

Shabbat HaGadol Drash 4/12/25

Rabbi Chai Levy Congregation Netivot Shalom

This past week I had the opportunity to attend a lecture by Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde.

You've probably heard of her and seen the video of her sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC when she boldly spoke directly to Trump at the Inauguration prayer service.

She made a powerful and heartfelt plea to him for mercy, mercy for people who are scared -

LGBTQ children and the children of immigrants who wash our dishes at restaurants, clean our office buildings at night, and work in our meat packing plants.

She reminded Trump of the Torah's teaching that we care for the stranger because we were once strangers,

And Trump of course, publicly lashed out at her and demanded an apology, and she refused, saying she would not apologize for teaching Jesus's message.

At the lecture here in Berkeley, attended by 600 people, She got a standing ovation before she even opened her mouth.

And when she did speak, she noted that the message of her inauguration sermon was actually quite "basic."

That such a standard, central religious message could cause such a stir - both the offended rage by the president, and

The way she was held up as a courageous hero -

Says a lot about this moment in which we are living.

That such a basic religious message, such foundational spiritual principles - mercy, care for the vulnerable and the stranger, loving your neighbor - would be such a big deal and evoke such controversy and attention, indicates, as she said:

How much we are in a desert right now,

and professing basic values is like water in that desert.

And that's where I am today on this Erev Pesach, Shabbat HaGadol.
I know many of us are feeling heavy hearted going into Pesach this year.
It's hard to celebrate freedom from oppression,
When we're feeling less free and more afraid and oppressed in a way
that most of us haven't in our lifetimes, when we are living with rulers,
both here and in Israel, that feel more like the hard-hearted Pharaoh
than any of us could have imagined from our leaders.

But hopefully you've taken note of what I've been saying for the past
few months, repeatedly, in different ways.
This moment is calling us to spiritual resistance and resilience.
And I would like to suggest on this Shabbat HaGadol, that this is what
Pesach is about, especially this year.

Like Bishop Budde said about her inauguration prayer-
Those were basic religious ideas.
And we have our basic religious ideas that
we find in the messages of Pesach.
I will share a few of those messages and perhaps they will offer a
kavannah/intention for your Pesach this year.

The main point of Pesach is - not cleaning your kitchen obsessively to
the point of absurdity, but alas - but is:
telling the story of our liberation from a tyrannical, hard-hearted ruler.

What are the big themes in the story?
First, resistance to tyrants.
The women of the exodus story, whom the rabbis call *nashim
tzidkaniot*, the righteous women who are credited with our liberation,
practice civil disobedience and stand up to Pharaoh.
The midwives save the Hebrew baby boys,
defying Pharaoh's "executive order," as it were.

Yocheved saves baby Moshe's life. Pharaoh's daughter raises him. These images of these righteous women come to mind these days as I receive notifications about trainings for houses of worship about what to do in case of an ICE raid. Clergy are preparing to stand up to a tyrant's decree, following our biblical tradition.

At the seder, we'll read about the five rabbis in B'nei Brak who were discussing the Exodus all night.

Many have argued, based on certain curious details of the story, that these five were actually planning the Bar Kochba rebellion against the oppression and colonization of the Roman Empire.

So, the first big theme of the Exodus story:

Standing up to tyrants and practicing resistance to tyranny.

The righteous women of the exodus I mentioned are admired in other ways by our tradition. They had faith and hope for the future.

There are several midrashim about how when we were slaves in Egypt, The men became depressed and stopped having sex with their wives. They could see no reason to reproduce and bring new life into the world, given their terrible circumstances.

There are different versions of the midrash that all say that the women seduced their husbands because they believed that there would be a future worth bringing children into the world for.

And so there was a future for the Jewish people, rather than us ending there in Egyptian slavery.

This story is actually one of the talmudic meanings behind the charoset, which makes more sense than the sweet apple mixture being like the mortar for the bricks. The rabbis cite Shir HaShirim, saying it was "under the apple tree" that the women seduced their husbands.

Another midrash celebrates the faith of the Israelite women and explains how it was that Miriam and the women had timbrels when they sang and danced at Shirat HaYam, the Song at the Sea.

Why did they bring hand-drums with them when they fled Egypt?
They didn't even have time for the dough to rise, but they said, wait,
just let me grab my timbrel?

Rashi cites the midrash that says it was because the women had so
much faith that there would be reason to celebrate,
they left with their timbrels ready to sing and dance.

So, Pesach's second message of spiritual resistance and resilience.

The first: resist tyrants.

The second: the hope and faith that says:
bring your timbrel because things will get better.

And note: all of these details of the story involve people joining
together: the midwives, the women dancing, the rabbis in Bnei Brak.
Spiritual resistance is best done in community.

We need each other to get through this,
just as we need each other to tell the story together tonight at seder.

And the third big theme I want to highlight from the Pesach story is the
one that the Torah itself highlights.

As you know, 36 times, the Torah instructs us to love the stranger, care
for the stranger, not to oppress the stranger because we ourselves were
strangers in the land of Egypt.

We tell this story over and over again, establishing it firmly as the
central story of our people, not to dwell on being victims, but so that
we can transform our victimhood into compassion and care for others.

And so it's spiritual resistance to tell this story and to hold on to our
values, the "basic" ideas of our religion, as Bishop Budde said.

And as I've been saying repeatedly since November,

וּבְמָקוֹם שְׂאִין אֲנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ

Pirkei Avot 2:5

Where there is a lack of humanity, try to be human.
As cruelty becomes normalized and rights and liberties are dismantled,
It's resistance to hold on to our spiritual values and assert them in this world.

We may feel less free this Pesach than we have in our lives,
But the Exodus story and its themes have sustained us throughout time.
We've been telling this story for thousands of years,
in other very hard times, times harder than this.
We've had it easier in our lifetimes than most have in Jewish history,
But our ancestors kept the story going, generation after generation,
With its messages of:
Resisting tyrants, faith and hope for the future, and
Caring for the stranger because we know what it's like to be strangers.

There are plenty of reasons to feel despair.
But engaging in the story of the Exodus, which we enter into deeply for
the next eight days, can be an act of spiritual resistance and resilience.
I invite you, I urge you to read it that way
for the sake of our country, our world,
For the most vulnerable in our society, and
for our own mental health and well-being.
I wish you Chag Sameach and a Zissen Pesach,
a sweet and liberating Passover.