

How Can I Keep From Singing

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All week as the news kept rolling in—suicide bombers at Seder dinners, Israel's retaliation in Ramallah, death, more death, and destruction—I wondered how I would ever find anything to say in this morning's sermon. In one way, there is too much to say. The situation in Palestine and Israel has become so serious and so deadly that I cannot ignore it. I feel a cry growing in my belly and I want to voice it, to stand here and cry out, "No more! No more! No more!"

This is a holy week and yet the violence and bloodshed continue, and even grow—and not only in the Middle East. This week a seventeen year old girl in Denver was attacked for being a lesbian—the word "dyke" carved into her arm and "R.I.P" carved into her belly with a razor blade. Our troops remain in Afghanistan, and thus far, they have not brought peace. Warlords still steal and murder the people. Tribal factions continue the deadly race for power. This week's earthquake heaps suffering on top of suffering. When will it end? And how can we sit here, in this little church, safe and complacent, and speak of renewal, rebirth, and resurrection?

As I began writing these words, I was flooded with a visceral feeling of despair. I saw myself wandering through the darkness, weeping. Oh the grief! I thought of the Easter story—not the morning of the empty tomb, but the night before. I thought of the women, grieving, numb in the dark cold night that held the dark cold tomb that held the dark cold body of their friend, son, teacher, hope.

This year, for the first time, I do not want to hurry through this part of the story. The grief is real, and I believe there is a reason for the nights in the tomb, the time of struggle, the pain of plagues and years wandering in the wilderness. They are here because we know grief, first-hand, and sometimes we need to stop and not ignore the pain of it. All is not well. There is too much killing, too much death. We have lost too much—our friends, our innocence, our hope. The powerful have decreed the death of their adversaries, the innocent suffer, and we cannot just go on. Surely, we must take the time to grieve.

It is a troubling time to speak publicly of these issues. I am painfully conscious that this time of year is always marked by increasing violence and anti-Semitism. This week, in San Francisco, the roof of a synagogue was doused in gasoline and propane, but luckily, luckily—did not catch fire. Jews, Arabs, and Persians face the frightening reality of being harassed, beaten or killed because of who they are. What we are seeing today in Israel and Palestine is inextricably tangled with that history of hatred and destruction. And yet, the Torah itself repeats again and again, an injunction, a warning, a plea: "When you come into your own land, do not oppress the stranger. Remember that you were the stranger in the land of Egypt."

This year I have tried to look unblinkingly into the face of reality. The stories we tell at this time of year are not pretty. Passover is the story, not only of freedom, but of the

brutal reality of the slavery that preceded it. It tells of freedom won at the cost of plagues, destruction, and death. The Easter story is no better. Jesus died as a political prisoner executed by those who savagely protected their power. The pain is also a part of the story.

"Remember..." the Torah says. Remember that you were once strangers. Remember you have felt the sting of loss, the deep despair in the face of death, the rage, the helplessness and the rage again. Remember that you, too, are human, and that as a human being you are capable of being both the oppressor and the oppressed. Remember.

As I stopped this year to take stock of not only the happy endings, but the struggle and the pain that fill these ancient stories, I realized that each story, whether historical or contemporary, has something in common with the others. In each story, someone refuses to remember that they are just another human being. In each story, someone is convinced that their way—their culture, their religion, their ideology, their power—makes them more important, more valuable—essentially more "right." And because of this they do not have to listen to anyone else.

In the most ancient story, it is Pharaoh who will not listen to the cries of his fellow human beings, and eventually will not even listen to God. In the story of Easter, neither the Roman authorities nor the Jewish leaders are willing to listen to Jesus and his message of human compassion. They see him instead, as a threat to their power. Today, leaders on all sides refuse compassion and value ideology and vengeance more than human life. None of these people remember that they know how it is to be the stranger.

This week, we learned from the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* that an Israeli officer told his troops, "If our job is to seize a densely packed refugee camp or take over the Nablus casbah, and if this job is given to an Israeli officer to carry out without casualties on both sides, he must before all else analyze and bring together the lessons of past battles, even—shocking though this might appear—to analyze how the German army operated in the Warsaw ghetto." Shocking? Yes, shocking and heartbreaking that we humans can so easily forget. "You were once a stranger in the land of Egypt..." You were once the stranger..."

Rabbi Michael Lerner is trying to remember. In his supplement to the Haggadah for this year's Seder, he writes:

One of the most radical messages of the Torah is that cruelty is not destiny. Though we tend to treat others in the way that we ourselves were treated, the message of Torah is that the chain of pain can be broken—that we do not have to pass on to others what was done to us....[yet] we are celebrating this Seder at a moment when the Jewish people are acting as oppressors...

The daily realities of occupation are not only cruel to Palestinians, but also distorting to the Jewish soul....Our task is not to condemn Jews, but to heal the fear that has led so many Jews to shut their eyes to the pain we are causing to others. [We] are fundamentally good, and our distortions are not a manifestation of an underlying evil but of an unhealed trauma at thousands of years in which we were the victims and others acted with outrageous insensitivity to us."

There is something powerful about remembering, but it is not enough simply to hang on to the memory and let it feed a festering need for vengeance. "Remember, you were once Strangers..." is always coupled with a command to treat others with *chesed* or compassion. Re-remembering is more than simple recollection of the pain and suffering. Re-remembering is putting the pieces back together again—all the pieces, including the face of compassion. Remembering means fighting the tendency to separate "us" from "them" and deeming ourselves superior in some way.

It is remarkably easy to fall prey to this tendency. It is not only a tendency in "them"—those faraway terrorists, those dictators, those fundamentalists of all stripes. We too forget. We forget that our way of thinking, our experience, even our values, do not make us better, smarter or more valuable people. We forget that even if we are able to back up our belief or disbelief with science and rationality, we cause harm when we hope to make everyone else's beliefs, actions, and language conform to our own. We must remember that once we were strangers. We must remember how hurtful it was when we were excluded, devalued, and made small by others. We must be the ones that refuse to treat others in the ways we were treated. We must be the ones that refuse to force our beliefs upon others and instead embrace compassion.

The stories of this season are not stories of despair. They are stories of hope. They are stories that lift up the human ability to conquer pain and degradation. The Hebrew people left Egypt, even though they were terrified of all they did not know and could not imagine. The early followers of Jesus found a way to go on, to continue to take his message of political and spiritual reform to the nations. Winter passes and melts into spring. Cruelty is not destiny. We have the ability to break the cycles of pain, poverty, violence, fundamentalism, and destruction.

I chose this year to take a hard look at reality, yet even in the face of so much suffering, violence, and pain—the larger reality I see is the reality of hope. Human beings can change. The cold stones over tender hearts can roll away. Obstacles to freedom can disappear like a river that opens up to reveal dry land. There is always the possibility that this is the day that spring will break through and the seeds that have remain dormant for so long will burst through. During the civil rights movement in this country, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke the words of our own Unitarian forbear, Theodore Parker—words of hope that I believe are true and are enough to sustain us: "The arc of the moral universe is long," he said, "but it bends toward justice."

I titled this sermon after one of my favorite songs in our hymnal—one that we will sing in a few moments. It is a song that acknowledges that life is full of storms and difficulties, yet just below the surface lies an equal truth: that there is always a reason to sing, always a reason to hope, always a reason to believe that the bells of freedom will ring again, and that love will eventually prevail. Despite the pain of slavery, of violence, of death...the song of life goes on and we continue singing. We sing the song of remembrance and hope...even if we do not completely believe the song when we begin. We sing to remember our captivity and our liberation. We sing the dirges of grief, and the melodies of joy and thanksgiving. We sing of the mystery of life that returns, the greening all around us, the bud, the flower, the breaking forth of what is new. We sing because we need to sing ourselves awake—to shake off our despondency and our tiredness—and re-member the passion that moves us to act, the love of life, the hope that we so need to make it through this difficult time.

May we move toward justice and away from fear. May our actions restore this world from lamentation to love. May hope be reborn in and among us in this season.

Amen, Ashé, and Blessed be.

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