

Mishpatim 5775: Unleashing Blood's Life Force

- Blood, *dam*, is wrought with paradox. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, "Blood doubly unites us, for we share the same blood and we have spilled blood."
- Blood also gushes forth in paradox in the book of Exodus. It begins as a symbol and vehicle of death and becomes a symbol and vehicle of life.
- First, blood suffocates the life force of the water of the Nile during the first plague on Egypt. Then, nine plagues later, during the plague of the first born, the Israelites place blood on their doorposts, embracing blood's own life force in an Egypt soaked with the blood of death and oppression.
- With this swab of blood, the Israelites state that they want to live, despite it all, and affirm the God who passes over, as their chariot to life.
- God needs the Israelites' blood as a public pledge of loyalty, at the bare minimum, in order to save them. They give God some of their life force in order to benefit from God's.
- In Egypt, blood flows from death to life.
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- Further on in Exodus, at the beginning of Mishpatim, the blood flow turns back toward death, but finds great resistance in the emerging, life-affirming Toraitic tradition.
- The first law given after the 10 commandments seeks to remedy a situation where the flow of blood would lead back to slavery in Egypt, turn back the clocks on the Exodus, and fly directly in the face of the ethical monotheistic legal framework introduced by the 10 commandments.

- The situation is this. An indentured servant has the choice to go free, to emerge from the shackles of his master, just once - in the 7th year. Logically, he should celebrate the possibilities of creation and rebirth on the Shabbat year of his servitude. But he instead rejects them and chooses to remain indentured to his human master, a fateful and permanent choice loathed by the Torah and the commentators and totally contrary to the spirit and flow of the Israelite saga.
- To highlight his contrary choice, and to possibly change his mind, according to the rabbis, the community shames the servant at the very location where the Israelites first declare their desire for life, at the doorpost, the mezuzah. They bore an awl through his ear into the doorpost, draining the creative lifeblood of God, Torah and freedom, making a mockery of the meaning of mezuzah, and marking his permanent servitude to a human master.
- The servant gets pierced in the ear, because, according to the rabbis, he does not heed the message, reinforced at Sinai, that God is the sole master of life.
- The rest of B'nai Yisrael, as we see at the end of the parasha, heed the message, and affirm it by proclaiming, *Kol asher deeber Adonai na'aseh v'nishma*, "All that God has spoken we will faithfully do." Moses responds by sprinkling them with the blood of a sacrifice, called *dam habrit*, "the blood of the covenant," redeeming blood in our parasha as a source for life.
- Blood flows in parashat Mishpatim. The soaking blood of death, oppression, and finality threatens as it did in Egypt, and the tradition fights it equally as hard as it did in Egypt.
- What's the message for us in this struggle over blood?

- Blood is a potent and visual symbol, which treads on the border between life and death. It takes courage, tenacity and imagination for us to resist the fright it engenders, the specter of death it evokes, the way it stops us in our tracks, and to instead embrace its properties as a force for life.
- The stakes are high when the Israelites put blood on their doorposts. This is their only chance for freedom. The stakes are high when they affirm their commitment to the covenant and are dashed with its blood. This is their only chance to be the covenanted people. And the stakes are high when the servant decides to stay with his master and compromises both the people's freedom and the covenant, dripping away their blood.
- Likewise, the stakes are high when we are on the edge. We need to make the right choices, with the confidence of our freedom, the backing of our covenant, and the strength of our character, because the opportunities may not come forward again to emerge more fully into life. It's easier than we think to become permanently enslaved to our life's condition, to the masters that oppress us, that we don't seize the brief opportunities for life-affirming change. We give in to the pull of complacency, inertia, and, in the worst-case scenario, addiction to how things are.
- Thankfully, the Jewish community does not leave us to make these choices alone at these liminal moments. There is support, and money available, to help us make positive life-affirming choices when we are on the edge. Hebrew Free Loan is one of those organizations, whose origin we can trace all the way back to this parasha and the ethic of lending at no interest.

- Hebrew Free Loan was there for the Jews of Oak Park, Huntington Woods, and Royal Oak, streamlining its procedures to help hundreds of families remediate their homes after the floods of last summer. Hebrew Free Loan is there providing loans to students to make college more affordable – and less debt-encumbered. Hebrew Free Loan is there to help Jews pick themselves up by their bootstraps to start and expand small businesses.
- Hebrew Free Loan is also there to help for complex dental and medical care, to help women get out of domestic violence situations, to send kids to camp, for adoptions, in-vitro fertilizations, for academic programs overseas, for help with living expenses, to purchase used cars and enable auto repairs, and to support modest Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations and weddings. Hebrew Free Loan's William Davidson Jewish College Loan Program provides significant, interest-free loan dollars that are renewable each year to Jewish college and graduate students across Michigan. HFL's Marvin I. Danto Small Business Loan Program can provide up to a \$100,000 interest-free loan for a 51% Jewish owned business in Michigan.
- Reading from the material Cheryl Berlin, a staff person at Hebrew Free Loan, provided me, "At Hebrew Free Loan, every person is met with understanding, respect, dignity, confidentiality and the agency's sincere desire to help fellow Jews in times of need."
- Hebrew Free Loan advertises well in this area – which is not always the case with its sister organizations in other cities – but it does require people to step up and seek out its services.
- I encourage you to find out more about Hebrew Free Loan, to utilize its services when/if you're on the edge, and to publicize its mission and activities

to others in the area. For more information, talk to Cheryl Berlin or to Michael Graub, an executive board member of Hebrew Free Loan.

- It's our responsibility, both as a community and individually, to continue to redeem our blood for its positive life force and to be propelled by it to grow at the liminal moments of our lives.