

Maggid: Telling the Story of How a People Gets Free

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“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them’...Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field. The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, ‘When you deliver the Hebrew women, look: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live. The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.’” (Exodus 1. 1-17)

A Pharaoh must forget. Forgetting is how a Pharaoh, or a King, or a colonizer, erases people, steals land, exploits bodies. A Pharaoh works to erase the memories of the people. In our own time we have seen the JNF plant forests over Palestinian villages. We have heard testimony of families ethnically cleansed in order to make the desert bloom. We have seen the Dakota Access Pipeline bulldoze Lakota sacred sites and graves. We have seen the violence, the money, the force it takes to try and forget a people. We have also seen the resistance.

“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 God’s covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.” (Ex. 2.23-24)

A people must make themselves remember. The way forward for a people is to imagine and plan for a future that might not be possible. To trust midwives and healers, who birth babies, who heal a people, who fight back the skepticism and despair. The way out is to tell each other stories that freedom it is possible and to believe each other.

And finally, God remembered the promise of freedom but the people had already forgotten and *“they were short of breath from the cruelty of their bondage” (Ex. 6:9)*. And despite miracles and plagues and wonders they could not remember.

Pharaoh forgot Joseph and his people.

God forgot Joseph and his people.

And the people forgot they could get free.

Until, one night, with thousands of mighty outstretched hands, they painted their doors red with blood. They reminded themselves of who they were and what their bodies could do. They made a scene. They marked their homes as places of rebellion, households that stood against Pharaoh. Places where a story of freedom could be told. And in the morning, with Egypt rocked to its core, the people marched out towards the sea.

“And the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.” (Exodus 14:28)

The Haggadah tells us: In every generation a person is obligated to regard themselves as if they had come out of Egypt.

How will we remind ourselves that we have been here before, that we have survived? We, in 2017, have seen fascism and anti-Semitism before. We have seen Islamophobia and racism and transphobia. We have learned how to fight. How will we remember we already know a way out of Egypt?

By crying out and chanting on street corners, with voices that wake the heavens and remind the powers that be we are here. By marking safe spaces. By marking moments of resistance. By telling stories of times we got free.

Here is one: before the 8th and 9th plagues, Pharaoh got desperate and tried to pit the people against one another, saying he would let the men go free but leave the rest enslaved. And even though they were desperate and afraid, they did not abandon one another. They said no to Pharaoh's deal, they would not sacrifice each other.

That is how we get out. Today it means, we will not accept walls or Muslim bans that dehumanize. We will not accept politics of “progressive except Palestine”. We will not sacrifice each other for false stories of safety. We will remember what is possible when we stand together.

**In every generation we are obligated to tell this story:
“Once we did not sacrifice each other and we won.”**

WHAT STORIES OF VICTORY DO YOU CARRY? WHAT STORIES OF YOUR ANCESTORS, YOUR PEOPLES, YOUR FRIENDS? YOU ARE OBLIGATED, INVITED, BEGGED TO TELL THEM THIS YEAR AND EVERY YEAR AT THE SEDER.

TAKE A MOMENT TO TELL A STORY OF FREEDOM BY TURNING TO ANOTHER PERSON, OR SPEAKING TO THE GROUP.

SAY TOGETHER: BLESSED ARE THE ONES WHO RESIST AND WHO SANCTIFY THROUGH STORIES.