

Romemu Dvar Torah January 20, 2017

This past Sunday, on Martin Luther King's birthday, I returned from a week-long trip to the Dominican Republic as one of 14 clergy colleagues chosen to be Global Justice Fellows for the American Jewish World Service. We 13 rabbis and one cantor flew to the Dominican Republic to spend a week visiting with grassroots organizations that were working on the ground in the Dominican Republic, in the DR, fighting discriminatory laws, providing support and advocacy for victims of systemic racism and oppression. We 13 rabbis and one cantor arrived in the Dominican Republic at a moment in our country of considerable anxiety and angst.

Division and discord, hoping to learn from those living and working in a beautiful Caribbean country that is plagued by racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. We hope to learn pathways and practical tools to use in the fight to eradicate hate and educate love. We hope we might glean best practices from them, you know? Maybe take with us inspiration to keep the flame lit.

Our hearts wide open, our souls elevated, and our intentions aligned to make our world safer, stronger, and more sane. We 13 rabbis and one cantor landed in the Dominican Republic hoping that the distance and perspective that it offered us might widen our vistas, expand our options, and make our vision clearer at a time and in a world that feels increasingly narrow and unclear. We hoped to find precedent for the unprecedented, taking place right here in our very own backyards.

We 13 rabbis and one cantor journeyed to the Dominican Republic at a time when nations are building or planning to build walls, when forces are calling for a renewed emphasis on us versus them, on me first mentalities. We came to bear witness to the truth of our interconnected and interwoven destinies, to remember and participate with all peoples, affirming both our metaphysical unity with them and the increasing realization that with global economies come global responsibilities in a world that continues to shrink, perceive differences and distances between us. We were reminding ourselves and them that we are all connected. We all rise and fall together. We came to remind ourselves and those we met that isolationism is not a viable, realistic option. On our first day, we met with a group working on behalf of the more than 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent who are living as stateless, undocumented immigrants, even though they were born in the DR. We met with groups working to ensure human rights for LGBTQ people who face daily danger and discrimination. And we met with women, leaders from the Junta de la Mujeres Mamatingo, an organization that is rooted in social action and social justice for women. We sat around tables in a town called Jena, which was once the home to a large lithium battery factory and now is one of the most polluted places in the world. We learned the story of Mamatingo, an activist for land rights, a symbol of resistance for rural women who was assassinated in 1974. We met with women who have been inspired by Mamatingo's example, to organize, to raise their voices for women's economic, sexual, and reproductive rights to speak out against violence and femicide. We learned that in the barely two weeks into the new year, seven women had already been killed in the Dominican Republic by their partners. And so we sat with these grassroots organizations, 13 rabbis and one cantor.

We asked them, what lessons, what advice that we hear in the United States, a land that is seen as a beacon of liberty and freedom by the rest of the world, what we might take back to our people, our communities, give us some good advice. And here's what they told us, each and every one of them over and over again over the course of the week, two things, only two things. Organize, come together, resist; and don't lose hope.

Don't give up hope. The men and the women that we met in the DR were courageous fighters for justice and human dignity against forces of systemic hatred, smallness, and moral bankruptcy. They embodied the power of a spiritual activism that is rooted in a moral courage and a resistance to the status quo that normalizes injustice and indignity, laws that lull us into a fearful complacency and systems that are intending to break our spirit and crush our will.

We rabbis, 13 and one cantor, could not have known the unique contours of the stories of courage and moral leadership that we saw in the DR, but we knew the general shape of the story they told. We knew it because we Jews know their story. We Jews know their story. Those who have read the Torah know their story. We know the story of despotic rulers and heroic resisters in our DNA. We know it in our bones. We have been there and we have seen that. You see, everybody, I know you all know this. It doesn't bear repeating, but let me repeat it.

Twice a day, every day, on Shabbat and Shabbat morning, on holidays, we Jews for two millennia have reminded ourselves of our collective recollection of the journey from despair to hope and from powerlessness to freedom. We say every single day, twice a day, *zayicher li yitzyat mitzrayim*, to remember how we left Egypt. And wouldn't you believe it? Incredibly, tomorrow morning, in this shul and in shuls around the world as we begin the second book of the five books of Torah of Moses, known as *Shemot* or *Exodus*, a book that served as a bridge between the familial and the political, between the story of one clan and the history of one nation, we will tell the story of how we became slaves.

Avvadi mayinu lefairo bimitzrayim, how we became the despised and the degraded. We became the minority, and then we left. Within the first chapter and a half of tomorrow morning's reading, we will meet three remarkable women, three remarkable women, role models and leaders who risked everything they had for the sake of babies who were born on the wrong side of power, for the sake of love and for the sake of justice.

Now, there's no doubt everybody here knows that the most important leader of the Torah, the most pivotal figure and the one who was forever associated with those five books, Moshe, Moses. We know who he is, we know his name, but long before Moses stood before Pharaoh and demanded the release of the Israelites, long before Moses stood at the Reed Sea to split it, long before Moses brought the Israelites to a wilderness to receive a law on a small mountain known as Sinai. He almost never was at all.

Moses almost never was were it not for *Nashim Tzidkaniot*, were it not for the righteous women that our tradition tells us, *B'zichut Nashim Tzidkaniot Nigalu Yisrael*, in the merit of the holy women, we were redeemed from Egypt. The righteous women who defied a king to defend the defenseless. We would be remiss tonight, everybody, if we didn't tell their story

on this night and on this weekend as thousands of women and men march all over this beautiful land that was made for you and me.

So some context now. You see, when the book opens tomorrow morning, we are reminded how the Israelites ended up in Egypt to begin with. Go with me here for a moment because you might know the story. Jacob's entire family, 70 members strong, come down to live in Egypt because of the famine, because of Joseph's power and political position, because they would die if they didn't. And besides, anyway, Joseph is alive and he's a big shot. And after all, we will be a part of the privileged class. We're safe in Egypt, they told themselves. But it all goes wrong. You see, first Jacob dies, and then the brothers, and eventually Joseph died too. And then the whole generation dies.

And then the Torah, in one ominous, simple verse, shifts everything for us. Va'yakam melech chadash al mitzrayim asher lo yadat Yosef. And a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph, who knew not Joseph. A new king arose over Egypt who didn't know Joseph. He didn't acknowledge who Joseph was. He didn't acknowledge the other, the immigrant, the one who looked different, the one who belonged to the other people. Knowledge in the Torah has moral valence. To not know something is not just bad because you don't get it, it's bad morally.

Joseph represents an intimacy with that whole movement of Joseph and his family. To not know is to be disconnected, to forget, to turn away. The great commentator Rashi says, you know what it means that he didn't know Joseph? It doesn't mean that he didn't know him in the simple meaning, which is he had never met him. He didn't know how great Joseph was, he hadn't learned about it. No, says Rashi, asatz mo ki ilu lo yada'o. This new king intentionally tried to forget Joseph.

The new king made himself seem to not know Joseph. His ignorance was willful, intentional. It was fueled by an agenda, the whole Joseph thing. He doesn't know and learn about fratricide. He doesn't know and learn about what it is to split what should be cohesive, to tear a seamless coat of many colors into threads. He doesn't know from Joseph.

Joseph, who was an outsider, a Hebrew, a criminal, who rose to participate and contribute and even save the land of Egypt, is forgotten, erased, repressed, seen as dangerous and worthy of fear. This new pharaoh elides over this convenient truth. Pharaoh, our new king, actively erases the memory of the contribution of those immigrants who helped to build Egypt to the great power that it was. The Torah narrates to us how this new king, this pharaoh, spoke to his fellow Egyptians, framing and fanning a frenzied fear of foreigners and stoking suspicions of their perceived power. In the Torah, the Torah says, Pharaoh came to the people and said, וְהָיוּ עַמְּךָ כְּכֹחֵמָה Let us deal with them with chokhmah. Let's be smart. Let's fool them. Let's be strategic. Let's outwit them. Lest they become the majority and displace us. Let's put Egypt first at all costs.

This new pharaoh goes further. He enacts a perverse program, a system that will support his nefarious narcissism. Throw every firstborn male into the Nile. Enter our first two heroines, Shifra and Pua, Egyptian midwives. Maybe they were Hebrew midwives for the Hebrews or

Egyptian midwives for the Hebrews. They are ordered to comply with Pharaoh's decree and they don't. They can't.

They won't. They fear only God, only the Holy One. They fear God alone, says the Torah.

And even though at least according to one way of reading the text, they're not even Hebrews. They're Egyptians. These women set up a sanctuary space, a safe zone to house and to hold those who have nowhere to go. No one to trust. Those whose very lives are dependent on others' willingness to risk their own lives. And so risking it all, Shifra and Pua put themselves on the line for life. They are on the line for life. They're on the line for life. They are willing to give their lives to resist pharaonic empires for the sake of these Hebrew foreigners, these boys, for the sake of what is just, for the sake of what is moral, for the sake of what is holy, for the sake of love and justice. But Pharaoh's decree is still working. It's dangerous to give birth and to affirm life in Pharaoh's empire when one couple that is unnamed and anonymous has the audacity to hope, to imagine having a child even under a cruel edict.

And enter our third heroine. Enter Pharaoh's daughter. She has no name, though the tradition will call her Bat-Ya, the daughter of God. And the daughter of Pharaoh went to wash on the Nile with her servants, her maidservants. Bat-Ya, Bat-Ya. And she saw the crib, the basket, in the reeds. Bat-Ya, Bat-Ya. And she sent forth her maidservant to grab the basket, v'tiftach, and she opened. And she saw, v'teiru et ha-yeled, v'hinei na'ar b'cheh, and he was a child who cried. V'tachmol alav, and she had compassion for him. And then she said, miyadei ha-ivriim zeh, this must be a Hebrew child. As if the text could not ratchet up the tension any higher. As if the beautiful text of our Western civilization, the cornerstone of what we deem moral and ethical, could not be any more tightly woven and more beautifully constructed.

The Torah tells us not just that there were two, let's say, Hebrew midwives, or maybe Egyptian midwives, who were willing to step out into the breach, so to speak, for the sake of these Hebrew children. Not just those women who had to be on the line for life. But it's all the way on the top. There's a daughter of Pharaoh, she's unnamed. The danger is immense. There's no way that she could possibly hide this from her father. They live in the same home. But she is going to grab a child.

Now, I tell you something, everybody, between me and you. In ancient Egypt, at this moment in the story, there's no chance that that little basket with a baby in it is anything but a Hebrew child. There is a perverse edict. She knows what she's getting herself into. But Bat Paro, the daughter of Pharaoh, she sees a child on the Nile. She opens the basket. She sees him crying. And before she can even recognize him as a Hebrew child, before the text tells us that he's a Hebrew child, she has compassion. Compassion comes first. She feels him. She sees him and she feels his fear. She is moved by his cries, his tears, to disobey her own father. She adopts this child.

This great leader, after whom the Torah is named, is brought up by an Egyptian stepmother, right there in the house of power. And he inherits her ocular empathy, her compassionate

gaze. If we know anything about Moshe, and when we finally arrive at Moshe in the story, one verse brings us to the full-grown, fully-actualized man.

וַיֵּצֵא אֶלְדָּוָו And he grew up. וַיֵּצֵא אֶלְדָּוָו He went out to his brothers. The first exodus in Egypt happens from the palace of Pharaoh.

וַיֵּצֵא he left. And then, the verb in Hebrew, וַיֵּדָה, he saw. His mother, the Egyptian mother, saw. Those Hebrew midwives, Egyptian midwives, they saw. And Moshe has a penetrating gaze. Scholar Aviva Zornberg writes about Moshe's seeing, Moshe sees in a way that allows him to be affected, to suffer with those who are unexpectedly called his brothers. Moshe's vision is contrasted with Pharaoh's, whose seeing is disjunctive and differential. Moshe's seeing is an act of empathy with those who seem physically, socially, and existentially so different from who he is. He looks at those crushed under Egyptian's burdens with what Jorge Semprún calls a pure fraternal gaze.

It is on the basis of that vulnerable empathy that he then sees the Egyptian taskmaster battering one of his brothers. He sees the axis of difference now running between those who inflict cruelty and those who suffer from it. Those who inflict cruelty and those who suffer from it. He saw their suffering and he went out to them. It is in that context that we can better understand who Moses is and what leadership means to the Torah. Moses, we are told, is named because he was drawn forth from the water of the Nile, the deathly water of the Nile. But Moshe is not only drawn from the Nile, he is drawn and sustained by the life-affirming example of the lineage of Egyptian women who, though not from his own clan or family, they set an example of putting themselves on the line for life. That is a man growing up with women who were willing to cross over boundaries of race and creed and sexual orientation and sexual identity and gender identity and political partisanship, who were willing to walk over that line and put themselves on the line for life.

That is Moshe. And that is a Moshe who can write a manifesto in which 50 times he will tell us, love the stranger for you were once strangers in a strange land. A Moshe who knows in his heart and his bones what it is. We would all not be here were it not for those Egyptian women who were willing to live elevating life above all else. Moshe's vision is a vision that includes a vision that holds many pieces.

None of us this evening know what the new king who has arisen in our land and his administration will bring. But we've already seen and heard much that should be alarming. The conservative columnist David Brooks wrote today, we have never over our centuries inaugurated a man like Donald Trump as president of the United States. You can select any random group of former presidents, Madison, Lincoln, Hoover, Carter, and none of them are like Trump. We've never had a major national leader as professionally unprepared, intellectually ill-informed, morally compromised, and temperamentally unfit as the man taking oath this Friday. So let's not lessen the shock factor that should reverberate across this extraordinary moment, he writes.

Our new king is no Moses. He was not drawn from the waters of love and compassion. But I don't believe this is the end. I don't believe in prophecies of doom and gloom for this country because I know, I know the vast majority of Americans agree that bigotry and hatred, racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and putting

America first, none of those things will help us win. I know that the vast majority of Americans agree that we are a stronger nation, a more vital nation because we come together across differences and distinctions to unite in a greater we, a greater us. That is the America that I believe in. I know tonight that the forces that seek to divide this country against itself as well as pit us against the world do not represent what is most noble about us as a country, no.

I know that the vast majority of us, regardless of who we voted for, agree that each human being is entitled to quality health care, a home, and a job. That is the America I believe in. We are a nation that aspires to the lofty goal of our Torah. You shall love the stranger for you were once strangers. And the kernel of the deepest element and most basic structure of our society that every human being is imbued with innate dignity and worth, we believe those things. The vast majority of us believe those things, regardless of the aisle you sit on.

So what would it feel like to organize with the eyes of the daughter of Pharaoh, with the eyes of Moses? What would that look like for us to take that first piece of advice from our friends in the Dominican Republic? What would it look like to organize with those eyes? Maybe this. Maybe it would mean seeing with eyes that are trained to see and feel the cries of others. And in that paradigm, whites would speak out against the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, and black brothers and sisters, and all people of color would stand together with those in our country who feel unseen and unheard despite their privileged white skin.

It would mean white women and women of color, gay, trans, and heteros, along with men of all stripes, would refuse to be divided and pitted against one another. That's what it would mean to see and organize with Moshe's eyes. With Moshe's eyes, we might see the suffering of those in the Rust Belt as well as the suffering of those in the inner cities. We might see the pain and fear in the immigrant communities who are terrified of deportation and those who are fighting on behalf of women's sexual and reproductive rights, terrified that those rights will be rolled back. We will feel all of that. A new king has arisen today, but just a week ago when I landed, we were remembering another king. A king named Martin Luther King who spoke for all of us when he said, power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. I believe that the power of little-known players like you and me who leave privilege and fear to listen and to see, to organize and to act are what we need to focus all of our energies moving forward.

Howard Zinn wrote, What matters is the countless small deeds of unknown people who lay the basis for the significant events that enter history. Small deeds of unknown people. When we think of Moshe and his life, we can't and never are we allowed to forget that he owed his life to the legacy of three remarkable women who put themselves on the line for life.

And I want to leave you now with a second piece of advice. Not just organize, not just resist, but don't give up hope. On our last day in the Dominican Republic, we sat down with a woman who was now working in the Dominican Republic but had been in Haiti, working in Haiti for many years for AJWS, for the American Jewish World Service. And we sat with her

and we asked her what it was like in Haiti when the earthquake hit because she had been there. Yeah. And so she said, you know, the morning that the earthquake hit, the day the earthquake hit, I was on my way out of Port-au-Prince with a group of friends and we were making our way to a mountain. And with this group of friends, we were maybe in the safest place you could have possibly wanted to be in Haiti at that moment. As we were discussing volcanoes, we felt the ground move. And we laughed uncomfortably thinking that maybe, you know, it's kind of weird. We didn't have cell phone service, she said, so we went down the mountain and we found an internet cafe. And we looked on the internet and we saw right away what had happened in Haiti. In Port-au-Prince, excuse me.

They saw the devastation. They all had friends and family that were in Port-au-Prince. And so they hopped into the car and they frantically began driving back to Port-au-Prince, hoping to contribute in some way to the rescue mission. And as she was coming into the city, she saw something incredible. You see, in the aftermath of the earthquake, there were about 60 to 90 aftershocks. And those aftershocks were even more dangerous than the earthquake.

And so she saw literally thousands and thousands of people making their way to the highway because that was the safest place to be in the aftershocks. So as she drove in, with her headlights on, they were in the dark, and she could see all of these people on the highway.

And then there was an aftershock, and everybody hit the ground and they waited for it to be over. And then she said she saw the most remarkable thing. When the aftershock was over, these dignified, incredible human beings stood up and they started to sing. And she told us that she never in her life would have imagined seeing people singing in the aftershocks. Singing in the aftershocks, being able to find song after devastation, after confusion, in chaos, when things look bleak, to be able to be jumping up and down in the headlights of her car, praising God for life, worried about the next aftershock, they sang there.

Last Friday. As I sat with a group of Mama Tingo, they began our group meeting with listen to this song that I sing, the anthem of Mama Tingo, that great mother. Listen to this song that I sing. Do not leave me alone. Raise your voice, raise your voice.

Tonight we all sit here together. Standing at a moment of crisis and opportunity for this country and for our community. We stand with all of the courageous ones who are fighting for peace and justice, equality and end of ignorance and greed, bigotry and systems of oppression. We stand here tonight to recognize and hear the pain of those who feel unheard, and of those who feel unseen, and to feel their pain.

Their pain that has been pushed aside. And we stand to pledge to organize and protect freedoms and liberties that many feel are endangered at this moment in our country. We stand together to be on the line for life and for liberty for all. And we sing tonight. We sing in the aftershocks knowing that though we may be afraid, we live in a remarkable country. We sing for Mama Tingo, we sing for love and we sing for light, and for every one of those immigrants who live in fear tonight. Because in the end, as Adam Phillips, the great psychoanalyst, said, each and every one of us is an immigrant on the shores of this world,

coming into this world looking for love, looking for welcoming, looking for acceptance, and who is at the border of that of that door?

That great fourth heroine, that great woman who stands in our harbor, who watches us sing the song of triumph, of resistance, of power, of courage, that great mother of exiles who says, give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

You're tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to read, bringing the wretched refuses of your TV show. Send these your homeless tempest tossed to me I, my love, the side of the door. Give me attire. You're talking to myself. We are to to be free. That watching threat to stop your teacher send these your homeless tempest tossed to be my life inside. You don't know I left my life inside your door. I left my life beside the golden door. We will build a world from love. We will build the world from the eyes of. We will build the world.

Please rise.