

Vaera 5775: When Our, and French Jews', Needs Cannot Be Met

by Rabbi Mark Robbins, B'nai Israel Synagogue

Throughout our lives, we find ourselves with needs that can't be met where we are, in the situation that we're in. We try our best to fill the needs, we speak the language of trying, but circumstances just don't fully allow our needs to be met.

For example, no matter how much we run outside to absorb the fleeting moments of sunlight in Michigan in the winter-time, we can't get the sufficient vitamin D sunlight that we need health-wise. We try to supplement - sitting under artificial lights, taking trips down South -- but it's just not enough.

Likewise, in Modi'in, Israel, as I remembered during my visit there last week, as in so many other places throughout the State of Israel, we can't find a daily egalitarian minyan. We daven alone, maybe have a special Rosh Chodesh minyan, continue to impress upon our community the need for daily minyan, but we ultimately have to wait until Shabbat to meet our davening needs.

In our parasha, the downtrodden Israelites also have a need that can't be met in their current circumstance -- convening and covenanting with God. They are not free to relate to their God as they need -- and to gain the strength of purpose that comes with -- while enslaved in the land of Egypt. And they cannot ultimately fight for their own physical freedom without the foundation of relationship with God. God will have to do it for them.

Moses and Aaron are keyed in to the Israelites' dilemma. The Israelite leaders do not say, in their repeated entreaties to Pharaoh, **שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי**, "Let my people go." Directed in chapter 7 by God, who's clearly eager for a covenanted relationship with the Israelites, Moses and Aaron say instead to Pharaoh, **שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי** -- to worship God, to sacrifice to God, a few day's journey from Egypt. Moses and Aaron make not a plea for pure liberation from slavery. Besides being politically astute -- for what ruler is going to respond affirmatively to such a plea? -- their actual plea goes to the heart of the matter, that the real key to freedom is relationship with God, without which physical emancipation would soon be a hollow victory. Moses and Aaron make small practical demands on Pharaoh while pointing the Israelite narrative toward real freedom.

If Pharaoh had let the Israelites go to worship God, he might have unwittingly empowered the Israelites to be part of the physical liberation process themselves, together with God -- and to get a headstart on the covenanted relationship later marked at Sinai.

But, ultimately, the Israelites cannot meet their need of convening and covenanting with God in Egypt, no matter the efforts of their leaders.

Turning attention to the events of the day, I believe that involved French Jews have come to their Dreyfuss moment of the 21st century -- when they're realizing that their needs cannot be met in France, without either assimilating deep into the woodwork of French society or alternately living in a fortress -- now guarded by upwards of 5000 French troops -- which still cannot guarantee their security.

Episodes over the past decade have built up a scary narrative of anti-Semitic violence for French Jews, as the Wall Street Journal documented two days ago. 2006 - a Jewish salesman is kidnapped and burned to death for being Jewish. 2012 -- an Islamist gunman kills a rabbi and three children at a Jewish school in Toulouse. 2014 -- pro-Palestinian demonstrators burn down several Jewish-owned businesses. 2015 -- the massacre at the kosher supermarket.

The statistics concerning anti-Semitism in France show a 5-fold increase in anti-Semitic incidents in France between 1999 and 2013. Moreover, in 2013, 40% of the racist violence in France targeted Jews, who represent just under 1% of the French population.

The violence taps particularly deeply into the historical memory of the 300+ thousand French Jews of North African descent, who fled increased anti-Semitism in North Africa after the birth of the State of Israel and during the national liberation movements in North Africa in the 50's and 60's. The violence also taps deeply into the memory of French Jews with long roots in the country, who remember French collaboration with the Nazis -- and are skeptical today about France's commitment to stymie home-grown Islamic extremism, despite France's leadership in Europe in counter-terror.

This all being said, things are not crystal clear for French Jews -- far from it. Many feel committed to the French Republic and its values of liberty, fraternity and equality. Others don't want to abandon what they believe, according to US Special Envoy on Anti-Semitism Ira Forman, to be the "front lines" of the West's war for human rights and free religious expression against Islamism. They are heartened by the demonstration of an estimated 4 million people in the streets of Paris, some carrying banners and wearing shirts proclaiming, "Je suis Juif/I am Jewish." At the same time, they are beckoned by Prime Minister Netanyahu, extending Israel's arm to French Jews, and declaring that Israel is home for French Jews.

Jews in France are faced with many questions Do we stay or do we go? Do we

have a place in this country? If so, at what cost? Do we want to send our kids to Jewish schools to be targets for further attacks? Do we want to live, always protected in our every religious and cultural move, by soldiers? Is that freedom? If we stay, will there be funds to support what may be seen as a dying Jewish community? Does our departure give a victory to the terrorists? What's our responsibility to France and to civil society in France? Is Israel ready for us?

If I were a French Jew, I would go. According to Forman, there is not a French Jew who has not considered emigration. It's all well and good to stand on principle, until another terrorist attack occurs. French Jews need their lives first, and the ability to practice their tradition openly and safely a close second. And neither need can now be guaranteed in France -- no matter the wishes and dreams of most of French Jewry.

Tellingly, just minutes before his death in the kosher supermarket, Yoav Hattab, z"l, exchanged the following text with his close friend:

Yoav: "Try to observe Shabbat as soon as you arrive."

Friend: "This shabbat is stressful, I have exams tomorrow morning and I'm flying, but next Shabbat for sure."

Yoav: "These are difficult times in France for the Jews. So, at least try."

It's hard for me to imagine French Jews now being truly free, and safe, to observe Shabbat in their country. It may be time for them to go.

The implications for us as American Jews and our security situation -- that's a topic which I promise to address in an upcoming week.