



“We Must Do Battle Where We Are Standing”

Shabbat Pinchas 5778 – July 6, 2018

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EXCERPT FROM SHABBAT WELCOME (No Audio File)

This past Monday, I was in San Diego for a rally and march led by Mijente: a Latinx racial justice organization mobilizing against immigration enforcement and criminalization. **Latinx**, a gender neutral term used in lieu of Latino or Latina, is inclusive of all people of Latin American cultural or racial identity. Faith leaders were asked to join as allies - to witness, support, march, and, if desired, protest. A delegation of rabbis from across the country answered that call and we joined with Christian leaders, in beautiful stoles and white collars, away from the center stage where the rally would begin.

Dove Kent, one of the organizers and most recently the director of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, stepped into the center, looked around and simply said, “Welcome!” Then she said it again, “Welcome!” And then again, “Welcome!”

And because crowds were starting to gather, and music was playing from the stage, the gathering of 100 rabbis and ministers called back to Dove using the style of the People’s Mic, so that the word “Welcome!” was being called out again and again, grounding us in our purpose, clarifying our demands:

- We are saying “Welcome” to all those who have been locked out, pushed away, degraded and dehumanized.
- We are saying “Welcome” to all those who have been told “you are not wanted” or “you don’t belong”
- We are saying “Welcome” to every person brave enough to join the rally, to step forward and say, “I see the injustice and I will not be silent.”
- We are saying “Welcome” to every person in our nation who, because of race, class, gender identity, sexual preference, or religious belief, has felt driven back to the margins –

Welcome.

It’s not just a greeting. It’s a political statement. It’s a foundation on which to stand and build a nation.

Welcome.

And here we sit, as many of us do every week, ready to welcome one another. Ready to welcome Shabbat. **Who knew that practice of welcoming might turn out to be revolutionary?** As revolutionary as Abraham welcoming the strangers to his tent. As revolutionary as Pharaoh's daughter welcoming Baby Moses into her home.

So, let's engage in *welcoming* tonight as a spiritual practice: Welcome. To each of you. To this space of Shabbat. To the world as it is - we see you. And to the world as it might become - we will reach for you. A world built on compassion, and love, and justice...and welcome.

SERMON

As I mentioned earlier, this past Monday, rabbis from around the country answered the call to join immigration activists in San Diego.

Our action coincided with the introduction of **Operation Streamline** into San Diego: a fast-track prosecution program that moves migrants through the criminal justice system in group hearings, denying them due process and appropriate legal representation.

This latest injustice adds to the trauma of family separation at the border and the absence of any plan to reunite 3,000 children with their parents (as reported by the LA Times on July 6). It adds to the ongoing bullying and demonization of the immigrant community, and, to the removal of protections for refugee and asylum seekers.

The rally was part of a series of rallies, marches and protests that have taken place across the country to draw attention to these injustices and to demand change. Some of you joined me last Saturday in DTLA at Grand Park. The week before I was in front of the Department of Homeland Security, with clergy and lay leaders, preaching from a Torah of compassion and welcome.

This rally felt different.

This rally and march was led by **Mijente**, a Latinx racial justice organization that is mobilizing against the criminalization of immigration, pro-Black, pro-woman, pro-queer and pro-poor. And the gathering in Chicano Park reflected its base: brown and black, queer and straight, young and old. While some speakers were trained and seasoned in rallying a crowd, it was clear that others were being asked to step forward, perhaps for the first time. Young Latinx activists spoke of raids and arrests. Black Lives Matter allies drew parallels to the state-sanctioned separation of children through incarceration.

Whereas in DTLA, John Legend performed a new song and politicians arrived to take their 3-minute spots (Garcetti, Newsom, Harris, Waters...), in Chicano Park the stage was reserved for the people most impacted and affected by our immigration policies.

Jews present ranged from clergy and representatives from T'ruah, The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, Bend the Arc, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, If Not Now, Jewish Voice for Peace to congregants from a handful of local synagogues.

The strategy was clear: Demonstrate that Operation Streamline, Family Separation and denying protection to Refugee and Asylum Seekers wasn't abhorrent just to the Latinx community. But that we, Jewish and Christian leadership, and especially those with power and privilege, we say, "this is abhorrent to us, too."

Mijente has been fighting against the criminalization of immigrants for years. Now, it was time for us to join them: to support the resistance of immigrant activists (many undocumented); to be part of a bold, courageous mass movement to challenge the unchecked power of this administration and its policies; and to bring an end to this terrible chapter in our country's life.

The strategy was clear

The motivation was clear.

The details were not.

Up until 2 days before, we did not know where we would be meeting. (I had mistakenly thought we would be at the border.) We knew there would be a rally with speakers followed by a 1-2-mile march. We did not know where we would be marching. We knew there was a plan for civil disobedience. We did not know when or where or what to expect.

Every partnering group was given the same instructions:

- **You are coming as an ally.** This is a crucial role but not one that requires you to have all of the information.
- Do not talk to Press. There are representatives from Mijente who will speak on behalf of the action.
- Pay attention to crowd dynamics.
- Don't take risks you aren't comfortable with or put others at risk.
- Have a buddy.
- Do not wear oil-based sunscreen.¹

And that's all we knew.

¹ If you google oil-based sunscreen and "protest" you'll see posts warning against oil-based skin products because they can trap chemicals.

We were asked to “trust the process and the people in charge...” which is a funny thing to ask a bunch of rabbis flying in from across the country since we’re usually the people speaking at the rally and leading the march. Our privilege and power places us at the table where decisions are being made. But this time, **we were allies not orchestrators.**

This time, the community most impacted by Trump’s inhumane immigration policies led the action. As such, most of the rally and many of the rhythmic chants were in Spanish.

This time, information about the route of the march and the actions taking place were kept from everyone who was not responsible for those actions. If authorities learned of the plans in advance, it would jeopardize undocumented activists' participation and place them at risk of being identified by ICE and then deported or incarcerated.

This time, it was about learning a new way to show up, to protest, and to be transformed.

I am still thinking about what it means to be an ally to Mijente: not to be in charge, not to know all the details, not to speak Spanish. To show up at a protest, willing to be seen as a rabbi, willing to serve as a witness to injustice, willing to use my voice to say “I will not stand idly by...” and, in the midst of that certainty, feel a deep sense of uncertainty as to what happens next.

Jewish tradition loves to retell the Exodus narrative. We offer it up through daily prayer and Passover ritual. We love to focus on the moment of Exodus itself: the departure from Egypt, the first taste of freedom, the parted seas.

Yet, it could be argued the Exodus itself is not the most compelling part of the narrative. Instead, it is the journey that must capture our attention and fuel our imagination. 40 years of wandering through the Wilderness. Days and weeks and months of *not knowing exactly where we were going, or what would happen when we arrived.* Nevertheless, our ancestors journeyed, side by side, traveling together towards an idea called the Promised Land.

Moses *probably* had all the information. Maybe he shared it with his siblings or the elders of the tribes. It’s likely the message did not translate to the masses. It’s likely the masses were alerted by disruptive shofar blasts signaling it was time to pack up camp and move to the next destination, rather than receiving an itinerary ahead of time.

We’ve forgotten what it’s like to travel with allies without google maps calling out our next turn and giving us an estimated time for arrival.

We’ve forgotten the importance of flexibility: the importance of being willing to use the tools and resources we have in the moment, to learn skills *as we do the work*, and to make decisions in real time about what is required and how we want to act.

The poet Audre Lorde's wrote, "Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time, and the arena, and the manner of our revolution, **but more usually we must do battle where we are standing.**"

We must learn to do battle from the place we are in. Not the place we wish we were. Not the place we were in 2 years ago. Now. This place. This time. With these people. To show up and stand up and fight for more just and compassionate immigration policies...now. *Even when we don't know where we go next.*

The movement starts in the place where we stand.

I'm also thinking about the importance of disruption as a spiritual practice. No one enjoys disruption unless it's a surprise birthday party and you really like the people who were invited. But perhaps there is value, by choice or by force, in allowing disruption to be our teacher. My experience on Monday is but one example. Having demonstrated at two recent immigration rallies in which my role was defined, and the route planned and publicized, it was unsettling to arrive in San Diego with colleagues and know so little about what came next.

However, moments of disruption give us permission, if not demand of us, to take another look at the world we thought we knew. We are all in danger of harboring calcified beliefs that shape what we see and what we allow to be rendered invisible. Disruption forces us to look again:

- How long have we tolerated a broken immigration system?
- How long have we turned away from the cries of undocumented workers whose stories of exploitation and criminalization go unanswered?
- How quick was I, at this rally, to associate bandana-clad youth with Anti-Fascist protesters rather than with undocumented Latinx activists who were simply trying to protect their identity by covering their faces?

We need disruption in our lives or we risk seeing the world *as it used to be* and not as it truly is. We need disruption in our lives or we may miss the moments in which the activists are beginning to gain some ground - in which the world is *slowly* shifting, *slowly* bending, following the moral arc that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told us to look for.

In this week's portion, Pinchas, we encounter the Daughters of Tzelophahad: Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, who argued the case of a woman's right and obligation to inherit property. They brought their case to Moses. Moses brought it to God. God said, "their claim is just" and the women received the property, creating a new precedent for the Israelite community.

Sometimes reactions to injustice lead to an immediate change in policy. It's very satisfying: action leads to reaction. This story, in particular, seems to say "This cause was just; therefore, change was not only possible but also required."

But, as we know, there are many just causes that take years if not generations before we see that change is not only possible but required. Civil Rights. Gay Rights. Native American Rights. Black Lives Matter. Immigration.

We have a powerful tradition of protest emerging from our ancestors. It traverses generation and echoes in the pages of our prayer book and holiday rituals. This is where we find our voice. This is the foundation on which we stand. And, still, we must find a way to tell the full story of our inheritance of activism or we will feel defeated by our perceived lack of power and noticeable impact in this moment.

Not all ancient protests yielded immediate results. What's more, even those precedents that were set and celebrated were subject to being overturned. For example, consider the daughters of Tzelophahad. I only told you half the story:

Later on, the elders from the tribe of Menashe, the tribe of Tzelophahad and his daughters, appeal to Moses arguing that if the 5 daughters (now with their inheritance of land) choose to marry men from outside Menashe, they will lose that portion of land to another tribe. God agrees that their claim is also just and instructs Moses to tell Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah that they can marry anyone they wish, as long as it is within their own tribe.

So much for the feminist win.

But, as you know, that is not where the story ends. That's just the end of the chapter. The story of our people, our tradition, our resistance and our aspirations is still being written – here, tonight, in this space. **And, we are the authors.**

We need to build our muscles for the marathon, not the sprint.
For the wilderness, not the Exodus.

We have to train ourselves to stop looking for the outcome of our work before we've even begun to engage. And for not giving up because we don't know what comes next. And for not retiring after we've won.

We need to build our muscles in order to tell the full story, not just the chapter. For including the moments of setback and failure. And for claiming our power to begin writing again, right now, from wherever we sit or stand.

On this Shabbat, may our ancestors and tradition continue to guide us.
May the Torah of Disruption and Discomfort be our teacher as we learn and grow together.
May the Torah of Not (Always) Knowing transform us into resilient and resourceful and reflective participants in this project of restoring justice and compassion to our world.

May it be so, Amen.