



This Land is Your Land

Shabbat Chukat 5778 – June 22, 2018

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This past year, at the Isaiah Women's celebration of Passover, we used the melody of "This Land is Your Land" to sing through the 15 steps of the seder.¹

It seemed a fitting choice.

In a season when the President of the United States calls Mexicans murderers and rapists; when transgender service men and women are told they can no longer serve their country; when women are spoken about in the most degrading of terms; when the Administration's view of immigration all but says, "we'd like more white immigrants to fill our country..."

It seemed like the right time to remind ourselves of what we *thought* America was all about:

- It's about opening our land to others.
- It's about abundance, not scarcity.
- It's about a vision of America as a land that can help all people take root and blossom.
- It's about welcoming refugees and asylum seekers and offering them a chance for rebirth and renewal.
- It's about moral leadership - liberty and justice for all.
- And, it's about getting better each day, reaching for a more perfect union and, by extension, a more perfect world.

"This Land is Your Land" sang out to us the familiar and folksy aspirations of a different era – a time nostalgic to many at the seder, who first practiced protest and resistance while singing this song.

Interestingly, the version many of us grew up singing was incomplete. The full version included a much harsher critique of America, the professed land of opportunity and promise, that moved beyond endless skyways and golden valleys. Perhaps, not surprisingly, these verses were not widely published.

Woodie Guthrie had written the lyrics as he traveled across the country, "joining the half-million so-called Okies and Arkies — *Dust Bowl refugees migrating in search of better lives*. In the often-omitted fourth and sixth verses of the song, **Guthrie railed against class inequality.**"²

¹ Click here for the 15 steps: https://www.interfaithfamily.com/holidays/passover_and_easter/the_15_steps_of_the_seder/

² <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/bios/woody-guthrie/>

Verse 4:

*As I went walking, I saw a sign there,
And on the sign there, it said "Private Property."
But on the other side, it didn't say nothing!
That side was made for you and me.*

Verse 6:

*In the squares of the city, in the shadow of a steeple,
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?*

Nora Guthrie [Woody's daughter] suggested these verses may not have been recorded because 'This is the early '50s, and [U.S. Sen. Joseph] McCarthy's out there, and it was considered dangerous in many ways to record this kind of material...'³

And now, perhaps, we remember the context in which we sung this song. As much as we loved this "alternative National Anthem", in the end, it was shaped and recorded to be a palatable, politically neutral ode to America. Thanks to Woodie's son Arlo, Pete Seeger, Bruce Springsteen and countless other activists, the verses were preserved. But the consequences of challenging authority and the repercussions of critiquing one's nation are not lost on us today.

- Today, those who claim ownership of the term "patriotic" tell us that protest and truth-telling are *anti-American*.
- Today, those who claim to most ardently love this country box out those of us who also love this country - but express that love differently.
- Today, many of us have surrendered the language of patriotism to those who yell louder. We have relinquished ownership of American identity by saying "#notmypresident" and "not my country" and "can't we let California secede from the US already?!" rather than "Yes, this is my land. *This land is MY land.*"

Tonight, for the sake of our land and all its inhabitants, for all who seek safety within our borders, and for future generations who want to see this land as a land of liberty and justice for all, I suggest we reclaim our land, and, that we do so through Jewish text and tradition.

I was meeting with a bar mitzvah student the other day who asked why religious school in 7th grade was worthwhile. Did he really need to learn about the holidays for another year? He knew all the prayers. I told him that 7th grade marks a year of transition and recognition of young adulthood. It's no longer about memorization. It's about taking ownership of your Jewish identity and Jewish tradition.

And then we talked about Attorney General, Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III. And I asked this bright, articulate teenager whether he wanted *others* to tell him what his tradition thought about immigration and family separation, or if he wanted the tools to be able to explore the texts and make a decision for himself?

³ <https://www.npr.org/2000/07/03/1076186/this-land-is-your-land>

Because, I told him, there are those who tell us that our beloved Torah is a scripture that teaches obedience. That first and foremost we are about following the law. That, in the end, justice wins out over mercy. That submission is necessary to build God's kingdom.

But I'm here to tell you that we are part of a tradition of **sacred resistance and holy dissent**. Abraham challenged God's plan to destroy 2 cities. Moses pushed back on God's plan to destroy the complaining and kvetching Israelites. Shifra and Puah were Hebrew midwives who defied Pharaoh's orders to kill the Hebrew children by creatively claiming the women delivered too quickly for them to perform their tasks. The 5 daughters of Tzelophahad demanded justice from God and Moses when the standing law of family inheritance would have bypassed them because they were women.

In almost all cases, our tradition records and revels in resistance and dissent.

Now, for our Shabbat regulars and those who enjoy Torah study, some of you might be thinking, "But Rabbi, I remember a certain guy who got swallowed up by the Earth last week for challenging Moses' leadership." True.

But, take a closer look.

While the infamous Korach and his critique of Moses is shunned by rabbinic authorities, **it is not the content of his challenge that is the concern**. In fact, the challenge he presents is worthy: Korach looks around at the tribe of Israelites and he's a bit perplexed. *God said we would become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, but I'm not seeing the kingdom of holy leaders. I'm seeing a few people at the top with all the power. Is that what God wants? Is that what we, the people, want?* (Can you hear the ancient echo of Guthrie's class critique?)

What makes Korach dangerous is not the challenge, it's his motive. According to the rabbis, he is seeking power for himself. The end game is meant to benefit him alone. For that reason alone, his argument is not given time or space to be considered. He is judged and punished, never to be spoken of again.

But his critique was valid: The promise of redemption from Egypt was that all people would be lifted up and recognized for their capacity to build a holy nation. But, that promise has not yet come to pass; and so Korach speaks truth to power and asks Moses, "Why?"

In this week's Torah portion, Chukat, we see another moment of challenge that ends poorly for the challengers. This week we learn that, "The people spoke against God and against Moses, saying 'Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food'. So, Adonai sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died." (Num. 21:5-6)

(Not a good day for the Israelites.)

But, take a closer look.

Through the lens of the rabbis, you can see the efforts to tease out the message from the messengers. It is a valid critique of leadership to say, "Listen, Moses, we're feeling lost. We're scared. Our faith in the land of milk and honey is not as strong as yours. Please, can you or God help us?" **The content of the challenge is not the concern. It's the tone. It's the timing. It's the partial presentation of the truth.** (That miserable food, by the way, is the miraculous manna.) **And ultimately, like Korach, it comes down to motive.**

The founding rabbi of the Hassidic movement, the Ba'al Shem Tov says: "This type of critique [from the Israelites] burns people as if they have venom in their mouths. And if so, we can infer that such a person's mouth and heart are not aligned, **that he intends to benefit himself** even as he says that he is offering reproof for the sake of the blessed One's honor, and as a result, he brings about harm."⁴

Text and tradition do not look favorably upon those who agitate a community when driven by self-interest. **But, Jewish tradition has long rewarded courageous questions for the sake of something larger than ourselves.** When our motives are for the sake of Heaven or for the sake of the greater good, then all is permitted. That's why Shifra and Puah were extolled as heroes. That's why the Daughters of Tzelophahad won their case. That's why Abraham and Moses were not struck down on the spot.

Courageous questions, sacred resistance and holy dissent are demanded from us when people's lives are at stake. The Sages of the Talmud tell us that all but three of the 613 commandments in the Torah may be broken in the name of *Pikuach Nefesh* – nothing is more important than saving a human life, a person's soul.

And this is where we find ourselves today: a state of moral emergency where the soul of America and the souls of so many in our country are at risk of being destroyed. Degraded. Dehumanized. Deported.

And our choice could be to surrender. To mute our verses of protest. To fantasize about Canadian citizenship. To numb ourselves with legal weed and craft beer.

Or we can learn to sing again.

We can rediscover our tradition of sacred resistance and holy dissent. We can protest and mobilize. Next Saturday at 11 A.M. at City Hall, members of Isaiah will join thousands of Angelinos as we demonstrate our commitment to welcoming immigrants, protecting families crossing the border, and the reinstatement of laws allowing refugees and asylum seekers to find shelter in our land. *Let me know if you're interested in joining us.*

But the commitment moves beyond next Saturday. We need to change our relationship to politics and civic engagement. It's not enough to march. We have to vote. We have to build a base of constituents who feel engaged, inspired, invited and hopeful about America's future. Americans who don't give up. Who don't back away. Who find their voices, to join ours, in sacred resistance and holy dissent. *For those who want to do this work through Isaiah, there is a task force of justice leaders meeting in July to lay out a temple-wide strategy leading up to, and then moving beyond, the midterms. Talk to me or our Chair of Am Tzedek, Janet Hirsch.*

This land is your land. We know what that means. We know how to sing it.

But Guthrie also sang, **this land is MY land.** Tonight, I want you to think about reclaiming the second half of this verse.

- I want you to fight for the land you want to live in.
- I want you to fight for the country you believe in.
- I want you to speak truth to power, just like our ancestors did, even when they knew the political risk and fallout.

⁴ Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Parashat Chukat, translation by Rabbi Sam Feinsmith

It's time to fight for this land so that we can live up to Emma Lazarus' words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, and the words of our tradition:

Give me your tired, your poor.

- When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the corners of your field...*you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger.* (Leviticus 19:9-10)

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

- *You shall not oppress a stranger* for you know the feelings of the stranger having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)

The wretched refuse of the teeming shore.

- When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. *The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself.* (Leviticus 19:33)

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me

- Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice. *Aid the wronged.* Uphold the rights of the orphan. Defend the cause of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)

I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

- [God said,] I will make you a light unto the nations. (Isaiah 49:6)

Let the light of Shabbat be our reminder of the light we are commanded to bring into the world. The light that God offered in the first moments of Creation. A light that dispels the darkness. A light that shows us a path ahead, *in our land.*