

A THEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

RABBI MORDECHAI LIEBLING

Jewish children are taught the following story about the biblical Abraham (whose name as a child was Abram):

Abram's father Terah manufactured idols. One day he left Abram to mind the store while he departed. A woman came with a plateful of flour and asked Abram to offer it to the idols. He then took a stick, broke the idols, and put the stick in the largest idol's hand. When Terah returned, he demanded that Abram explain what happened. He told his father that the idols fought among themselves and the largest broke the others with the stick. "Why do you make sport of me?" Terah cried, "Do they have any knowledge?" Abram replied, "Listen to what you are saying!"

From the outset we are taught that you stand up for truth, question authority and if possible expose the absurdity of prevailing ideas -- the seeds of a Theology of Resistance. We are implicitly taught that it is communicated through stories.

Such a theology needs to be based in love and awaken us to the pain, suffering and oppression that exists; force us to look at unexamined assumptions and to actively imagine the future we want; and then, helps guide actions that are effective in both securing it and in harmony with the desired outcome. The articulation of the beliefs and the values that this theology rests on will differ among people and faith traditions. I approach this as a Reconstructionist rabbi, a son of East European Holocaust survivors, a father and a white man.

In this past year there were two issues that I spoke about repeatedly and risked arrest for: Black Lives Matter and defending the Earth from global warming. In my theology, and in reality, they are connected. As I write this on the eve of the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, I think the linkage is clear.

We are, also, approaching the Jewish High Holidays when we celebrate the birthday of the world, on Rosh Hashanah, and ten days later, on Yom Kippur, reflect on how our actions over the past year measure up against our values. Our Creation story teaches that the Earth in and of itself is good, that it does not belong to humans, but to the Life of the Universe and that we are all, each one of us, manifestations of the Divine.

I want to be clear that my theology is not grounded in a conscious, willful, omnipotent or omniscient God. I believe in a Divinity, that I worship as the One, the Great Mystery, Great Spirit, Life Force of the Universe, the Inner Force of All Being or YAH - The Breath of Life. I understand God as the connective tissue of the universe. A One whose Transcendence is seen in the depth of Immanence, that can be seen in both the particular and the universal, that is revealed in the continuing wonder of evolution, a One whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is panentheism (not pantheism) -- forms of which are shared by Reconstructionist Jews, many Indigenous Peoples, Buddhists and Hindus.

On Rosh Hashanah we begin with gratitude for the birth of the world, giving thanks for the beauty that is the Earth and expressing our awe and amazement of being alive. My theology of resistance begins with gratitude and calls me to open up to the Awe of what is -- this practice helps nurture the love and strength that the long struggle requires.

The Creation myth teaches the bedrock principle of Judaism: each person is created in the Divine image -- sacred, holy and imbued with dignity. Further we learn that a human cannot live alone, we only exist in relationship to another. Not only are we social beings dependent on each other, our existence depends on our relationships to the world around us. This is so aptly expressed in a core teaching of Native People (As the Native People say of the world), "All my relations."

In this theology my life is no more valuable or important than anyone else's life. This is a direct contradiction to the society we live in which is based on domination rationalized by declaring one group less human, less important, less Divine than another. The first Europeans who came to America declared the Native People as savages, less than human and sanctioned killing them in the name of Christianity and civilization. America was born out of the sin of genocide -- that for Native Peoples in America is ongoing. From there it was but a step to put African slaves in the same category and commence the Holocaust of the Middle Passage.

African people were treated as "bodies" -- not as human beings, and, racism was burned into the soul of the United States. Slavery was a system that could only be maintained by extreme violence and that has left a legacy that leads directly to the way the law enforcement system treats Black people in America today. That is why it is so important to declare that Black Lives Matter.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the most important Jewish theologians of the 20th Century, he wrote the following:

"Racism is worse than idolatry. Racism is Satanism, unmitigated evil. Few of us seem to realize how insidious, how radical, how universal an evil racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to man, the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason, the maximum of cruelty for a minimum of thinking."

Until our country, the United States, acknowledges and comes to terms with how it was built on genocide and racism it will not be a healthy society, there will be no true freedom. A Theology of Resistance acknowledges the need, possibility and value of honest repentance.

A Theology of Resistance requires us to always take responsibility. The teaching is transmitted through the story of "Eating From the Tree of Knowledge", when God says to Adam after he ate of the fruit, "Ayeka? Where are You?"

"Ayeka -- Where are you?" is the central call of a Theology of Resistance. Each of us has the possibility of encountering the Divine when we take responsibility in any situation to affirm the essential Unity and connectedness of life. That begins with looking at the truth of what is in each moment. We are called to radically examine how and where we are complicit with systems that harm the well being of any person or of the Earth itself -- actions that lead us into objectifying the other. Racism tears at the connective tissue of the universe, it violates the Divine. Just as disrespect and degradation of the Earth similarly tears at that same connective tissue

Ayeka -- Where are you in this system?

On Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar we recite a Martyrology Service, "Eleh Ezkerah -- These I Remember." In it we recount historical acts of voluntary martyrdom by

ten Talmudic Sages in Roman times. This is known as dying Kiddush Hashem -- for the sake of sanctifying God's name; voluntarily giving up one's life rather than committing a serious transgression. These Ten Sages refused to abandon the Torah and were tortured to death. We have been chanting a poem commemorating their heroism for nearly 2,000 years; and since the time of the Crusades they have served as a model for contemporary martyrs.

The Talmud recounts the death of Rabbi Akiba, the most famous of the martyrs:

...When Rabbi Akiba was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the Shema (the prayer pronouncing the Oneness of God) and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he directed his mind to accepting upon himself the sovereignty of heaven with love. His disciples cried out to him: "Our teacher, even to this point?" He said to them: "All my days I have been troubled by this verse, And you must love the One your God with all your soul, (which I interpret) 'even if God takes your soul.' Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it?" He prolonged the word ehad (One) until he expired while saying it. Talmud Berahot 61b

Our liturgy on Yom Kippur goes on to recount tales of martyrdom through the ages up through the Holocaust. One who was not killed, but constantly risked his life teaching Torah in a concentration camp was Leo Baeck. He later wrote:

The respect we owe to our neighbor is not an isolated commandment, but represents the whole content of morality, the quintessence of our duty.... Our relationship to others is thereby lifted out of the sphere of good will, affection or even love; it is exalted into the sphere of the established relationship with God, which is common and equal to all and therefore unites us all. Each person has an unconditional claim on us.... What we owe to another and what we do for that person is not based on the uncertain foundation of good will, or on any transitory emotional impulse, but on the positive and social commandment of justice, solely because every person is a human being."

I will repeat the last phrase, "...solely because every person is a human being." This requires me to stand against oppression to maintain my relationship to the Divine despite risks.

Jewish mysticism teaches that we are always living in four worlds simultaneously: the Physical, Emotional, Intellectual and Spiritual. Oppression exists in each, as does resistance. The stories of great rabbis like Akiba and Baeck show resistance in all four. But, what of ordinary folk?

As a child I listened to personal stories by my parents and their friends, all recent immigrants and all Holocaust survivors. Two stand out for me.

Genya at fifteen was in Auschwitz. For weeks she and a few of her friends saved breadcrumbs from their starvation diet to make a birthday 'cake' for another friend.

My parents, not yet married, were in a Nazi labor camp in Poland. Most of the town's Jews had already been murdered. One morning the Kommandant lined everyone up and then directed some men, whose labor was still valuable to step out, my father was among them. It became clear that everyone else was about to be killed, including my future mother -- his girlfriend. Risking his life, he walked over to the Kommandant, pointed to her and asked if his wife could step out. He replied, "That was a quick marriage," but indicated that she could step out. Everyone else was killed. That night the 'newlyweds' escaped.

Rabbis Akiba and Baeck acted out of their love for God; my father and Genya acted out of love for others. Love is at the heart of my Theology of Resistance.

As in the opening story about Abraham, we must resist the idolatry in our culture. Today among our many idols are power, money, technology, materialism and fame. We live in a culture that narcotizes us into a dream of pursuing illusions of happiness. Everyone is susceptible but keeping people poor and uneducated makes them even more so. It is, also, a culture that instills racism and other oppressions, valorizes violence, champions individualism, promotes fear and constantly tells us we are not good enough. A Theology of Resistance challenges the prevalent culture by affirming life and the inherent worth of each person.

One important tool of resistance in the Jewish tradition is observing the Sabbath, or as we say Shabbat. This, too, is rooted in the Creation myth; to be in harmony every person and every work animal needs to rest regularly. This is in part to give us a taste of the society we want create. Some aspects of traditional observance are: not working, not using money in any way, and, disengagement from regular weekday activities. Unplugging from mainstream culture one day in seven -- to gather with friends and family, to relax, to reflect, to pray or to study. In our age of induced consumerism, 24/7 work availability, and constant screen time these are radical acts of resistance.

The story at the very core of Judaism is about resistance, one that has sustained us for 3,000 years and served as a beacon for African- American slaves as well, is the myth of the Exodus. We celebrate it daily in our prayers and annually during Passover. The first act of resistance is by the two midwives, Shifra and Puah, who refuse to obey Pharaoh's orders to kill all Jewish male babies. Women initiate the beginning of civil disobedience.

The next act of resistance is violent -- Moses rises up in anger and kills an Egyptian overseer. He has to run away. Individual, impulsive acts of violence don't work. He then goes off for a long period of reflection resulting in his revelation. We, also, need to affirm times of reflection and meditation as acts of resistance to the dominator culture.

I won't recount the rest, but point out that in the central tenets and liturgy of the Jewish people God is continually described as "...who brought you forth from the Land of Egypt, from the house of bondage." It follows that from this point on Resistance or Liberation is the proof text of the validity of theology. If your belief in God does not lead you to acts of freedom and resistance, then God is not active in your life.

What is revealed to Moses in the desert is that another way is possible. God becomes the possibility of changing what is to what ought to be. We no longer have to accept oppression; God is defined as the life force that is the source of the strength, the love, the wisdom, and the spirit of our resistance to oppression and commitment to progress.

I understand progress as the simultaneous development of greater individual freedom and creativity with a greater identification with increasingly larger entities -- from family, to social group, to nation, to the world, to all living beings and the living earth itself. Our theology needs to hold out for us a vision of what we are moving towards.

The holy days that I cited above are all celebrated communally. The prayers and stories are recited with others. Changing systems of oppression requires communal effort and individual courage. That courage is bolstered by our accountability and responsibility to our sisters and brothers in struggle and fueled by love.

Among us there is a diversity of beliefs. A new Theology of Resistance needs to be able to accept and affirm that we all do not need to have the same theology. We will have a multi-vocal Theology of Resistance that is judged by the effectiveness and harmony of our acting together. As my late teacher Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi taught,

“The only way we will get it together is together.”

Rabbi Mordechai Liebling is the Director of the Social Justice Organizing Program at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, PA and is active in POWER the PICO affiliate in Philadelphia.