

## **Bo 5782** **The Fragility of Power**

In this week's Torah portion we see the total collapse of Pharaoh and everything he has stood for up to this point:

*Pharaoh rose in the night with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians - because there was a huge cry in Egypt, for there was no house in which there was not someone dead. He summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you. Go, worship the Lord as you said. Take also your flocks and your herds and begone - and bless me, also."<sup>1</sup>*

This frantic, pathetic figure is unrecognizable from the tyrant we first met, the one who sneered,

*Who is God that I should pay heed and let Israel go? I do not know this God...<sup>2</sup>*

Pharaoh's fall does not happen all at once. He's taken down by degrees.

First, he is openly defied by Moses and Aaron in the sight of his court and made to watch while Aaron's staff in snake form, devours every other snake in the room. Then Moses and Aaron catch him unawares, early in the morning (Rashi notes that when Pharaoh went to the river, it was to relieve himself - imagine what that felt like) to announce the plagues. Pharaoh is exposed to ridicule both literally and figuratively.

Then come the plagues themselves - every type of physical and emotional destruction, undoing every aspect of the life and environment Pharaoh has known. First the river, the source of Egypt's wealth. Then the integrity of home and of field and of body. Then the fertility of the land. And ultimately, Egypt's future in the form of their firstborn children and animals.

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<sup>1</sup> Shemot 12:30-32

<sup>2</sup> Shemot 5:2

The gods of Egypt are defied too, because each plague is aimed at an aspect of their domain. The first plague is aimed at Hapi, the bull god of the Nile. The sixth is directed at Sekhmet, the goddess of healing. And the tenth throws down the gauntlet to Isis herself, protector of children.

So the reputation, the environment and the beliefs of Pharaoh are all destroyed, until he is left helpless.

We may cheer this result (and certainly, as children at the Seder, we do), but if we pause for a moment and look back at Pharaoh's fall this particular week, we might also feel a little uneasy.

Because this week we marked a first, new anniversary in America. On 6 January last year, a mob stormed the Capitol.

And we found out for ourselves that, like Pharaoh, power can be fragile. It can be taken down. It can waver in the face of open defiance. Its authority figures can be shamed and humbled and made to look ridiculous. Powerful people can be made to cower in corners. Some are even killed. The physical symbols of America, even though they are invested with meaning, are made of wood and brick and stone and can be smashed and broken to pieces. And perhaps worse than all of that, the riot at the Capitol challenged some of this country's most fundamental beliefs - that democracy works, that argument and debate are to be welcomed, that people are willing to limit some of their personal freedoms in the interests of the greater good.

The fragments on the floor of the Capitol on the morning of January 7th were both visible and invisible.

And this is the deeper lesson the Torah is teaching us. Power is fragile. Whether it is the power of tyranny or the power of democracy, power is vulnerable and can be undone in a terrifyingly short space of time. We might even wonder whether the power of the people is more vulnerable than the power of a tyrant because it is more widely distributed, spread thinner.

In his small but powerful book "On Tyranny," the historian Timothy Snyder describes 20 strategies that ordinary citizens can implement to protect democracy from authoritarianism. It's worth reading the whole book, but for

this morning let me just quote Snyder's second step, which is to defend institutions:

*It is institutions that help us preserve decency. They need our help as well. Do not speak of "our institutions" unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one by one unless each is defended from the beginning...*

*...So choose an institution you care about - a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union - and take its side.<sup>3</sup>*

As we read once more about the collapse of tyranny this year, we might want to note that while power is fragile, we are not, ourselves, powerless. To be human is to be descended from the Garden of Eden, where the gift was not - as we might first think - to be in Paradise, but rather, to be given free will. Our choices still have power - if we elect to use it.

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny*