is to tell the story because...the redemption is with the power of speech.

That is why '*Pesach*' [meaning *Passover*] is a play on words

with "*Peh Sach*," meaning "the mouth speaks."

We celebrate our freedom by telling the story, by celebrating speech itself coming out of exile -

Like a Moshe, Joe, or Amanda overcoming a speech impediment and becoming a great leader -

Slavery means being silenced and not having a voice.

The whole story of the exodus can be read as a progression  
from silence and impeded speech to crying out,  
to having one's voice heard by the Holy One,  
to the power of voice singing praises as we crossed the Sea of Reeds.

And each telling of the story is an accumulated layering of texts and tellings  
biblical, rabbinic, midrashic, contemporary.

I loved the [document](#) that was shared in our community this week  
of Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech that was laid out like a page of Talmud,  
with "Rashi" in the margins, connecting his holy words with the sacred texts that came before,  
a growing canon of redemptive speech that expresses through words layers of history.  
This is what Amanda Gorman did when she said  
*everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid.*  
She was quoting Lin Manuel Miranda, who was quoting George Washington,  
who was quoting the prophet Micah.

The power of speech carries and transmits our story and shapes our vision for the future.  
This is why our Torah instructs that we celebrate the Passover by "telling our children."  
This is why school teachers are creating lesson plans to teach and unpack Amanda's poem.  
(And thank you teachers, by the way, for everything you do.)

Amanda spoke about the power of speech, and indeed  
Our tradition understands that the world is created through the spoken word.  
God created the world through speech: "let there be light, and there was light."  
Our liturgy reminds us of this each day when we say  
*"Baruch She'amar V'haya ha'olam –*  
Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being."  
So too, we recognize the power of *our* words to create our world.  
Remember a word that was spoken to you as a child, a loving word or a hurtful word,  
and how you've carried it with you all these years.

Indeed words have the power to create or to destroy.  
Words spoken in recent months and years have  
Degraded our discourse  
Soiled our souls  
Desecrated our democracy.  
Irresponsible words, cruel words, lying words have literally  
altered truth in the most dangerous ways,  
incited violence,  
led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans from Covid,  
and threatened to destroy our great nation.  
Words are powerful.

As the Zohar said about the exile in Egypt,  
Speech itself has been in exile.

We've all been contaminated by the exile of sacred speech and the degradation of words.  
We've engaged in uncivil discourse,  
with our families, with our friends, online and even in our synagogue.  
How many of us have friends or family with whom we no longer can easily speak?

It's time for the re-sanctification of words.  
President Biden has called us to "end this uncivil war,"  
To "open our souls rather than harden our hearts."  
And Amanda Gorman has reminded us of the power of speech to heal and connect us,  
And she's taught us about the power of words to purify and re-sanctify.

May we, in this time of inauguration, rededication, purification, and re-sanctification,  
Rededicate ourselves to speech that heals, connects, and inspires us to dream like Dr. King.  
We rededicate ourselves to speech that creates a world of beauty and love and truth,  
in our families, in our communities, and even on the internet.  
May we, like our parasha instructs us, use the power of our holy words  
to tell our shared story of liberation from oppression and tyranny  
to the next generation, that it becomes the story they tell the generation after them.

In our parasha, the instructions for the first Passover  
conclude with the message that we do these rituals  
*"Lema'an tehiyeh Torat Adonai b'ficha ki b'yad chazakah hotziacha Adonai Mimitzrayim,*  
So that the Torah of God will be in your mouth  
that with a mighty hand God freed you from Egypt." (Exodus 13:9)  
*That the Torah of God be in your mouth!*  
It's a new beginning for our country,  
New leadership, new administration, new executive orders, new hopes for our future.  
It's a new beginning for all of us.  
May the Torah of God be in our mouths,  
as Speech again comes out of its exile  
and may it lead to redemption for all of us, for our country, and for our world.