

Shabbat Juneteenth 2020

Shabbat Shalom and a joyous Juneteenth to you all!

A little history on the holiday:

even though President Lincoln issued

the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, with
an effective date of January 1, 1863;

and even though General Lee surrendered on April 6th 1865;

word of Emancipation didn't reach Texas for
another two months after that.

On June 18th, 1865,

Union Army General Gordon Granger arrived
at Galveston Island with 2,000 federal troops to
occupy Texas on behalf of the federal government.

The following day,

standing on the balcony of Galveston's Ashton Villa,

Granger read aloud the contents of "General Order No. 3" announcing the total emancipation of those held as slaves. Formerly enslaved people in Galveston rejoiced in the streets after the announcement.

The following year, freed people in Texas organized the first of what became the annual celebration of "Jubilee Day" on June 19th.

From the National Museum of African American History and Culture:

Juneteenth marks our country's second independence day.

Though it has long been celebrated among the African American community,

it is a history that has been marginalized and still remains largely unknown to the wider public.

The legacy of Juneteenth shows the value of deep hope and urgent organizing in uncertain times.

D'var

This week's Torah portion, Shlach, details the well-known story of Moses' sending spies up from the wilderness of Paran to scout out the promised land of Canaan.

12 in total, one from every tribe,

Moses instructs them to scout out the conditions and qualities of the land and its people.

After 40 days the spies return and report back that, while the land is indeed flowing with milk and honey, it is also inhabited by giants.

So big that they must have seemed like grasshoppers to them.

Only two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, recommend

that the people go up to Canaan.

Thus, calamity breaks out in the camp and

a familiar pattern emerges:

the Israelites Kvetch;

God threatens to wipe them out with a pestilence;

and Moses is forced to intervene on their behalf.

Moses petitions God in much the same way

we do on Yom Kippur:

Adonai El Rachum v'chanun

Erech Apayim v'rav chesed

nosei Avon v'feisha v'nakei

Adonai! slow to anger and abounding in kindness;

forgiving iniquity and transgression;

But Moses doesn't stop there, instead adding:

yet not remitting all punishment,

but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children,
upon the third and fourth generations.'

While this sentiment doesn't initially jive with
the forgiving image we depict God in on Yom Kippur,
we shouldn't neglect the sentiment.

It expresses that we are not automatically absolved from the
sins of the generations who preceded us.

T'shuavah must be made in order for the debt to be paid.

This is really not fatalistic,
even though the Israelites from this week's Torah portion won't
get to see the promised land due to their lack of faith –
their descendants' repentance enables
the next generation to conquer it.

Over the past month, millions of Americans (myself included) and people all over the world have taken to social media and to the streets to protest a virus. Not COVID-19, but a virus that has infected this country since before the Revolutionary War.

The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony Mcdade, and countless others serve as testament to the fact that the virus of racism, the plague of bigotry, remain endemic to the very core of our country and pervasive in many of its institutions.

Even though the Jim Crow laws of old have been repealed, the New Jim Crow of Mass Incarceration rages on.

But the sins of past generations need not continue to be revisited upon us.

We can be like Caleb and Joshua and
stand up for what we know is right;
in full knowledge of the fact that,
even though the way to the promised land is anything but easy,
it is exceedingly worth it.

May we keep the words of Emma Lazarus at the forefront of
our minds: “None of us is free until we are all free.” Our
liberation and the liberation of all humanity is tied up in the
liberation of our Black siblings. As Eric Foner put it

Most white Americans believe that freedom
is something they possess and that some
outside force is trying to take away.

Most African Americans view freedom

not as a possession to be defended,
but as a goal to be achieved.

We cannot look away because we might be comfortable; we must join hands and march towards this goal called freedom.

One step at a time.