

Parashat Pinchas/Haftarah: We are Never Ready

Ari Yovel, 7/11/2020

The word of the LORD came to me: Before I created you in the womb, I selected you; Before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations. I replied: Ah, Lord GOD! I don't know how to speak, For I am still a boy. And the LORD said to me: Do not say, "I am still a boy," But go wherever I send you and speak whatever I command you.

Jeremiah 1:4-7 (JPS 1985)

To all aspiring book writers out there: I'm sorry, but the best and most perfect title for any text ever is already in use. Rabbi Alan Lew called dibs on it back in 2003, when he published his book reflecting on the transformative journey that the Jewish people undergo beginning on Tisha B'Av through the Days of Awe and ending in Sukkot each year. The title, you ask? *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*. It's a text that feels particularly relevant right now because we have just entered the Three Weeks leading up to Tisha B'Av, the first milestone on the journey described by Lew. But perhaps a more aggressive connection between that book and our current circumstances is best encapsulated by this quotation from the chapter on Selichot:

There was a time when our biblical ancestors thought they really had things figured out. They thought they knew what to do. They thought they had life under control. All they had to do was to make the prescribed sacrifices at the Great Temple in Jerusalem and everything would be taken care of, everything would be all right...If you were a biblical Prophet, the immensity was the social reality of the day. People were starving, people were homeless, strangers and orphans and widows were uncared for. The sacrifices, the rituals of the Temple, were a very thin reed in the face of this immensity, and the Prophets told us so...We thought

we knew what to do, we thought we had things figured out, but then we ran into the wall of reality. (Lew 112)

It is a text I keep coming back to: this idea that no matter how much we may actively try to ready ourselves to do and be our best selves, we can never truly anticipate the realities that will confront us. I would challenge the aphorism that “Life is what happens while you were busy making plans” by amending it to say “Life is what happens **because** you were busy making other plans”. We go about our days, hour by hour, year by year, and all the while the greater spiritual and social organisms of which we are a part continue their machinations, with us still very much inside them.

Nowadays, however, there is a very different reckoning that we are undergoing that gives these texts a whole new layer of meaning. We are being called upon and held to account for our roles in upholding and sustaining systems that have perpetuated violence and harm upon others for generations: systemic racism and white supremacy. At no point were we sat down and consulted about the hand we were dealt in relation to this silent monstrosity that is so heavily built into the fiber of our society. Perhaps that is why so many of us reflexively disavow any association with these things when called out on harvesting their fruits with variants on that common refrain: “I’m not racist!”.

The sad truth of the matter is this: The privileges we hold, and the marginalizations too, are things that are pre-determined for us. And despite having lived with them, knowingly or unknowingly, our entire lives, the act of coming to terms with them finds us total strangers to the mechanisms that shaped the circumstances of our existence. We know that they exist, that they are real, that they have often enacted untold generations of oppression on our fellow human beings, in whom the Divine Image is reflected, and perhaps worst of all- they have done so in our name. In the face of that knowledge, any justifications we have used to distance ourselves from the heart of the matter crumble away and we are left with only two essential truths.

The bad news: We are, each of us personally, part of the problem.

The good news: It doesn't have to stay that way.

The work of undoing a system in this order of magnitude is terrifying and daunting, the work of nations and generations. Who are we, as individuals, to try and tip the scales on such an operation? We often feel like Jeremiah receiving his calling, and may even say as much: we are but children, we protest, and cannot handle the task that is placed before us. Much like Jeremiah, we too have no idea how to make heads or tails of the systems of oppression that have embedded themselves into our lives, much less dismantle them. However, and this is perhaps the most challenging part of this process, the fear we feel when contemplating our charge is not a reason to disengage. In fact, it is that very feeling that is the reason we must take a hands-on approach to fighting systemic forms of injustice. Such an act of undoing is more than a simple disavowal in the form of "not being racist". Rather, it is the generative choice to be actively "anti-racist". Those terms, "not racist" and "anti-racist", are not synonyms. The distinction between the two is perhaps best explained by Ibram X. Kendi in his aptly named book, "How to be an Anti-Racist":

What's the problem with being "not racist"? It is a claim that signifies neutrality: "I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism." But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of "racist" isn't "not racist." It is "antiracist." What's the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of "not racist." The claim of "not racist" neutrality is a mask for racism. This may seem harsh, but it's important at the outset that we apply one of the core principles of antiracism, which is to return the word "racist" itself back to its proper usage...The attempt to turn this usefully

descriptive term into an almost unusable slur is, of course, designed to do the opposite: to freeze us into inaction. (Kendi 15)

It is a resistance to that paralysis that is the crux of my takeaway from this week's parsha. In the face of overwhelming odds, be they a people who have turned away from the righteous goodness of G-d's ways or a nation that refuses to acknowledge the hierarchies of oppression on which it was built, we cannot and must not remove ourselves from the equation. It is true that we are not ready, but that is not a reason to avoid the responsibilities placed on us, whether by G-d or by our social positionality. Our confrontation with the truth is a shock. And that is precisely why we must lean into that fear, embrace it, and use it as a stepping stone on our long journeys towards teshuvah, as people, communities, and generations untold. Only by acknowledging the horrors in which we are embroiled can we begin the process of healing and freeing ourselves from their wretched embrace.

In essence, I must return once more to the words of Alan Lew:

"This is real.

This is very real.

This is absolutely inescapable.

And we are utterly unprepared.

And we have nothing to offer but each other and our broken hearts.

And that will be enough." (Lew 116)

WORKS CITED:

1. Jeremiah 1:4-7. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.
2. Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2019.
3. Lew, Alan. *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003.