

Responsibilities after Crossing the Sea

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Last Shabbat morning, I was in an Alexandria, Virginia hotel with four fabulous teens from our congregation, Eugene Krupitsky, my son Daniel, and hundreds of others a Reform Jewish teen social justice weekend that would later be snowbound. The weather wouldn't reach the Washington area late that night, so we were on track to follow our longstanding plan of visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum that afternoon.

Despite being fully engaged in Shabbat morning services and roleplaying a conservative coal-state senator for a program, I was also following the news. Once again, an American citizen had been shot to death by federal immigration officers while engaging in protest that might best be called civil disobedience. Once again, officials at the highest levels of our federal government were blaming the victim, voicing an easily debunked false narrative about that victim, Alex Pretti, about his intent, and about the officers' response.

Those events were very much on my mind as we entered the Holocaust Museum. The exhibit begins by detailing Hitler's rise to power, fueled by antisemitism, despite a fact quickly demonstrated by the exhibit: Jews constituted less than one percent of Germany's population in 1933. The exhibit goes on to explain: "Violence and brutality were fundamental elements of Hitler's dictatorship. They were used to prevent any militant opposition to the new government and to remove existing barriers on its path to total power." It continues, "Almost immediately after the takeover of power, Hitler's second-in-command, Hermann Goring, gave 'shoot to kill' orders to police sent to quell Communist demonstrators."

I usually recoil when present day events are compared to the Holocaust, but this part of the exhibit is about the early stages of establishing unchecked power that would only later turn to genocide. I was overwhelmed with the sense that what I was reading on the wall could be describing that day's news. The lies spun by Homeland Secretary Kristi Noem among others that day would make Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, proud. Richard Sheposh explains: "The 'big lie' is a concept suggesting that a falsehood can gain acceptance if it is repeated frequently and is grand enough that individuals cannot fathom its untruth. This idea has historical roots, notably attributed to Adolf Hitler's writings in his 1925 manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, where he argued that larger lies are more believable

than smaller ones. The Nazis effectively utilized this concept to scapegoat the Jewish population, ultimately justifying horrific acts during the Holocaust.”ⁱ

But here’s the thing: This week, Americans did not believe the big lie.

In 1930s Germany, tens of thousands of regimented demonstrators repeatedly donned their swastika armbands and reported to a designated location to cheer the cruelty and the lies heaped upon the scapegoated marginalized minority, and to call for more.

In Minnesota this week, by contrast, tens of thousands took to the street to proclaim the truth and protest violent immigration enforcement and suppression of dissent. Gun rights activists, generally supportive of the administration, refuted a narrative that criminalized carrying a holstered, legally registered handgun to confront tyranny. Some members of the President’s own party spoke up to demand a fair investigation, while others suggested that the violent response to protest, even the overwhelming force of immigration enforcement currently in Minnesota, needed to end or at least be scaled back.

Protest is patriotic. We who would be proud Americans must be participants in our own nation’s liberation.

Torah shows us how.

Two weeks ago, we read: “The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant...God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”ⁱⁱ We read those words immediately before God appears to Moses at the burning bush. We later read that Moses was eighty years old at the time—that is, God does not act until the Israelites have been subjected to slavery and genocide, throwing every baby boy into the Nile, for eight decades. What stirs God to action, at long last? The Israelites’ outcry. Calling out for salvation is the first step to achieving it.

In last week’s portion, Pharaoh frees the Israelites in the aftermath of the tenth plague. Now, as we read on this week, he has a change of heart, sending his armies in hot pursuit. Trapped between Pharaoh’s armies behind them and the sea in front, the Israelites despair. God, though, instructs Moses to lift his rod, to part the sea. Why would God require Moses to act before the sea can part? Couldn’t God do that alone? Of course, but God wants humans to be partners in liberation.

Then, after Moses raises his staff, we read that “the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground.”ⁱⁱⁱ Which is it? “Into the sea” or “on dry ground?” It can’t be both! Our Talmudic sages imagine the Israelites standing astride a not-yet-parted

sea, Moses urging them to march. Rabbi Meir depicts the tribes quibbling: Everyone wants to go first. Rabbi Yehuda has a different, more plausible, theory: **Nobody** wanted to go first. Nachshon ends the dispute by plunging into the sea. He does so with a prayer, quoting a passage from Psalms: “Save me, God; for the waters have come even into my soul[--that is, drowning him.] Let the water not overwhelm me, neither let the deep swallow me up.”^{iv}

Nachshon risks his own life, thereby saving his forsaken people.

This week, I reached out to two friends in Minneapolis. One told me that he is staying close to home. He’s transgender, and he understandably fears that he would be in great danger if he went out to protest. Another is a comfortable, white, cisgender, straight, male Reform Jew. He was out on the streets with his wife and their young adult children, together with many others from Minnesota’s Jewish community.

Both responses are entirely appropriate and in line with Jewish teaching. We are required to preserve our own lives. We also have an obligation as a people who have crossed the sea.

The generation who had been enslaved was consumed with their own liberation. Those who tell their story in Torah, though, remind us, thirty-six times, that we are obligated to care for the stranger. That’s what Renee Good was doing. That’s what Alex Pretti was doing, as he had so many times in the Veterans Administration’s intensive care unit.

Jewish Americans, too, crossed the sea to reach these shores of freedom and opportunity, whether we be immigrants or their descendants. Richard Kreitner, author of *Fear No Pharaoh*, a book about Jews and the Civil War, explains that Jews in the nineteenth century were no better or worse than their neighbors in confronting slavery. Like the first generation of freed Israelites, they were consumed by their own liberation.

We, their descendants, are obligated by the commandment to care for the stranger. We, their descendants, are required to stand up for justice. We, their descendants, bear the responsibilities of those who have crossed the sea. Let us seek strength from God, who saved us. Let us partner with God, like Moses, Miriam, and Nachshon before us, to bring freedom in our own day.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/big-lie>.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 2:23-25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 14:22.

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 36b-37a.