

Hannah Goldstein  
Parshat Bo  
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## On the Eve of Liberation

### *Background:*

I want to begin tonight with a short explanation of the ongoing conversation about the Women's March and how Temple Sinai came to the decision to participate. In 2017, hundreds of us; Temple Sinai members and friends made our way down to the mall for a prayer breakfast sponsored by the Religious Action Center, followed by the march. During the past few years there have been concerns about the march leaders. In particular, Tamika Mallory and Linda Sarsour, and their relationship with Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam and an unrepentant anti-Semite. Recently, articles in the online Jewish publication, Tablet as well as the New York Times have suggested that there were other anti-Semitic incidents involving the leaders of the march. I offer this as background for those of you who may not be facebook friends with a thousand rabbis who share the daily think pieces and articles following this unfolding story.

At Temple Sinai, we knew this year's march was different, so we gathered a group of women who had been "bus captains" for the march in 2017, and who had supported Sinai's effort in bringing people down to march. We asked participants to read a few articles before the meeting, and when we were together, we talked about how to proceed. It was not a straightforward decision, but after a thoughtful conversation, the majority of those in the room decided to recommend to the board that Temple Sinai participate in the March. They prepared a written statement citing these 3 central reasons:

1. We believe unity of purpose is critical to the long-term success of the women-led movement for equality and justice that the Women's March has helped harness. The March calls for an end to domestic inequality and injustice, a cause in which we, as a congregation, are deeply involved.
2. We believe the movement is greater than any individual, including the leaders of the Women's March organization, or any single issue. Thus, the Women's March Unity Principles were only one, not the sole, factor on which we based our decision.

3. We hope that, by actively participating in this movement, we can ensure those who share our values continue to have a seat at the table and can help shape the programming and platform of the Women's March into the future.

This group expressed their concerns about the absence of an explicit mention of Jewish women, and anti-Semitism in the march's principles. The unity principles have since been amended to include Jewish women. At the next Temple Sinai board meeting, the board discussed the recommendation. There were questions, and certainly not unanimity, but the majority of the board supported a resolution in favor of Sinai's participation in this year's Women's March. We have posted a registration page for our congregants to sign up to march with Temple Sinai on Saturday, January 19th. We will have a bus that brings us down to meet up with other Jews, and then we will march.

*Sermon:*

This week, we read Parashat Bo, set on the eve of the Israelite's liberation from Egypt. We read about the final plagues, and we know that change is afoot. Moses tells the people about the ritual of Passover. Before they even set out from Egypt, Moses imagines how they will narrate the tale of their liberation, how they will tell this story to their children and grandchildren. Moses imagines that in time, a child will see the rituals of Passover and ask "What does this mean?" And we are meant to respond to this question with the story of moving from a place of oppression to a place of liberation.<sup>1</sup> In Parashat Bo, it hasn't quite happened yet...but it's coming...and already we are imagining how we will explain it to future generations.

Every generation has a story to tell. What will we tell our children about this moment in history? What will be the legacy of this era?

On the morning of the Women's March in 2017, buses stretched down Military Road. We did not yet know what would greet us when we arrived at the march. What we found were hundreds of thousands of people who felt called to board trains and planes and overnight buses to flood the streets of Washington, as well as cities around the world. What was the meaning of this ritual? What was this march about? It's hard to say- I couldn't hear the speeches. What we learned after that long, exhausting, exhilarating day, was that it was likely the largest single-day

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Exodus Ch 13:14

protest in American history. If you asked participants what it was about, you would likely get responses as diverse as the signs they carried. Sure, it was a response to the election, but why did we take to the streets? It was a nation-wide primal scream, initiated by women. And, there was a lot to scream about.

It was an historic moment that one day we will recall to our children, and grandchildren. But what did it mean? What will it become? A passing moment, or a movement on the eve of a new wave of liberation?

In the two years that have passed since the Women's March on Washington, there continues to be much to scream about. The hate, the divisiveness, the overt racism and misogyny that emerged during the lead up to the 2016 election have not abated. If anything, we have seen what is born of this hate: thousands of migrant children remain in detention centers at the border, dangerous pesticides poison our air and water at alarming rates, the erosion of protections for women and girls, for sexual assault survivors, for the vulnerable among us.

Two year later, I am still angry. If anything, I am more angry than I was 2 years ago. And while this anger can feel overwhelming and it can be exhausting, it can also change the world.

In Rebecca Traister's book "Good and Mad" she traces the history of angry women. She suggests that some of the most significant moments of social change were born of women's anger. And, for this reason, women's anger is quite frightening. In order to keep our existing power structures in place, we have learned to be suspicious of women's anger. She explains, "We are primed to hear the anger of men as stirring, downright American, as our national lullaby, and primed to hear the sound of women demanding freedom as the screech of nails down our national chalkboard. That's because women's freedom would in fact circumscribe white male dominion."<sup>2</sup> While men's anger is celebrated, it is righteous, it is heroic, it is powerful, women's anger is hysterical, it is shrill, it is unhinged. And it threatens the status quo, a status quo that serves those with power and privilege quite well. But if we are angry, together, might we find ourselves standing on the eve of liberation?

I am angry because I am an American, and I am also very angry because I am a women. When we marched two years ago, we had not yet learned the stories of Bill O'Reilly, Matt Lauer, and Harvey Weinstein. Perhaps even more importantly, we had not yet learned the stories that came pouring forth when the firehose was opened by the #metoo movement. Mostly women, but

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<sup>2</sup> "Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger." Rebecca Traister. p 43.

men too, shared their stories of sexual harassment and sexual violence. On social media, and around dinner tables, we learned the never-before-told stories of what our friends and our loved ones had experienced; the dark secrets, the shame, the repercussions- though they were the innocent ones. We learned that for many women, the workplace continues to be a minefield.

Since that first march, Christine Blasey Ford sat before the Senate Judiciary Committee and the eyes of the American people. Nervous but controlled, she shared her story while we watched in our living rooms, or at our desks, or on our phones. Seeing something familiar, perhaps in her story, but also in her white knuckled attempt to control her fear, her pain, so as not to be perceived as weak, or pathetic, or hysterical.

And, that anger continues everyday in a world where men get paid more, where in many industries, they continue to make the rules, to pick the content, to choose the best ideas. We live in a world where angry women become memes, and are called “unlikable.” Perhaps you are uncomfortable right now, because I am angry, and we have learned to be uncomfortable around angry women.

Yes, I am still angry. But it is a wonderful time to be angry, because at this moment in our history, women’s anger is being celebrated, it’s even being commercialized! There are so many sassy t-shirts and cool tote bags to buy.

Author Rebecca Traister reminds us that many white women, particularly of a younger generation, are new to this anger. People of color, who have been systematically discriminated against since our country’s founding, are not new to anger. For women of color, there is nothing exciting or novel in the desire to resist and persist, and to challenge the status quo. So it makes sense that there is tension here, that those whose anger is deep, seasoned, and not at all new might ask the question, “Where have you been all these years?”

Suddenly we find ourselves, this diverse group of women trying to figure out what to do with this anger. With this large, messy coalition of angry people who haven’t ever really been angry at the same time before or expressed common sources of anger.

And, in reality, our anger is NOT all the same. For many white women, the anger derives from living in a world rife with sexism, experiencing decades of mistreatment. But, white women can be simultaneously oppressed and complicit in upholding a white male dominated power structure that sometimes serves white women as well. Because white women are often close to white men, white men serve as professional mentors, champions at work, husbands and

fathers at home. The term intersectionality was created to describe the double dose of oppression that women of color face in the workplace, because they were born women and people of color at the same time.

When Tamika Mallory is quoted in the New York Times, speaking about how white Jews uphold white supremacy while simultaneously being targeted by it, it's understandable that many white Jews were taken aback. White supremacists are not known for their love of the Jews. In a world where we nurse fresh wounds from the Pittsburgh shooting, can white Jews be part of the problem of white supremacy? The answer is yes. Anti-semitism is painfully real, and so is white supremacy. White supremacy is the belief that white people should dominate society, a belief that has been deeply woven into the fabric of our nation, and all white people are a part of it, even if we didn't do the weaving.

We are angry about a lot of things and sometimes, we are angry at each other. Yet, I believe in us, we can contain multitudes. But, we have to face some complicated truths: White Jews can be victims of anti-Semitism, white Jews can and are targeted by white supremacists. White Jews can also benefit from a system that bestows upon us unearned privilege. Some Jews perpetuate and participate in racism. And our Jewish community is large, and diverse, and multiracial so all of this complexity is ours to hold.

These tensions are not going anywhere. They are about more than the leaders of the march, they stem from how hard it is for us to be in relationship across difference. And of course this movement, powered by anger, is disconnected, disjointed, disorganized- moving in fits and starts. It's the newborn, making its way. It's the pain of new life coming into the world, a new beginning.

I'm hanging on because I believe that if we stick it out, if we keep pushing to be in relationship, even if we never have been before, then we can change the world. Women in America couldn't vote, but now we can. Women couldn't be doctors, lawyers, we couldn't have children and then return to work. We couldn't wear pants. Couldn't take out loans, or buy homes. And now we can, because change happens, but only if we engage in the struggle.

I stand here in front of the ark that contains the holiest writings in our tradition, brought to us by Moses, telling the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob- also known as- the Patriarchs. The earliest fans of the patriarchy. Our tradition, like so much of the world, centered men and men's leadership and men's stories. But, courageous women forged a place, told the untold

stories, and demanded a seat at the table. They fought for me, and they didn't even know me. They pushed and fought and struggled so that I could do what I love. Just 45 years ago the first Reform woman was ordained. A blink of an eye in the course of history.

I know I said that tonight I would talk about the Women's March- and for me- all of this is about the Women's March. And also, it isn't. For me, the march was never about the leaders, and this year is no different. I have been disappointed by their leadership, I wish they had worked harder to make this march a comfortable home for more women. I understand why many smart, thoughtful, engaged women have decided to opt out this year. Or that they feel that the march has lost its way. And, I also believe that the millions of women who took to the streets two years ago had almost nothing to do with the leaders. I still believe that we must build bridges, and have those hard conversations, rather than close our eyes and our ears and abandon the struggle.

What matters most is not whether or not you march on January 19th. I am not going to tell you how to be a good feminist. What matters is that we find a way to stay in the fight together. I believe that this messy, mass of anger can guide us to push forward yet again, to make change for women, to make change for the vulnerable, to reexamine the systems that do not serve us. If we're going to do that, then we need to be in relationship, and in coalitions that might make us uncomfortable at times. We cannot throw our hands up and leave at the first sight of discomfort. If this will be the eve of our liberation, then we still have work to do. But as we learn from the activist Jessica Morales, "The other side of anger is hope. We wouldn't be angry if we didn't still believe that it could be better."<sup>3</sup>

Moses imagines that one day a child will ask, "What does this mean?" And we will tell them the story of the Exodus. Are we on the eve of our own liberation? Someday, our children and grandchildren are going to ask us where were you when the world was changing? How will we answer them?

A movement is slow and sloppy and confusing. We know we are living through history, but we don't yet know what story will be told. A march is just one opportunity to play a part in this movement. So find your place in the work, wherever you find meaning. If we turn our anger into action, then I believe that we can part the sea. And, just like in the days of Miriam, dance our way to liberation, together.

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<sup>3</sup> Traister, p 239.

*Note: Written with immense gratitude to Rebecca Traister for writing “Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger” at just the right time. Many of the central ideas in this sermon were inspired by her book.*