



We are Women's League

Engaging Enriching and Empowering Jewish Women
Women's League for Conservative Judaism

D'var Torah — Women's League Shabbat — January 16, 2021

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This weekend, in addition to celebrating Women's League Shabbat, we are also honoring the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on what would have been his birthday. Like Moses who led the Israelites, Dr. King guided his followers in the African American community and beyond on a journey from slavery to freedom, focusing on removing discrimination and persecution through strong communication skills and non-violent action. He had a vision and the courage to pursue his dreams of a time when all people would be free from tyranny and would be able to respect one another.

So, you might ask, how does this relate to our parashah this week?

In Vaeira, we learn of the struggles of the Jewish people, who were overburdened slaves in Egypt. They were oppressed, lacked hope, and felt demoralized. They cried out to God but did not believe that their voices were heard. They had "Kotzer Ruach"- "difficulty with breathing" literally and "constriction of spirit" figuratively, due to their oppression, a product of their long exposure to slavery. Unable to envision a life free of bondage, they initially did not trust Moses. He had a speech impediment which made him difficult to understand and they rejected his message when he offered them a vision of freedom. They feared that they would risk losing more than they had, even as slaves. The people also needed some actual proof that things could change for them.

Although the Israelites were initially convinced that Pharaoh's magicians were very powerful, they ultimately began to believe in God's powers, once they witnessed the first 8 plagues that God brought upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians. They were able to observe God's actions and hear God's words through the petitioning of Moses and Aaron when they went before Pharaoh. The people began to see that the plagues affected the Egyptians and not the areas of Goshen where the Israelites lived. From these observations, they began to gain elements of trust that they would be protected by God. They also began to initiate their own actions and continued to follow Moses' plans, thus showing the first steps towards their movement from constriction of spirit to freedom to ultimately hopefulness.

Being able to have hope is a very Jewish theme. Over the centuries, Jewish people have experienced periods of persecution, where we have had to struggle through a

narrow place of trauma to reach forward and rebuild our lives. We have gone from pogroms to blood libels to the Holocaust. The idea that the Israelites were looking for hope before they could begin their journey to freedom is not at all foreign to us. We know as we look back with 20/20 hindsight that through it all, we have survived our traumas. The State of Israel is a glowing example of what people with courage and hope can accomplish.

Of course, hope and courage are not only Jewish values. Dr King certainly tried to instill hopefulness and courage in his followers. People still follow his inspiration by trying to gain these traits as many of their struggles continue today.

Both leaders also knew that freedom from slavery was only the first step. They felt that the people had to learn to take giant steps toward building the lives they desired and deserved. They urged their followers to communicate through many styles and in many forums as a way of doing this. And, during present times, many of us have learned so much about ourselves as we also communicate as they did so as to get others to understand our various messages. We too want to join together in building understanding and facilitating justice and equality for all of the individuals around us by following the teachings of these two leaders.

Currently, we are living through what could be thought of as a modern time of plagues. Instead of having a Pharaoh, we have a polarized society with one or both sides sowing the seeds of hate or fear of the other. There has been tremendous discord as we deal with issues related to the eradication of Covid, the preservation of the environment, the appreciation of different leadership styles and the elimination of further discrimination. There are also varied forms of injustice everywhere. People are adamantly separated in their beliefs, a situation which is magnified by living in a social media world. Often, we hear only one side of any story. The hearts of some in our society, like those of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, are hardened toward those whom they consider "the other" or "the outsider", those individuals who are seemingly different. And as Jews we certainly understand the concept of being the other in much the same way that the former slaves of nineteenth century America and the African Americans of Dr. King's time understood this concept. We know that we will have to bridge gaps such as these in our diverse society in order to be truly free.

How might we be able to build this understanding? The answer lies in sharing our beliefs and listening to and learning from "the other". Moses and Dr. King understood this, and like them, we must realize that some of the truths we hear are possibly half-truths that warrant compromise. By doing so, we will build optimism and further hopefulness.

Additionally, we know that in Women's League we also are obliged to keep our minds and those of others around us as symbolically free as possible. What you may ask are we doing in Women's League to make a difference today and to prevent us from ever feeling enslaved again? For one thing, we know what it feels like and we know how complex an issue it is. As we undergo this time of Covid separation and isolation, we know that we run the risk of feeling our own "kotzer Ruach". We are therefore working very hard to prevent this by developing numerous programs so as to keep our intellectual lives as free as possible. As the pandemic has continued, we have adapted

and created a multitude of programs to engage and educate our women. Highlights include a series on favorite books as well as a history of women in film. We have both a resolutions committee and a social actions committee that help us to communicate and put words into action, much like Moses and Dr. King did. Our leaders have made sure of that. We as Women's League members have been leaders in providing varied and interesting learning and social opportunities for other women in the organization so that we will never feel enslaved or bored. Even our WLCJ convention this past summer was redesigned to be done electronically rather than in person and over 1000 women were able to participate. We see ourselves as women of action. and we have widened our worlds as our Israelite mothers, like Miriam, learned to do as they left Egypt.

As proud members of affiliated Conservative Sisterhoods and Women's League for Conservative Judaism, who have come together on this Shabbat-- may we move to create better understanding and work together across divides and through narrow places , so that we can help create solutions to our problems and ultimately make our world more just and peaceful. Much as the Israelites did when they left the constricted Egyptian slave mentality and crossed the Red Sea to freedom, may we learn from the complex issues presented in the story of the plagues and the eventual Exodus from Egypt, and strive to be leaders as well as followers who work together to solve problems through listening, communicating and acting for the benefit of society, and may we all learn to live together in peace. Dr. King and Moses would have been so proud of us!

Shabbat Shalom