

Steit Oyf—Rise Up!
A Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5780
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The Talmud tells a story...

Rabban Gamliel II lived about 2,000 years ago and had a lot of power. He had political power, wealth, was descended from an illustrious family, and was head of the court and the Academy. In other words, he had a lock on the three branches of government. He was also an authoritarian. He didn't tolerate disagreement and bullied his students who dared contradict him.

One day, a certain disciple asked a young Rabbi Joshua whether the evening prayer was optional or obligatory, and being a bit of a liberal, Rabbi Joshua said it was optional. The same disciple went to Rabban Gamliel with the same question, and Rabban Gamliel said it was obligatory. Oh, that's funny, the student tattled. Rabbi Joshua said it was optional. The next day in the academy, Rabban Gamliel dared Rabbi Joshua to contradict him in public, and when Rabbi Joshua declined, Rabban Gamliel bullied him anyway, making him stand up before everyone for the rest of the academy, as Rabban Gamliel proceeded to sit down to teach the students. But the students couldn't bare it anymore. "How long will we allow these humiliations," they said to each other. They told the interpreter

(whom Rabban Gamliel depended on to translate the text from Hebrew to Aramaic) to just stop translating, essentially “unplugging the microphone” so to speak so he was essentially talking to himself. They succeeded in overthrowing Rabban Gamliel’s leadership and put in his place another leader, opening wide its doors to new students and renewing the life of the academy.

Rabban Gamliel’s authoritarian tactics were not new. He had used them many times before that day. But that day, something made those students come together and stand up. What made the difference that day? In Yiddish the phrase to “stand up” is “*Shteyt Oyf*” What is it that finally make us stand up?

The Torah portion this past Shabbat, and the Torah portion immediately before *every* Rosh Hashanah, is called “Stand Up” – Nitzavim. The portion begins with the verse: *You stand up this day, all of you, before the Lord your G-d (29:9)*. Commentators ask, which day does the Torah mean when it says “this day?” The Besht, the founder of Hasidism, says “this day” refers to Rosh Hashanah. In other words, the Torah is saying that Rosh Hashanah is the day to have the courage to stand up.

You stand up this day, all of you, before the Lord your G-d. But who is the “you” that Moses is talking to? Isn’t the “you” the Israelites of 3,000 years ago? Actually “*You,*” the Torah says is *us*, for it is written just after: “those who are standing here with us this day before the

Lord our God and ...those who are not with us here this day" (29:14). "Not with us here today," Rashi says, are the "generations yet to be." In other words, Moses is telling us, *us*, to stand up, and to make the decision to stand up *today*, Rosh Hashanah.

So the question I want to ask this Rosh Hashanah, is: What do we stand for? What do we need to summon courage and commitment to stand *up* for? And are we prepared to stand up this very day, this very year?

These questions couldn't be more relevant. And yet, they couldn't be more ancient. They are questions that each generation must ask itself, and questions that form the basis of our Torah. In that same Torah portion, the Torah portion of "standing up," it is written: "*For the word is exceedingly close to you*" (30:14). In other words, the subject and the substance of Torah is, as one Rabbi taught, *closer to you than anything else, for you yourself are the subject of Torah...*"

We ourselves are living the story we tell at the Seder every year. We ourselves, are living in a land where the leader consolidates power by manufacturing fear of those most vulnerable: migrants, refugees, immigrants and their descendants. As it says in the book of Exodus, "A new Pharaoh arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.... in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground'" (Ex. 1:8-10). In other

words, Pharaoh is invoking a demographic problem, stoking fear that Egyptians will be in the minority. This is the ancient Egyptian way of saying “You shall not replace us. Jews shall not replace us.”

And once that fear is invoked, Pharaoh can order the unthinkable—an attack on children, on babies. Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill every male Israelite baby born. *Our* Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew children of today, refugees and migrant children, to be forcibly taken from their parents and held in detention centers, sometimes without soap, toothbrushes, or blankets, having to sleep on a concrete floor. There have been 6 deaths of migrant children in custody since the new Pharaoh came to power.¹

That Pharaoh does not order midwives to kill migrant babies on the birthing stool described in the book of Exodus. That Pharaoh instead orders the sickest of immigrant children, children who have received legal permission to receive lifesaving treatment in American hospitals, (many in Boston hospitals), to leave or be deported, likely to their deaths, within 33 days. But many people stood up and cried out. So *our* Pharaoh’s courtiers issued a temporary (and uncertain) reprieve, saying nevertheless that their deportation order was “appropriate.”²

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48375144>

² https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/09/02/government-consider-some-immigrants-applications-remain-for-medical-care/gIJFrEUViuGhfwUhrIlfAJ/story.html?p1=Article_Inline_Text_Link

I sometimes hear people wonder whether the Exodus story ever really happened. I know it happened-- and not because I'm an archeologist or an expert on hieroglyphic texts or a biblical literalist. I know it happened because it happens every generation. It is happening now. The Exodus story is happening now.

Why do we have to tell the same story at the Seder every year? Because, the Sefat Emet teaches "the specifics of our liberation are worked out each year."

Pharaohs always target the vulnerable. They always stoke fear. Their actions always result in plagues. The immoral use of power results in plagues because such Pharaohs are not concerned with either the environmental consequences of their actions or the consequences to their people. In Egypt, the Nile water turned to blood, crops were eaten by a locust infestation, animals were afflicted with disease, humans with boils. Today, according to New York Times reporting,³ there are so far 7 rollbacks of environmental rules that protect our water: 23 that protect our air; 10 that protect non-human animals; 5 that protect humans from toxins. In addition, regulations on Methane gas, a major contributor to climate catastrophe, have been relaxed. These will result in plagues that will be with us for many years to come.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks.html>

There is one plague, however, that we can turn around right now. The ninth plague is the plague of darkness, a darkness so thick, the Torah says, that “people could not see each other” (Ex. 10:23). According to midrash, the plague of darkness refers to people did not seeing each other’s pain and not seeing others as full human beings. As the Chidushei HaRim taught: “There is no greater darkness than one in which ‘a person saw not his fellow’ -- in which a person becomes oblivious to the needs of his or her fellow. When that happens, a person becomes stymied in his personal development as well.” We too, as a country, have been plagued with this darkness.

And yet this plague of darkness offers hope. Remember, the Seder takes place at night, in darkness, for redemption from Egypt began in darkness. The Jewish day and the Jewish year begin in darkness, reminding us that the darkness turns to dawn. And the Talmud defines dawn as when one “can recognize the face of a friend” (BT Ber. 9b). In other words, we ourselves can turn this darkness around. Isaiah (9:1) proclaims: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light." And Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.” We can turn the darkness around by seeing the full dignity of all human beings. We can turn the darkness around by standing up.

It was then and continues to be now the decision to “stand up” that makes the difference. In Egypt, the Torah tells us there were two brave Egyptian midwives, Shifra and Puah, who had the courage to stand up to Pharaoh and did not carry out his orders to kill the newborns. They saved their lives. The Torah also tells us of another act of civil resistance, this one by someone close to Pharaoh—Pharaoh’s daughter. She saves the life of a baby floating in the Nile whom she knows is a Hebrew child. She saves that child’s life and in turn saves the Israelite people.

We have our own midwives. At the beginning of the summer 1,000 mostly young and Jewish activists, some wearing Jewish stars, tallies and kippot, marched from the New England Holocaust Memorial to the Suffolk County House of Correction “which houses scores of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement detainees. Eighteen protesters were arrested after locking arms near the facility’s entrance.”⁴ They were organized by a new group called “Never Again Action” formed in response to the immigration crisis, along with Movimiento Cosecha, an immigrant-rights group.

“When we grew up hearing the words ‘never again,’ it’s referring to a moment like this,” said Michaela Caplan, 23, one of the organizers of the event, whose grandmother survived Auschwitz.

⁴<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/07/02/protest/OuNM4jlpelhNwoGlwcLEYL/story.html?event=event12>

In mid-August young Jewish protesters were demonstrating at the street entrance to the ICE detention center in Rhode Island, when an employee drove a pick-up truck through the line of protesters, sending some to the hospital. In September hundreds of young Jewish protestors walked from the NE Holocaust memorial to Amazon's building in Cambridge, protesting Amazon's giving tech support to federal agencies tracking down immigrants.

There are so many people standing up. Wayfair employees, doctors, judges, immigrant lawyers and advocacy groups, civil rights groups, elected leaders, people from all religions, political parties, ethnicities and all walks of life. Orthodox Jews in a new organization called "Torah Trumps Hate." People of all ages.... A few weeks ago, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, 86 years old, my friend and teacher, protested with a group called "Elder Witnesses and Friends." He couldn't literally "stand up" because of his back, so he sat down at the ICE entrance in Philadelphia and got arrested anyway by the Federal Department of Homeland Security police.

"Atem Nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei H'... You stand up today all of you before the Lord Your God." This is Moses's commandment to us shortly before his death. The Torah doesn't tell us where Moses was buried. Why? "The Hassidic masters say: Moses entered into the core of every Jew of every generation, so that every ... soul possesses a spark of the soul of Moses. (Maayanah Shel Torah)." That spark of

justice, that spark of leadership and ability, is in each one of us. We do not have to wait for another Moses. We are the leaders we have been waiting for.

This is not an easy struggle. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said before his death:

we still have a long, long way to go before we reach the promised land of freedom. Yes, we have left the dusty soils of Egypt, and we have crossed a Red Sea that had for years been hardened by a long and piercing winter of massive resistance, but before we reach the majestic shores of the promised land, there will still be gigantic mountains of opposition ahead and prodigious hilltops of injustice. We still need some Paul Revere of conscience to alert every hamlet and every village of America that revolution is still at hand.⁵

We are that conscience. The darkness only remains dark if we continue to sleep. *Shteyt Oyf*, stand up, the Yiddish folksong calls to us. “*Vos Shloft ir, ir shlefer. Shteyt Oyf! Shteyt oyf!* Why are you slumbering you sleepers? Arise! Arise! *Genug shoyn tsu haltn di lodn farmakht.* Enough! Keeping your shutters closed. Why are you sleeping in this dark night... Arise! *Shtey oyf!* Awaken yourselves.

⁵ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/where-do-we-go-here-address-delivered-eleventh-annual-sclc-convention>

But softly, softly, without any noise. *Zet, az ale zoln zayn glaykh.* See to it that all are equal.”⁶

⁶ Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 296.