

Rabbi Fox's Message for Temple Beth Shalom's  
Nisan/Iyar 5770 (April 2010) Newsletter

From Narrow Places to Open Spaces

Lord Thomas Dewar, a 19th-century Scottish conservative politician and Scotch whiskey maker, cultivated sayings that he felt led one to a successful life. One of his most well-known sayings is a call to the natural adventure of the human spirit: "Minds are like parachutes, they only function when open," he observed.

While a bit of a cliché, Dewar's words have behind them an essence of responsibility. We have been given something of value – our ability to reason – and when we do not utilize that reason, we do no justice to such a special gift. You see, with that gift comes responsibility.

And so it is with the message of Passover. We honor God's gift of redemption not by wasting it or ignoring it but instead we honor the gift of freedom and Peoplehood with what accompanies it: An obligation to one another.

We have spent a year, decades, even a century and more, debating the merits of caring for each other in our adopted nation. And last month we witnessed, for better or worse, an attempt to put into practice that lesson of reflecting God's redemptive power of healing. In this debate, what has been lost on most people, by my reckoning, is the ability to reason; the Godly gift of being able to measure with honesty the choices before us. Whether spitting words or bullets, whether throwing bricks or accusations, our holy texts tell us that God is diminished when we remain silent in the face of harm experienced by our fellow. The Torah places before us both the obligation to love each other just as it does to rebuke each other, but nowhere does it speak of removing the blessings of God from well-meaning and loving people.

Even when frightened or angry, we must follow the classic methodology that the wise among us have employed: 'An ounce of encouragement is worth more than a pound of criticism.'

As someone who has suffered and nearly died because of the excesses of our present health insurance system, and as a man of God who has faith in the message that pervades the Torah and every Jewish holy text, namely that we are raised up in holiness by the very act of reaching out to heal one another, you might easily guess where I stand on this issue. And yet, for the purposes of this topic, that is far less relevant than what is most important for you to hear from your Rabbi: We must justify our freedom. We must meet the obligation that is mated to our liberty and honor God's honoring us through the freedom our ancestors. All this we must do if we are to reflect God in the lives we lead day in and day out. Simply put: Doing so – cultivating a holy life – does not and cannot possibly include causeless hatred, *sinnat chinam*.

Let us leave behind our nation's narrow places, our American *mitzrayim* (Egypt – literally, "narrow places"), and live our lives in dedication to God's love and to "holy living." Let us remember that those of us with voices are obligated to speak out, to act, to empathize (the *Hagaddah* and the Torah say "remember"), so that all of us are closer to "whole-ness."

It is our devotion to redemption – reflecting the love God showed our ancestors by showing that same love to others – that will bring us from our narrow places and lead us to rejoice in the blessings that we have been granted. We must do this so that, when asked for what we stand as Jews (especially during the holiday of Passover), we may answer without reservation: "We believe that we must follow God's example in helping our fellow from narrow places to

open spaces.” It is that that will lead us to listen and to love one other this year and every year.

May you and your family experience a truly meaningful *Pesach* and may you find freedom from all of your narrow places.

My wife, Sarah, and I wish you “*Ah zissen und ah kasher Pesach*” – a sweet and kosher Passover!

Rabbi Gerald Fox

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