

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Shemot

It is the end of an era and the beginning of a decade. Ok, this is not as good as Dicken's, "It was the best of times and it was the worst of times," but it works. As we look at the flow of time, the story takes us from the best of times to the worst. Last week, we said good bye to the Abrahamic story as we ended the book of Genesis. This week, we will mention Joseph once, but only in passing reference. Over the next four books of the Torah, we embark on a new story. We will not be the privileged lot that we were under the patriarchy. We will not be the wealthy shepherds and land owners. We will be slaves seeking freedom, and wanderers seeking direction and stability.

At the same time that we have bridged the two books and two story lines, we have bridged not only a new year, but a new decade. In the same sense that we grew tremendously as we vicariously lived with and through the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs, this last decade has brought growth beyond our wildest imaginations. In the last ten years, we have revolutionized communication, the way we process information. We have seen Mars from ground level. We carry entire music collections, even movie libraries, screens, and entire book libraries in our pockets on i-pods, mp3 players, and mini-computers. With all of the wonderful technology that we have to celebrate, we see in the news each day the lengths to which this technology is used to destroy the world around us. Over the last decade, we have also experienced worldwide terrorism, the terrifying rise and effect of religious fundamentalism, and the collapse of a vibrant economy. It is the best of time, and the worst of time.

The question we have to face is not what was, but what can be. Joseph brought his family to Egypt. He reestablished his family's wealth, as it had been before the famine, though it was short lived, as all of Egypt fell. In the midst of this moment of glory, the economic collapse brought the entire dynasty to an end. Egypt lived to the excesses, as Pharaoh (with the help of Joseph) took everything owned by each Egyptian and used it for his own selfish well being. This week, on the heels of the culmination of this story, we read that a new Pharaoh arose, who knew not Joseph. After nearly two centuries of growth and prosperity, we became more wealthy and powerful than any other country. In the short course of one decade, a world exists that knows not the grace of the United States. This is not the fault of a president or even a political party (unless you fault all politicians whose agendas are built more on defeated political opponents than representing the people). Our newly questioned status globally is all about the excesses to which we have lived and the self serving governing forces that have not only allowed it but fostered it. The ultimate question that we have to face is not what was, but what can be.

As we begin Exodus, we will have a chance to define the way in which we look at Moses and the opportunities presented for the journey. Is this simply the story of how a family moves generationally from experience to experience through history, creating for us, a link to the past? There are those who want to believe that this is history, we were actually slaves in Ancient Egypt, freed by the hand of God. Perhaps the storyline is a metaphor? Is Egypt and its taskmasters the symbol of our own enslavement to the idolatry of greed and power? Do we live, as Joseph in a dying society, looking for some privilege. Or we can see ourselves as slaves looking to be free, or we can read into this story the building blocks for restoring health to ourselves and our communities. It takes a lot of faith to break with the past. It takes a lot of faith to leave behind the chains that bound us to destructive ways. In the same sense, though, that Moses, the one who leads us to restoration and freedom is really one of us, it really is to each of us to pay attention to what is going on around us and take a leadership role in our restoration. Each of us is Moses, or needs to be.

This next decade will provide us the opportunities to change the world that is, into the world in which we want to live. We have choices to make and can, as Torah tells us, choose the blessing or the curse. Where we choose the blessing, we choose life – for us and the world around us. Where we choose the curse, we destroy the world. We learn from our tradition, If we save one life, it is as if we have saved the world. One on one, ani v'atah neshaneh et ha-olam. You and I, we can change the world. May this next decade see us restore our communities to safety and health. I pray that this Sabbath bring us to the path of peace and love – and respect for each other. Shabbat Shalom.