

Shemot 5781: A Dark Day in America's History

As we move into this secular new year of 2021, having completed the book of Genesis, we enter the book of Exodus. We have a ritual when completing a book in the Torah, we say "*chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek!*" – meaning, from strength to strength, may we be strengthened! This is a celebration.

We have many rituals. Baby namings, weddings, *bar mitzvahs* are communal celebrations. So too, we have rituals for mourning those whose lives have ended. We gather and bury, and we cry and mourn, and remember. We observe *shivah*, *shloshim*, and observe *yahrtzeits*. Whether for celebration or to mourn, our rituals give us a sense of who we are, nurture us, and bind us together as community.

Our country too, has official rituals. In January 1933, the 20th Amendment to the Constitution determined January 20th as the day for presidents to be inaugurated.

This is a date to celebrate. The formal ceremony and rituals of inauguration illustrate and celebrate a peaceful transition of power each time we elect a new president. It is a celebration for democracy, and a visual representation of what America is, for the world to see.

This peaceful transition of power was in jeopardy this week. The storming of the Capitol was an act of insurrection, intended to disrupt the most fundamental act of our democracy – the peaceful transition of power.

I watched the news with fear, and I was shaken to the core.

A mob of people scaled the walls of the Capitol bearing clothing, flags, and symbols that do not represent the America that I know.

As Jews, we recognize the hatred displayed via the news, and via selfies and social media posts by the mob who stormed the Capitol. As a community looking toward the International Holocaust Remembrance Day this month on Wednesday, January 27th, we should be aware of symbols displayed and worn by those who mobbed, attacked, and invaded our Capitol.

A sweatshirt reading "Camp Auschwitz: Work brings freedom" – a rough translation of the message that Jewish prisoners saw at the entry to Auschwitz. On the backside of the sweatshirt it said "staff."

Q – a symbol of QAnon, known for its conspiracy theory, laced with antisemitism, began in 2017, has millions of adherents, and falsely claims that an elite cabal of pedophiles, run by Democrats, is plotting to harvest the blood of children. Related to QAnon is the phrase, Save The Children, referencing children who QAnon conspiracists falsely believe have been abducted by Democrats and progressives, including the Jewish billionaire financier George Soros.

Prominent Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis were part of the Capitol mob.

Among flags on display by the mob were those associated with long histories of white supremacy. At least one protester carried a Confederate battle flag into the Capitol building. Meanwhile, nooses — a prominent symbol of racist violence — were placed outside.

These are just a few of the symbols seen this past Wednesday. Additional symbols exist, including another, worn by a Proud Boys protester in December. It chills me to the bone: 6MWE, “Six Million Wasn’t Enough.”

Our Torah portion this week elevates two remarkable women, who were likely Egyptian women, midwives who were instructed by Pharaoh to kill all the male newborns of the Hebrew mothers. Being God-fearing women, they refused Pharaoh’s order, and stand as an example to all, throughout time, to stand for moral, compassionate, and courageous behavior. These women teach us that we are to stand for morality, and compassion, with courage, and to have hope for the future.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, once wrote, “To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair...Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet.”

With this reminder, that we are to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair, I share with you the following call for introspection, learning, and healing, published online this week, from the American Jewish Committee:

No doubt, many of us will be talking about the shocking and harrowing breach of the Capitol Building by insurrectionists on Wednesday. The seeds for this horrible day were sown by the President of the United States and enabled, even encouraged, by many other elected officials and public figures. What can we as

American Jews - no matter what political party we call our own - do to heal our damaged nation? It is urgent that all of us take the time to talk to our family members about what it means to build a civil society.

Questions for your Shabbat table:¹

- Can we trace the roots of January 6th's terrible events? Where were the seeds planted? How can we identify those moments in the future?
- How might the events of January 6th have been stopped before they occurred? Who had the power to stop them? What tactics might they have used?
- What role does social media have to play in the terrible divisions in our nation today?
- What specific actions can each of us take to rebuild the civic foundations of our society?

For tools for talking to your family and friends about these issues, AJC recommends:

- The documentary "The Social Dilemma," available for streaming on Netflix. This very important documentary unpacks in terrifying detail how social media purposefully creates tools that sow division and misinformation in our society. Watch the trailer [here](#).
- [This](#) Op Ed piece by Jason Isaacson, AJC's Chief Policy and Political Affairs Officer.
- The book [Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times](#) by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory. You can also watch [this](#) video interview with Rabbi Sacks about the book.

It is my prayer, that we can heal the divide in our country, with real listening, one person, one conversation at a time. May we remember that at Sinai we were given commandments, not rights. May we understand that we cannot be a Jew by self nor an American by self, and that we are members of the world community and we share the gift of living on this planet. May God grant us and inspire within us healing, courage, resilience, and hope.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Lisa Bock

¹ https://www.ajc.org/news/shabbat-parshat-shmot-ajc-shabbat-table?ms=EL_EML_20210108_Dispatch-01.08.2021&utm_campaign=Dispatch&utm_source=LuminateEmail&utm_medium=Email&utm_content=Dispatch-01.08.2021-11