

THE BEST OF TIMES

Kol Nidre 5781

Rabbi David Kosak

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way— in short, the period was so far like the present period...”

With those immortal words, Charles Dickens began his famous historical novel of 1859, *The Tale of Two Cities*. The plot begins in the years before the French Revolution and it ends with the Jacobin Reign of Terror, which was marked by massacres and public executions.

During the period of this reign of terror, new enlightenment ideas—beautiful, necessary and humanistic ideas took hold and changed what people thought should be the role of government, its duties to serve its citizens and the intrinsic value and freedom of the human being.

At the same time as these ideas were spreading, the French reign of terror was also marked by horrific violence that spilled into the streets. Was the French Revolution a success? Did it achieve its goals of better government for its citizens? Is the history of the West marked by progress? The sort of progress toward which the French Revolution aimed? If it is, then perhaps a bit of violence and social upheaval are worthwhile because they lead us to a better place? Or perhaps our focus should be on the last of the five stages of the French revolution—the dictatorship of Napoleon?

What if we can't look over our shoulder and see how far we have come? Then what use is today's unrest? Why on earth would we imagine that we can do better than previous eras that also had ennobling ideas about human freedom and equality? What if progress is an illusion, as those who condemn the American project and believe our country is founded on apparently irredeemable foundations seem to believe?

These are not academic questions for me. They are questions of my soul. They touch upon my emotional well-being. Really, my emotional anguish. During this pandemic, and the important Black Lives Matter protest movement that has followed, I have been deeply troubled.

Our nation's social unrest has been reflected by my inner distress. Can you relate? I think you can.

I have not been at ease, and so many assumptions of who I am as a person, and what my role is as a husband, a father, or a rabbi, have been called into question. I have endured what a Catholic poet once called "the dark night of the soul." Based on conversations I have had with many of you, you too are going through a dark night of the soul. You also find yourself uneasy more frequently. We are all going through something necessary, deep, *and* difficult.

Defining that uneasiness is not, well, easy. What I can say is that through a great deal of introspection, I have grabbed hold of my dark night and used it to grow. Perhaps this is delusion, but at this juncture, my worries *remain* what they were, but I *carry them* with a much greater sense of equanimity. I have been seeking what I can only call spiritual freedom, and am fortunate to have made some progress on that journey. I hope you have as well.

On the holiest night of the Jewish year, every one of us is called to embrace an inner darkness which leads us to the light. That darkness is the challenge of seeing who we really are. The light flows out of the spiritual freedom we

find when we face our darkness, and that in turn allows us to feel more settled in these unsettling times. I want to explore this concept with you, because there is a terrible hunger for spiritual freedom in this country, and we are trying to sate it by turning toward politics, which is a bit like fighting windmills.

To explain this concept of spiritual freedom adequately, we first need to talk about political freedom. Political freedom seeks to change the outer world of relations. Spiritual freedom seeks to change our inner world, the relationship we have with ourselves. In Judaism this relationship is called *bein adam l'atzmo*, and it is one of the areas of teshuvah that we are invited to repair during these days of awe. Ultimately, it leads us back to changed relationships with the world and others.

Let's spend a few minutes now looking at political freedom so that we will be better prepared to understand why spiritual freedom is just as necessary or perhaps must even precede political freedom.

Political Freedom

The first profound lesson I had in political freedom occurred by happenstance. Did you ever overhear a stranger say something that changed your life, or at the very least, instantly seared its ways into your mind where it remained ever since? Growing up in New York, and attending college in NYC, that sort of thing happened. Between the subway, the crowded streets, or even small clubs, there's a level of interaction with strangers that occurs pretty regularly. It was, at least pre-pandemic, one of the endearing and infuriating things about living there. But maybe strangers are supposed to have a say in our lives? Because you never know when you might actually be meeting Elijah.

It was one of those sorts of moments when I heard an old black man in New York say to no one in particular, "the only freedom what matters is freedom from the police."

"The only freedom what matters is freedom from the police." That single phrase burned its way into my mind and has been there ever since. I suspect part of the reason is that as a skinny white 19 year old Jewish kid, I had never suffered much interference from cops. But anyone with a heart open to listening could hear in those words a depth of experience that couldn't be denied. Here

was a man who was sharing a hard-earned truth. He had been hassled by the police. The deepest sort of freedom he could imagine was to live unmolested by the authorities.

In an age where we are having serious conversations about defunding the police and repurposing those dollars into social programs, that snippet of conversation keeps echoing in my head. “The only freedom that matters is freedom from the police.” I didn’t have language such as Black Lives Matter back then, but that is what a stranger on the street was teaching me. *Black lives matter*, and when the state’s use of police power is not impartial—when hassles and use of force fall more indiscriminately on black bodies, then yes, the only freedom that matters to some is indeed freedom from the police.

There are also other sorts of freedom people are hungry for. Over the summer, I have gone downtown on several occasions. A couple of times, I ventured into the nighttime protests to see the beating, bleeding heart of my city and to stand amidst the pain and anger. I have also taken to heading downtown during the daylight hours. There are fewer people, and more opportunity in the relative quiet to have substantive conversations with some of the protesters.

There are people who want greater economic equality—even to the point of seeking a revolution. I have met utopians, who believe that in the coming new order, people who grow food will share it with others, and that a more natural human generosity will surface. More than once it was said that in a just society, police wouldn't even be needed.

On a couple of occasions, I have also seen angry people attack one another—not in the midst of a large protest, and not by those who are trying to undermine the cries for justice. No, there are some people who are so furious that their rage spills out of them with no definable object. The last time I came downtown felt like New York City of the mid 1980's, when every stroll on the street carried with it an element of risk and danger. I saw the aftermath, a man bleeding, his attacker running around screaming, and the police showing up almost immediately to tend the wounds of the injured victim.

In these visitations, the questions I really wanted answered were “what will it take to end the protests?” and “What will it take to make you feel alright?” People could offer me abstract, or theoretical or utopian answers, but not concrete answers. No one could tell me what policies,

if implemented, would make people feel safe. No one could give me a practical answer about what economic equality means.

I don't think that is accidental. The people I have met are passionate, concerned individuals, the sort who are vested in this country, who are trying to imagine what the America they want looks like.

There are two reasons why these questions of “what will it take to end the protests” and “what will it take for you to feel alright” go unanswered. One is because our political tools are imperfect and limited. The other is that ultimately, people are not looking for political freedom. Or *not only* political freedom.

There are two profound verses in Deuteronomy which can explain this, and help us begin making the shift from political freedom and toward the *spiritual freedom* that we Jews are called on to seek during our season of *teshuvah*.

In Deuteronomy 15:4, we read:

אָפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה-בָּךְ אֲבִיוֹן. כִּי-בֵרַךְ יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
נִתַּן-לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

There shall be no needy among you—since the LORD your God will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion—

and just a few verses later, in Deuteronomy 15:11, we read the complete opposite.

כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיוֹן מִקְרֹב הָאָרֶץ עַל־כֵּן אֶלְנִי מִצֹּדָה לֵאמֹר פֶּתַח תִּפְתַּח
(אֶת־יָדְךָ לְאֲחִיךָ לְעִנִּיךָ וְלֵאבִינְךָ בְּאֶרְצְךָ: 11)

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

How can that be? How can God say that there will be no one impoverished among us, and just moments later tell us that human need can't be eradicated?

Some of our classic commentators come up with clever solutions. *IF* we build a just society, then no one will be hungry. This, by the way, is a political answer. But then those same commentators continue: since we are incapable of doing that, then there always will be needy individuals.

One way to read all of human history is as a story about the changing nature of our economy. From hunter-gatherers to farmers and fishers; from barter to money; from artisans and crafts people to industrial production. From factory workers to information workers.

At each turn, new jobs arise that require new skills. Not everyone can get retrained. Not everyone is temperamentally prepared for the new world. Not everyone has equal access to the tools that will allow them to adapt. And some, like the African American, struggle against a system that seems perpetually stacked against them regardless of the economic model in vogue.

So Deuteronomy 15 *is* correct—we can't ever fully resolve the paradox between God's promise that no one will go hungry, and God's description that there will always be human need. We can build the most just society imaginable, and within a few verses, or at most a few decades, we will discover that the impoverished remain.

That might sound discouraging. But please remember, Judaism has never nurtured a sense of infallibility. Our greatest leader, Moshe, is flawed, and is denied entrance into the land of Canaan. Adam and Eve have to flee from the utopian garden for their failings. And the entire Torah is

a book about moving to the promised land, but never quite arriving. To be human is to be in motion.

Politics can't answer how to live with this dynamic turmoil, because politics can only address the art of the possible—that which can be measured or legislated. Politics can move us along a path toward justice, but it will never take us all the way. For justice is a spiritual value—a value of meaning—that gets applied in the political realm but exists apart from the world of power.

That's why I think the protesters I have spoken with can't decide what would be sufficient to get them off the streets.

When I look at our country today, there is so much pain, so much loss, so much struggle. The parts that can be alleviated by the public square must be, and as Jews we are obligated to take part in that work. Vote. Engage in tikkun olam. Roll up your sleeves. Let's work together as one people and one nation.

And still, what people are desperate for can't be fully explained or answered by political solutions.

Which brings me to Aiysha. Aiysha is an African American woman with vivacious eyes, crisp cornrows and a quick

wit. When I asked her the same question, she didn't offer a political answer. Aiysha believes that what Black people are missing is nationality and divine creed. By nationality, she means the fact that black bodies were stolen from their countries of origin, and never really given American nationality. Humans need a sense of belonging. We need to know we belong to a place, and that the place belongs to us. The security of identity. And by divine creed, Aiysha is highlighting the spiritual hunger and loss of purpose that so many people are struggling with. A society in which we can acknowledge that we are all children of God.

Listening to her, I was reminded of Victor Frankl. Do you remember him? He was a Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist and neurologist. What he learned in the Shoah was that even in the worst human conditions possible, some people thrived. In those horror filled concentration camps of degradation, wanton murder and starvation, *some humans flourished*.

What gave these people such spiritual freedom that their souls could remain free in a place of slavery and torture?

Frankl identified that a fundamental human drive is the search for a life of meaning. So profound is this need, that even the inhuman conditions of an Auschwitz were

insufficient to snuff out those who were able to generate meaning while walking through a living hell.

That is a rather profound form of spiritual freedom.

It also doesn't explicitly tell us how to do the *bein adam l'atzmo* work on this Yom Kippur or in the days to come; nonetheless, knowing that some found spiritual freedom in Birkenau can provide us encouragement to create our own purpose-driven lives during the current bleakness. That is an important and hopeful endeavor of its own.

Let's then revisit the Jewish American psychologist, Abraham Maslow. Some of you may be familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, often visualized as a pyramid. The bottom of the pyramid had survival goals such as security, connection and self-esteem. The upper portions of the pyramid addressed other human needs such as exploration, love, and at the top, purpose or self-actualization. In moving through these stages, a person would experience self-actualization as the pinnacle of human existence.

There is only one problem with this pyramid image. Maslow didn't create the pyramid. Rather, his hierarchy of human needs was first visualized as a pyramid in

management textbooks, according to psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman. Moreover, the highest human accomplishment for Maslow was not self-actualization but *self-transcendence*. *Spiritual freedom in other words.*

According to Dr. Kaufman, not only did Maslow believe that self-transcendence was the goal of human life, but he also believed that achieving such transcendence was an experience, not a destination.

Human growth is never linear. Life is much rockier than that. If there is anything the last six months have taught us, it's that.

A better way to envision Maslow's model is as a sailboat in the middle of a vast ocean, because we are always in a state of becoming and the closest shore is far from view. We never fully resolve any of the stages he outlines. We endure set-backs, and fear can strip away many of our feelings of security and self-esteem as well as prevent us from pointing our sailboat in the direction of growth.

Dr. Kaufman says it so beautifully:

“Every now and then, when we're *really* catching the wind— when we aren't preoccupied with our basic needs

and we are moving purposefully in a direction with the spirit of exploration and love— we can experience transcendence. Transcendence goes beyond individual growth and allows for the highest levels of unity and harmony within oneself and with the world.

Transcendence, which rests on a secure foundation of both security and growth, allows us to attain wisdom and a sense of connectedness and synergy with the rest of humanity.”

As those souls in Auschwitz taught us, the security we need to do that work may be far less than we imagine. Even with very little, those prisoners managed to limit their preoccupation with their basic needs. Heroic.

And that’s why these are the best of times and the worst of times. A season of light, and a season of darkness. A spring of hope and a winter of despair.

Humans’ internal progress is not linear.

Neither is external or political progress.

Progress exists, and doesn’t exist.

We take two steps forward and one step back.

Sometimes we take two steps back and only one step forward.

The Jewish master story of the Torah is that we never reach the promised land, not in the political realm, not interpersonally, and not in our relationship with ourselves.

We are always becoming, always seeking safety *and* new understandings that will make us uncomfortable—and unsafe. Always failing and picking ourselves up again.

We all know these things, but we don't always live from the center of our knowing. Spiritual freedom arises when we accept and acknowledge the rocky shoals and stormy waters within our psyche—and in the body politic as well.

When we don't, when we imagine that the next social movement or the next election will eliminate the turbulence of being human, then these indeed are the worst of days, because we enslave ourselves to impossible dreams. We live from a place of disappointment and judgement. We strengthen our anger—specifically the chronic anger which defines our nation and separates us from ourselves and others.

In many Jewish communities, Yom Kippur was considered the happiest day of the Jewish year. How can that be when we are hungry, unshowered, and peering into our own darkness?

Purpose. Wisdom. Coming to terms with the broken imperfection that each of us carry in our core. Being human. Listening into the wind. That's spiritual freedom.

It's not a little thing. It is the core experience required for a deeply and fully human existence. And it makes all the difference.

May you continue to move toward the blessings of spiritual freedom. May we all.