

Rebels with a Cause

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Almost four weeks have passed since the evening when my 20-year-old son told me he was headed to a protest downtown. I went with him. I was moved into the street by the passion of very young adults—the one in my home and the hundreds, perhaps thousands, I saw on the streets of our city that late May evening. I will confess: I was nervous, but only about coronavirus.

I saw no weapons. I witnessed no vandalism, no violence. What I did experience was a tremendous amount of raw anger. The cause, we all know, was the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, abetted by both silent and active accomplices. The video and that murder come on the heels of countless extra-judicial executions of black Americans, often at the hands of police. We know the names. Michael Brown. Freddie Gray. Eric Garner. Sandra Bland. Breonna Taylor. America's conscience should have been shocked into the streets years ago—and in some places, for a time, it has been. This time seems to be different. This video, this murder, has shaken even our own usually quiescent city into the streets.

I joined in some of the chants, but remained silent when the words were profane or inappropriate. I understood, though, why some protestors were shouting words I would not. When my sons got their drivers' licenses, I was thrilled—not terrified, as black parents are, that a broken tail light could prove fatal to their young adult offspring. I am angry about unchecked police brutality, but my righteous indignation cannot be compared to the anger of a people who have repeatedly grieved, who have repeatedly demanded justice, and who have repeatedly seen justice denied.

When the crowd walked down the embankment to block I-630, I decided the time had come for me to go home, but I did not disagree with the tactic. Even the Confederate monuments on the Capitol grounds pale in comparison with to the way that black citizens of our city view that freeway as a symbol of systemic racism.

Before the night was over, Robert would be shot with chemical irritants and rubber bullets. His crime? Kneeling on the ground in a line of protestors, peacefully facing down the State Police in front of the Capitol. He did not wear his wound as a badge of victimhood or honor. Black lives are on the line; not his.

Years ago, some of our Christian neighbors wore bracelets, reminding them to ask, “What would Jesus do?” Jews struggled for a parallel. The theologically correct answer is, “What would God have us do?” The popular response was, “What would Moses do?”

This week’s Torah portion gives us a glimpse.

Moses is faced with protestors. A band of rebels, led by his own cousin, “rise up against Moses.”ⁱ Their claim: “All the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why, then, do you raise yourself above the congregation of Adonai?”ⁱⁱ In short, it’s a power struggle.

Moses is bereft; but quickly, he collects himself, and he issues a challenge. “Whomever Adonai chooses shall be the holy one.”ⁱⁱⁱ Drama ensues. In the end, the “earth opened its mouth and swallowed [the rebels] together with their households.”^{iv}

What are we to make of this story? Is rebellion wrong?

Our sages note that these rebels have no cause. Though they claim to want power for all the people, they are actually interested in high office only for themselves.^v

For rebels with a cause, we look to next week’s portion. The people rise up because they have no water.^{vi} God provides a ready solution, instructing Moses to speak to a rock, at which point, God promises, water will flow.^{vii} Moses, though, loses control. He loudly reprimands the people and smashes his rod on the rock. The water flows, but the punishment for Moses and his brother is severe. This time, God does not punish the rebels, but Moses and Aaron, who will die in the wilderness, never reaching the Promised Land.^{viii}

The lesson seems to be: When the people have a righteous cause for rebellion, give them what they seek. If they are thirsty, provide water. If they are hungry, feed them. If they need medical care, get them to a doctor, and don’t ask questions about their ability to pay. If they have no home, provide shelter. And if it’s justice they lack, in a nation with a 400-year legacy of white supremacy, then justice will need to “roll down like water, righteousness like a mighty stream.”^{ix}

Torah’s rebels, even those with a cause, do not behave well. Thirsty and despairing, they whine, “Why have you brought the congregation of Adonai into the wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates?” Only then, do they get to the heart of the matter: “There is not even water to drink.”^x

No, America’s protestors in the last month have not always behaved well. A minority broke windows. Looted stores. Set fires. Assaulted police.

In the spring of 1968, a month before he was assassinated, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. admitted “that we have lived over these last two or three summers with agony and we have seen our cities going up in flames.” He reaffirmed: “I would be the first to say that I am still committed to militant, powerful, massive, non-violence as the most potent weapon in grappling with the problem from a direct action point of view.” “But,” he continued, “it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots...I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ... It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility ... than about justice and humanity.”^{xi}

Will this summer be America’s turning point? This week, the *New York Times* reported: “The sustained outcry over [George] Floyd’s death has compelled many white Americans to acknowledge the anti-black racism that is prevalent in the United States—and to perhaps even examine their own culpability for it. It is as though the ability of white people to collectively ignore the everyday experience of black people has been short-circuited, at least for now.”^{xii}

With Dr. King, we abhor the violence committed by a minority of protestors—often not even by demonstrators, but by those who would take advantage of the protest atmosphere. But like Dr. King, let us acknowledge that riots happen because people perceive themselves powerless, “unheard.” Therefore, let us hear. Therefore, let us act. And therefore, let each of us find our own ways to heed and even join these rebels with a cause. Then, we may heal America, together.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 16:2.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 16:3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 16:7.

^{iv} Numbers 16:32.

^v See Rashi to Numbers 16:3, *inter alia*.

^{vi} Numbers 20:2.

^{vii} Numbers 20:8.

^{viii} Numbers 20:10-12.

^{ix} Amos 5:24

^x Numbers 20:4-5

^{xi} The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Other America,” March 14, 1968, Grosse Point High School.

^{xii} Ay Harmon and Audra D. S. Burch, “White Americans Say They Are Waking Up to Racism. What Will It Add Up To?” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2020.