

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Bo

"In cultures that depend on elephants for labor and transportation, it's common to tie untrained elephants by their legs to a bamboo tree, using heavy-duty rope. After three or four days of trying to free themselves, the elephants give up. Their spirit is broken. From that time on, they can be restrained by tying one leg to a small peg in the ground — something they surely could escape from with minimal effort. But at the least resistance, the elephants don't try to get loose; they have learned helplessness. Like the elephant, sometimes we are all bound by little imaginary ropes, when just a little effort would set us free. You'll never know if you don't try."

I found this vignette the other day and could not help but think about our plight in the real world. We are conditioned to accept so many things that are thrown at us, without regard to the merit of the restriction being imposed upon us. Certainly this is where this commentary could turn decidedly political, but I think the ease with which politicians manipulate us is merely symptomatic of a much bigger problem. We buy "Organic" products in grocery stores, even where there exists no difference between organic and processed produce. We use the term "free range" to describe a healthier and more ethical treatment of poultry, only to find that "free range" is a rather meaningless term according to the F.D.A. When oil prices were high, airlines started adding costs to fares to compensate for the increase in fuel costs. Oil has gone back down, but we are still paying these extra fees. Society has absorbed a great many of these lessons, only to shake our heads up and down and accept whatever is thrown at us without question. Face it, day after day we prove to be more lemming than thoughtful consumer in the market place.

Certainly this problem exists in religion where a charismatic leader creates a dogma and convinces his/her community to buy into it as a matter of life or death (Waco, Jonestown, Manson, Hale Bop, religious based terrorism etc.), or even the exclusivism or ostracization of all "non-believers" practiced by the narrow fundamentalisms that exist in every religious denomination. As we learn so often, in the same sense that the elephant is really held back only by the small rope, we buy into the most destructive ideologies, even while thinking we are heading down much healthier and more holy pathways.

I believe that the root cause of this problem is a lack of faith. Dr. Martin Luther King said that believing God will do everything while we do nothing is not religion, but superstition. How often do we hear that matters are just left in God's hands? How often do we hear that people waited for miracles and then were disappointed when what they wanted did not happen? The faith we need is not in an all powerful God who does everything, but in ourselves — that we can take what our Creating Partner has given us and create some miracle using its order and power. It does not matter what one believes God is, only that one feels empowered to use the energy that exists in the created/evolved world to heal and restore it. Too often, though, we find this faith taken from us through the use of fear, propaganda, and programmed repeated messages with painful results.

With this thought in mind, as I approach the Exodus from Egypt, I always wonder why text demonstrates Israel to feel so helpless in servitude. It is not slavery as we know it, it is servitude. The text will tell us

that while serving Egypt, even amidst the edict of death and the taskmasters, we ate delicacies like quail, we were able to borrow the gold and jewels from our Egyptian neighbors, we had homes (not tents) such that we could paint doorposts with lamb's blood, and even while in servitude, a common Israelite slave (as Moses was thought to be) had access to an audience with Pharaoh. Was Pharaoh really the slaveholder, or were we too conditioned to servitude to know that we could go free? The text tells us that two million people will leave Egypt. How do Pharaoh and a much smaller army of taskmasters keep two million enslaved without their own acquiescence? The same question is asked of the Shoah, the Holocaust. How did six million go as lambs to slaughter and not rebel? How could God let that happen? The answer is quite simple, God did not. As with the elephant, we were conditioned to simply accept that this was our destiny. Browbeaten and oppressed enough, we accepted that simply surviving through the day was a blessing. There is no faith in this helplessness. Just surviving is never enough. When we give up the faith that we are to fill our lives with blessings, we allow ourselves to be oppressed. If this story of servitude from the Torah teaches us anything, it must be that if we ever expect to celebrate an age of peace, it had to come from our own commitment to making it happen. Even in the midst and aftermath of calamity, it is incumbent upon us to maintain and restore the faithful belief that we deserve to be blessed; we deserve to be free. Where we fail in this faith, we fail ourselves and each other. Where we succeed, we change and heal the world. Shabbat Shalom.