

Mutter Upon Mutter, Murmur Upon Murmur

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This week we begin reading what is arguably the most significant text of the Bible. As the biblical commentator Nahum Sarna puts it, Exodus "is the great seminal text of biblical literature; its central topic, which shaped and informed the future development of the culture and religion of Israel, is mentioned here no less than 120 times. It profoundly influenced ethical and social consciousness so significantly that it is frequently invoked as the motivation for protecting and providing the interests and rights of the stranger and the disadvantaged of society."

It seems that everywhere we turn in Jewish liturgy, we encounter the Exodus. We have it in our daily liturgy. It's evoked whenever we recite the Shma. And of course it is the centerpiece of the Passover Seder.

Part of what makes the narrative so powerful is its plasticity. It speaks to every age and every time. It is seen as the paradigmatic expression of the cry for justice by the oppressed. And so we read in this week's parshah about the enslavement of the Israelites by Egypt and their great suffering brought about by the actions of an insecure and paranoid tyrant. The Haftarah in Isaiah seems thematically related in the sense that there, too, Israel suffers. But their suffering, Isaiah relishes pointing out with indignation, is self-inflicted. They refuse to listen to God, and so deserve the suffering they get. And yet, just as the parsha ends with a promise to Moses that redemption will yet come, so too the haftarah ends with verses that promise redemption because Israel will finally stand in awe before God.

Suffering is a means to an end in these narratives. It is a necessary step towards salvation. This idea was adopted with entirely too much enthusiasm in previous centuries, with great meaning being attached to suffering. But the Holocaust brought this romance with suffering to an abrupt end. No longer could meaning be attributed to suffering.

Today we suffer as a nation. It is a suffering that is something of a hybrid between that depicted in Exodus and that told in Isaiah. We suffer because of the actions of an insecure and paranoid president. And we suffer because we have persisted in willfully ignoring the dangers of white supremacy. Herculean efforts were expended over the last year with massive protests under the banner of Black Lives Matter which sought to raise awareness of this terrible truth. But what we witnessed on Wednesday has ripped asunder the illusion of progress. Wednesday's insurgency shows that to the institutions entrusted with high stakes security, the voice of protest was, as Isaiah puts it, like one who speaks to the people "in a stammering jargon and an alien tongue.... Mutter upon mutter, murmur upon murmur, now here, now there."

And so we have a tremendous and awesome responsibility before us now. We must hold accountable those who violated the inner sancta of American democracy and shine a bright light on the homegrown terrorism of white nationalism that brought it pass. This is the task that Isaiah identifies - to self-reflect and learn once more how to stand in awe and humility before the God whose voice speaks for the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed.

And we have the task set before us by the Exodus narrative. To overcome the petty tyranny of an insecure and paranoid leader who is willing to wreak death and destruction to hold onto power through any possible means. Pharaoh ordered that baby boys be drowned. The president organized an insurrection. Both represent assaults on the basic norms that are supposed to govern society.

Before I say more, let me first make clear that I do not use my pulpit to take sides politically. I do not publicly advocate for Democratic or Republican political advantage. But let me also say that we as a nation are dealing right now not with legitimate political difference, but with an unhinged leader who has unleashed destruction on the United States Capitol. I want to be clear that this is not about blue versus red politics. I'm not playing at partisan politics here. This is about a single man's behavior, a man who happens to occupy the office of President.

The fallout from the terrifying violence in the Capitol on Wednesday is still ongoing. It is still a volatile and unpredictable situation. But one thing is clear to me. The president has shown himself to be as dangerous and illegitimate a leader as the character of Pharaoh in Exodus.

We are past the point of legitimate partisan political differences. What happened in the Capitol on Wednesday was violent insurrection brought about as a direct result of incitement by the President of the United States. Violence, destruction, vandalism, theft, injury, and death took place in the Temple of American Democracy.

That is what this is about. It is not about partisan politics. It is about a clear and present danger to America.

One could argue that removing the president from office is a mitzvah, an obligation. In Tractate Sukkah (29b), there is a teaching by the Talmudic sage Rav that those who throw off the yoke of communal responsibility from their own necks and end up placing that yoke on someone else's neck is liable for punishment. This to me is particularly resonant with this political moment. The reluctance of the cabinet to do what is their responsibility to protect the nation does not make the problem go away. It simply represents throwing off the yoke of communal responsibility from their own necks. In doing so, they end up placing it around the neck of Congress. And so impeachment proceedings will follow. Which will result not in the actual removal of the president from office, but only in a censure of his actions as impotent as the first impeachment. And when the Senate throws off the yoke of its communal responsibility, there is nothing to be done but wait two interminable weeks and pray that nothing more awful happens until the next president is sworn into office. We are even now fleeing from before Pharaoh's chariots. But in two weeks his chariots will drown, and we will cross over to begin a journey through a wilderness when we must learn to come together as a people, united as a nation.