



Shabbat Bo 5777 /February 3, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

I write you from Jerusalem where I am on my winter retreat for the Rabbinic Leadership Initiative at the Shalom Hartman Institute. It brisk and sunny; Jerusalem in winter is radiant green and blue against the ancient stones that build this eternal city. This retreat we are delving into the topic, "The Ikkarim (Essential Elements/Heart) of the Jewish People: A Covenant of Becoming." Through lectures, text study, chevruta (dedicated time to study with colleagues), meals, and an evening making art as commentary on Torah, we now prepare for Shabbat and the slow down of life in Jerusalem for a day. The blessing of being able to participate in this exquisite learning is at the forefront of my soul and heart...

With Dr. Micah Goodman, we are studying theology and exploring the ideas of 17th Century Jewish scientist and theologian Baruch Spinoza. Why, he wondered, is religion so universally popular? Spinoza's answer: Fear. Spinoza argued religion is universal because anxiety is universal. As humans, we are aware of the future and this creates anxiety. Awareness of the future changes our psyche. We are aware that we don't know what the future portends.

In Torah this Shabbat, we read the final confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. Pharaoh's hardened heart finally cracks open. We flee Egyptian bondage, we leave 400 years of slavery, with no guarantees. We head towards the Promised Land. The future is unknown. We don't know how long it will take us to trek through the desert, what tragedies may befall us, what promises and perils freedom bring.

We look to this defining story of our people to understand our past. Because we've read this story before, we know what happens and how it ends; we've read the rest of Torah and stood amidst the thunder of Sinai and the drama of the Golden Calf, the agony of Moses dying before he crosses the Jordan, the triumph of the Israelites arriving home. Even as we know the ending, the moment of final confrontation between Moshe and Pharaoh is still as riveting-as relevant-as ever.

The blessing of reading Torah is that we know how the story ends.

But what of our own stories, our own lives? We don't know the future. In our world today, the future can seem promising or scary.

For the Jewish people, Shabbat helps to quell our anxiety for the future. On Shabbat, we do not plan the day after because Shabbat demands our full presence. Shabbat is a Divine cry to be here, now. During the week, we pray 13 bakashot-requests-during the Amidah. On Shabbat, all bakashot are removed-we make no requests for the future; we must be present. On Shabbat, we've arrived.

We live into this Shabbat confronting the Pharaoh of Egypt, fleeing slavery, and rushing towards freedom. We pause on Shabbat, amidst all our wondering of how to live as full, loving, compassionate human beings, seeking justice, pursuing human dignity; we pause, to be present, not to deny the power of the future, but to prepare ourselves to face what it offers, powerfully.

With love and prayers from Jerusalem,

Shabbat Shalom,

Michael