

## Limited Liberation

### *Shabbat Bo 5781*

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As we open the Torah this week, Moses and Aaron threaten Pharaoh with yet another plague—this time, locusts: “They shall cover the surface of the land, so that no one will be able to see the land. They shall...eat away all your trees that grow in the field. Moreover, they shall fill your palaces and the houses of all your courtiers and of all the Egyptians...”<sup>i</sup> Dreadful! Under pressure from his frightened advisors, Pharaoh offers to permit adult male Israelites to leave Egypt to worship God.<sup>ii</sup> That’s not the liberation God and Moses have in mind, though, as Moses proclaims, in words familiar to us from the Passover Haggadah: “We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds...”<sup>iii</sup> Pharaoh offers freedom from slavery, but only to some Israelites and only for a short respite. The liberation God and Moses seek, though, is total.

Later in the portion, after the tenth plague, the slaying of the first-born, Pharaoh will free the Israelites—all of them, of every age and gender, along with their livestock, property, matzah, and more.<sup>iv</sup> Still, though, the Israelites’ liberation is limited. Next week, we shall read of Pharaoh’s change of heart, as he sends his mounted cavalry after the Israelites. Even after God parts the sea, the Israelites will not achieve freedom in their own land, but will suffer decades of desert wandering.

In fact, the liberation of the Jewish people has never been complete or permanent. Though the Israelites knew glory and conquest for a brief period under David and Solomon, our ancient history more frequently featured war, foreign rule, and destruction of our holy Temple. While we have always prayed for the permanently perfect world promised in messianic redemption, our history has more often featured exile and expulsion, persecution and pogrom, not to mention genocide.

Immigrants to this land found freedom they had not previously known, but their opportunities were limited by antisemitism. Each liberation is limited. The State of Israel struggles with foreign enemies that seek its destruction and domestic foes that would dismantle its democracy. We are blessed in America, but Nazi imagery in our U.S. Capitol on January 6—like the nefarious chants of Charlottesville, “Jews will not replace us”—reminded us that our liberation remains limited.

Earlier this week, we celebrated the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday. That observance is all about limited liberation.

Once before, I told you a story about Joanne Bland, who participated in the Selma-to-Birmingham march as a teen in 1965. Earlier, when Joanne was four or five years old, her grandmother began dragging her to meetings, where Selma's African American leaders were preparing to fight for their "freedom." Joanne thought all those grown-ups were "just plain dumb." "Everybody knew," she said, "that Abraham Lincoln freed us 100 years earlier!"

Yes, legal slavery ended in America when the Civil War ended in 1865. In rapid succession, three amendments to the U.S. Constitution promised legal equality to Black Americans. For twelve years, the Federal government enforced that new order. If you were raised in Arkansas—or, like me, another state of the former Confederacy—and you are around my age or older, you were likely taught the lie that Reconstruction was evil retribution, impoverishing the South. The real tragedy, though, was Reconstruction's end, bringing ninety years of peonage and convict leasing, Jim Crow and lynching. Little Joanne Bland came to know she had been wrong: President Lincoln intended to free enslaved people, but their liberation was as limited as that of Israelites, freed by a Pharaoh who pursued them with horse and chariot.

Only recently, while reading *Caste*, by Isabel Wilkerson, did I learn of the depth of the linkage between Jim Crow and the deadliest antisemitism our people has ever known. Wilkerson writes, "The Nazis needed no outsiders to plant seeds of hatred within them. But in the early years of the regime, ... they were seeking prototypes for the caste system they were building. They were looking to move quickly with their plans for racial separation and purity, and knew that the United States was centuries ahead of them..."<sup>v</sup>

In 1934, "Reich bureaucrats and legal scholars began to deliberate what would become" the Nuremberg Laws. "One of the men, Heinrich Krieger, had studied law...as an exchange student at the University of Arkansas."<sup>vi</sup> "As the debate got under way Krieger...reported that Americans had gone so far as to make interracial marriage a crime punishable by as much as ten years' imprisonment...He pointed out that the United States had divided its population in two with 'artificial line-drawing' between white and colored people. He and other Nazis showed a fascination with the American habit of assigning humans to categories by fractions of perceived ancestry. 'There is a growing tendency in judicial practice,' Krieger said, 'to assign a person to a group of coloreds whenever there is even a trace of visible Negro physical features.'"<sup>vii</sup>

The Nazis went on to debate the extent to which they should adopt Jim Crow's legalized white supremacy, with some of them recoiling from the American South's extreme laws—and these were Nazis, mind you. "As

cataclysmic as the Nuremberg Laws were,” Wilkerson concludes, “the Nazis had not gone as far with the legislation as their research into America had taken them... While the Nazis praised ‘the American commitment to legislating racial purity,’ they could not abide ‘the unforgiving hardness’ under which “an American man or woman who has even a drop of Negro blood in their veins” counted as blacks...The one-drop rule was too harsh for the Nazis.”<sup>viii</sup>

That was 1935. Neither Wilkerson nor I would suggest that Jim Crow compares or led to the Final Solution. We should be haunted, though, by the fact that the most heinous antisemitic legislation in modern history was inspired by Jim Crow and specifically its Arkansas incarnation.

Jim Crow, too, is a thing of the past, now for over half a century. Our new Vice President is a Black woman of South Asian descent. We were led by a Black President for eight years. Unprecedented turnout of Black voters was an important factor in determining the results of the Presidential election and later of the consequential Georgia Senate races. Much of the “freedom” Sandra Bland learned to seek has been achieved.

And yet, MLK Day continues to be a celebration of limited liberation. The suggestion that we live in a post-racial America is as absurd as the claim that the Civil Rights Movement accomplished nothing. Black Americans have died of Covid-19 at higher rates than our population as a whole. Inequities persist in healthcare and education, housing and voting rights.

In what would be his final speech, Dr. King said that, like Moses, he had been to the mountaintop, permitted by God to see the Promised Land. He prophetically implied that, like Moses, he would not enter that blessed future. Dr. King lived and died with the knowledge that the liberation he experienced was limited. Dr. King lived and died with the faith that limited liberation is a step on the road to permanent and perfect freedom. Let us, like the ancient Israelites and Dr. King before us, ever march toward ultimate liberation, for ourselves and all humanity. Then, may all be free.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 10:5-6.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 10:7, 11.

<sup>iii</sup> Exodus 10:9.

<sup>iv</sup> Exodus 12:29-32.

<sup>v</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, New York: Random House, 2020, Kindle edition, 188.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-202.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210.