

D'var Torah Shavuot Shabbat 5780
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It's been seven weeks since Passover. It's been seven weeks since we celebrated our *z'man Cheruteinu*, our season of freedom - our time for redemption. And the promise of Passover every year, of course, is that we all be so free that next year - *I'shanah ha'ba* - we'll celebrate Pesach in Jerusalem and all will be well. The messianic era will arrive - and with it, universal peace and justice and spiritual uplift for all. I can't wait!, And yet, I've been waiting for that amazing moment my whole life. How about you?

Surely, the pandemic is not speeding things up. The more the weeks press on the more I speak with lonely folks; the more I learn of unemployment and financial hardship; the more I see laid bare the racism that has always held our nation back from its true inclusive greatness.

I see the streets of Minneapolis on fire. I see a city and nation grieving yet another lethal act of police brutality. I see George Floyd's brother crying out for justice. Eye for an eye! Tooth for a tooth! Life for a life! I see such a vicious cycle of betrayal and distrust; and brazen dishonesty from our highest offices. How is empathy to blossom? How is hope to flower? How is trust to bloom? Are we really free while so many are not? Will the promise of Passover ever become real?

I take comfort in the festival of Shavuot. Our summer harvest festival comes as we are reeling, like a beautiful summer day with the sun shining warmly on our face. No, the moment is not suddenly made sunny. Shavuot is not that powerful. But it does bring perspective. And perspective lends to resilience. And resilience sustains us so that we may become and remain a force for good in the world.

During Passover, we recognize there is nothing better than Pharaoh taking a hike and taking up less space (or no space) in our souls. Passover champions freedom, and we love freedom. We love the freedom to speak our minds. We love the freedom to move about. We love the freedom not to live in fear. We love the freedom to act according to our fondest desires.

But then again, our fondest desires in some ways are the very problem we witness in life today. In the words of contemporary Israeli philosopher Menachem Kellner: Desire is predatory; it eats at our own hearts. And then, I would add we devour others with our covetous appetites. Presidents do it. Rogue cops do it. Everyday people who are

usually decent do it or at least aren't immune to it. This is why have tenth, and arguably most important of the Aseret Hadibbrot handed down from Sinai. Lo tachmod! :You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's. (Exodus 20:14)

Returning to the wisdom of Professor Kellner:

In the place of desire, God seeks to seal the passion of the covenant to make our hearts whole. A "holy nation" is not only a law-abiding nation; it is a nation that has internalized the values inherent in the laws. The tenth commandment - lo tachmod - thus teaches us that while mitzvot are a way of life, they are not ends in themselves, but means to a further end: the formation of a holy character. (M. Kellner)

Lo tachmod is not only a strategy for sacred Jewish community; it's also a healing balm of justice and compassion and kindness that our nation so desperately needs. But why isn't it easier to achieve this wholeness? After all, who would argue with the value of loving our neighbors or seeking peace or treating each other *betzelem Elohim*, in God's image, full of intrinsic worth?

We wouldn't. But the problem is not the values themselves. The challenges lie with us - with human beings. In the words of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, freedom must be earned. Yes, God grants us freedom from Pharoah during Passover, but that doesn't mean God forces us to be free. Rabbi Greenberg tells us, in truth, "freedom cannot be given to another." This is the essence of Shavuot. We must take the Torah, commandments like lo tachmod, and we must imprint God's loving wisdom on our hearts, and with that wisdom guiding us and framing our action in life, we can hope to build a bridge from the world as it is, a world that so often hurts, to a the world as it should be, a world made more whole. Freedom is hard work. Freedom is not free. Freedom must be earned with mitzvot like lo tachmod which keep our desires from devouring others, including ourselves.

Ever wonder why we read the Book of Ruth during Shavuot? It reflects the summer harvest. Ruth embodies the covenant and models the power of conversion. Ruth is connected to King David and the messianic line. King David died on Shavuot. These are all normative answers but none of these get at the kishkas of why Ruth is so important, especially as we consider the chaos and pain of this moment in our lives. Megillat Ruth flows out of great loss and betrayal. A great famine overwhelms Judah. Ruth's fiance and father-in-law abandon their loved ones but then die in Moab - Ruth's fiance

childless. So absurd is this moment that it's hard to figure the meaning of it all. Ruth, an endless well of love, feels great loss. She still loved her husband and never wanted him to be childless.

The covenant of love extends beyond the grave. Ruth loved Naomi, her living mother-in-law, and would not let her go away alone and impoverished. Although there was no hope or reason for it and there was no visible redeemer to keep the family name alive, Ruth insisted on going with Naomi. She acted out of chessed, a loving kindness that saw not only the bleak reality but the possibilities of redemption that may still break through the harsh surface of an unredeemed world. Ruth remained faithful. She joined Naomi's people and embraced Naomi's God. And incredibly, out of this barren, rocky soil grew hope—an act of kindness, a relative who cared. A marriage followed and a child was born who became the grandfather of David from whom would come the Messiah. Out of faithfulness comes hope; out of suffering comes redemption; out of love comes renewed life.

Out of faithfulness comes hope; out of suffering comes redemption; out of love comes renewed life. This is the essential message of Shavuot, our Feast of Weeks. We also reaffirm Shavuot not just as a moment to remember our freedom of Passover but a moment to rededicate ourselves to earning our freedom via Sinai and the mitzvot. And Shavuot is the holiday that perhaps best reminds us that the bridge between the world as it is and the world as it should be is built by receiving the Torah and impressing it upon our hearts and taming our ravenous desires.