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Vaeira Wallah Sermon

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My favorite class at school this semester is called Moral Issues in the Modern World. I love that I get to spend my time at school discussing current events or hypothetical situations, unpacking the choices involved, and deciding – or, more often, not deciding – whether or not the action was morally right. It's week three, and already we've looked at topics ranging from petty theft to murder, and cosmetic animal testing to nuclear weapons, asking if we would do the action ourselves, if we think it would be okay for others to do so, and where our perceptions of right and wrong even come from. These discussions are hard. It's hard to sit in a room full of people and be the only person to raise their hand. It's hard to realize that we might have been wrong about an issue of morality. It's hard to realize that we might be complicit in something we say we disagree with, and then to not know what to do with ourselves or our moral compass. Preparing for this drash felt very similar to my mornings at school – I came out with more questions than answers, and with a fundamentally different feeling about one of Judaism's founding stories.

This week's parashah is Vaeira. It's in the book of Shemot, or Exodus, and it covers the first seven plagues. You might remember them from the Passover seder, when we dip our pinkies in the wine and, in my house, recite them in some terribly disordered combination of Hebrew and English when no one knows which language to do first.

In my opinion, the speed of that moment rarely offers us time to appropriately reflect on what actually happened to the Egyptian people, so let's do that now. Firstly, *all* of the water in Egypt turned to blood – drinking, agriculture, and hygiene practices were completely contaminated. Given modern-day water crises like Flint, we know that this isn't something to be taken lightly. And after blood, there's frogs, lice, livestock disease, boils, and locusts, one after the other after the other – six times, *vayomer Adonai el Moshe*, and another terrible thing fell on the land of Egypt.

But we were freed because of it! After four hundred years, the Jewish people were led out of bondage by God's outstretched hand, and we crossed the Red Sea, and Miriam danced and sang that Debbie Friedman song, and after that, everything was perfect so we never have to think about the Egyptians again! Who cares if God committed atrocities against the Egyptian people in the name of our liberation – they did the bad thing first, so we should be allowed to celebrate, right? I think you know what I'm about to tell you: not so much. This idea of Adonai – *our God* – driving another nation of human beings into the ground and saying it was for our benefit doesn't sit easy with me, and it hasn't since I began to unpack this story at my bat mitzvah nearly four years ago.

This, again, as you might know, is not an old problem. In fact, modern parallels of leaders committing unspeakable acts of bigotry and destruction in the name of those they serve were frighteningly easy to find. Some of the most horrifying things committed by this administration were done in the name of the American people.

From the Muslim travel ban to the ongoing crisis at the southern border to the escalating conflict in Iran, the rhetoric of “Make America Great Again” has always been to protect the safety and prosperity of a select few at the expense of other groups.

Shir Tikvah, I know that we more than disagree with this administration and everything they stand for. I know that there are those of us who rightly feel unsafe because of these actions and others, who are not part of the “in group” protected in this political climate. I know that we are all fighters and protesters and bringers of justice. And. And I know that there are those of us – myself included – who benefit from the oppressive systems, systems of whiteness and socioeconomic privilege and others, upheld and exacerbated by the person in the White House and the people who put him there.

This also does not sit well with me. Often I find myself feeling uncomfortable, guilty, and angry that I get to keep living my life barely aware of and certainly unaffected by the appalling situations growing in this country. I don’t associate myself with the Trump administration. In fact, I like to put as much distance between me and it as possible. But I can’t simply step back from a fight that I was born into. I can’t turn a blind eye to something I so vehemently disagree with, in the White House or in the Torah. My life as an American and as a Jew are each tied to untangling, processing, and pushing back against the actions and systems that brought me to where I am today.

So what do I do? What do we do, because I know I am not as unique as I sometimes feel. Given that these leaders commit all sorts of terrible things in our name – currently as Americans and biblically as Jews – we can't, in good conscience, ignore it or let it slide just because we may benefit. And, we can't exactly turn our entire lives around to avoid being complicit. That isn't practical, and it isn't possible. I'll be honest, I'm not exactly sure what to do with the story of Passover. I like the holiday too much to remove myself from it, and simply being aware of what happened doesn't feel like enough. But I do know that we have to keep fighting against the injustices of *today*, against Trump and the systems that brought him to power. We will not consent to these atrocities being committed in our name. We start with awareness, and we continue moving forward with justice.