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University
5 February 2006
Public Worship

Stanford
University

The Courage to Live with Wholeness and Hope
(Exodus 20:1-18, Ps. 3)

Last year, my favorite undergraduate professor hosted an unusual wine tasting in Santa Cruz. He called it, "The Sound of Wine and the Taste of Music". Pairing each wine with a carefully chosen opera, he encouraged us to describe the wine in musical language. Although I'm a connoisseur of neither, I found it an imaginative and accessible way of experiencing both wine and opera. In deliberately confusing our senses, he encouraged us to practice what scientists call synesthesia. This is where the senses merge with one another—sounds are seen, sights are heard and tastes are touched. Some adults, particularly painters and musicians, experience "salty visions, purple odors, square tastes and green wavy symphonies." But, it turns out that we were all synesthetes as newborns.ⁱ

Perhaps this is what Exodus teaches when describing the birth of Israel as a people. When the Israelites entered into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai, the text says-- "V'chol ha am ro'im et hakolot—And all the people

see the voices." (Exodus 20: 15) Like newborns, as the Israelites took in the awe and enormity of what life held for them, Sinai was all encompassing. Voices seen, thunder felt, the Divine Presence absorbed. The Reform Jewish tradition in which I was raised, teaches that each generation stands at Sinai anew and hears Torah afresh. Torah is as accessible to us today as it was to the newly liberated, astonished people who had journeyed from Egypt. Each year, Jews celebrate a holiday reenacting the revelation at Mount Sinai. It is best known as Shavuot, but it is also called, Z'man Matan toratenu, "The Time of the Giving of the Torah"—Not, The Time When God Gave the Torah, but the Time of the Giving of the Torah--in the present, not the past, because the gift of God's wisdom is ongoing, contemporary and speaks to us today. So if Torah is being given today, if that Exodus epiphany is available to us in our own time, what voices are we seeing? What teachings are we touching? What sights are we telling?

In a foundational essay articulating a feminist challenge to Judaism called "Notes Toward Finding the Right Question" writer Cynthia Ozick makes a provocative claim. She says that, "the precepts of Torah criticize the world and sit in judgment on its ways."ⁱⁱ Ozick suggests that for

Torah to remain mute in the face of injustice is to acknowledge that Torah is, "in some respect frayed." Today, with respect to America, as we stand at Sinai, we who look to the Bible for guidance, we who believe in justice, might paraphrase Ozick to assert that our democracy is, in some respect frayed.

Do you know what the Annual Dialect Society voted the 2005 word of the year? The word is "Truthiness". It refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be trueⁱⁱⁱ. The linguists thought "truthiness" best reflected 2005. Comedy Central's fake newscaster and humorist Stephen Colbert coined the word to cast light on how even truth has become a commodity to be massaged, manipulated and packaged. Today, from Enron to Iraq, from warrant-less wiretapping to lobbying scandals, from Supreme Court confirmation hearings to the promise of reconstruction in New Orleans, our elected leaders espouse truthiness rather than truth. These political and religious voices we hear so pervasively and sanctimoniously in our country, proclaim moral values vastly different than those embodied in the Bible's truth. The Torah offers only one sentence related to abortion-- and that sentence

reveals that the life of the mother is more valuable than the potential life of the fetus. But the text is pervaded with descriptions of and injunctions about our responsibility to care for one another. Katrina revealed that the social safety net woven to manifest and realize this caring has frayed. Indeed, it has been systematically and thoroughly dismantled. The Torah speaks eloquently of judicial fairness, but in today's courts, the rights that women, people of color and the poor have fought so hard to attain are slipping through our fingers. In the face of these challenges, Sinai beckons. We must transport ourselves to the moment of revelation to give voice to a vision of justice as clear and compelling as that heard on MountSinai.

To insist upon truth over truthiness, to be outspoken, ready to convey the Biblical commitment to righting injustice at this moment in our national political life may fill us with fear. Will we be the objects of surveillance? Will our jobs be put at risk? Will our protest be labeled unpatriotic and misrepresented as treason? In these fearful times, it is easy to censor our own outrage. We readily justify narrowing the circle--choosing to take care of ourselves and our loved ones while we close the door

against the voices crying out for our attention, the voices calling for justice, for truth, for freedom.

But remember---fear was present at Sinai, too. The Greek, the Samaritan and other versions take the Hebrew word, "ro'im" "to see" to be from the similar sounding word "yirah" to fear. They translate "V'chol ha am ro'im et hakolot" not as "And all the people see the voices, " but rather as, "All of the people were afraid of the voices." Terrified, they ask Moses to be the intermediary, and Moses reassures them, "Al tirau"-- "Don't be afraid".

"Al tirau". Remember with me three strong women who were not afraid. Three women whose voices we saw speak truth. Three women who lived with courage, whose commitment to democracy, whose belief in freedom and equality brought them wholeness and hope. Yesterday, Betty Naomi Goldstein Friedan died on her 85th birthday. Friedan wrote and spoke of the truth she knew--indeed, she developed a language where none existed before. In 1963 she published *The Feminine Mystique*, identifying what she called "the problem that has no name." The book, which detailed the frustration and despair of middle-class American women

who were told they should find fulfillment primarily through the achievements of husbands and children set off shock waves around the country and catalyzed a new women's movement. Friedan understood that the problems women perceived as isolated, personal failings were part of larger social problems shared by others. Betty Friedan went on to found the National Organization for Women, National Women's Political Caucus, and the National Abortion Rights Action League. When she first became an activist, Friedan was undaunted by the ridicule and misunderstanding heaped upon her. She was a powerhouse of justice and always spoke the truth as she saw it. She was not afraid.

Coretta Scott King was not afraid. Her death this week of Coretta Scott King reminds us of how to have courage to live with wholeness and hope. From the bombing of her house when she and her infant daughter were at home, to her presence beside her husband, Martin, from her decision to continue their justice work even after his death, to her efforts to institute a national holiday, and to found a center for nonviolence in his honor, Mrs. King was able to transcend fear. With Martin, and for many more

decades after his death, she willed justice to flow like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Coretta Scott King, principled, tireless, courageous, was not alone. Many people accompanied her in striding toward freedom. Her neighbor in Montgomery was Rosa Parks, the "mother of the civil rights movement." Rosa Parks, buried amidst such fanfare a few months ago, also unleashed a quiet, steely resistance to injustice through her prophetic voice. Rosa Parks, too, heard "Al tirau". Don't be afraid. In segregated Montgomery in 1955, when a menacing bus driver loomed over her, threatening to have her arrested if she didn't give him her seat, Rosa Parks responded softly but resolutely. She said only, "You may do that." Fearless, bold, serene, those four quiet words relayed dignity to an entire people.

Many misunderstand Rosa Parks, painting her as a tired, old woman who made an impulsive, if fateful, decision. She was not old--she was forty-two. And she was no more tired than most of us are at the end of a long day.

"No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in," she explains. Rosa Parks' was tired of her own complicity in ignoring injustice; tired of all the times she had

yielded. This enabled her to overcome her fear. In the words of educator Parker Palmer, "When you realize that you can no longer collaborate in something that violates your own integrity, your understanding of punishment is suddenly transformed... The courage to live divided no more comes from this simple insight: no punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment. "^{iv}

Rosa Parks later said, "When I made that decision, I knew I had the strength of my ancestors with me." It was as if she, too, had stood at Sinai, and in her mind's eye, saw those voices proclaiming justice. It was as if Moses reassured her, "Al tirau." "Do not fear".

The portrait of Rosa Parks' transcending fear and resisting injustice echoed in every newspaper and television in the country. The voice that was seen 50 years ago awakened the conscience of this nation. The truth of her stand spoke volumes, and slowly, but inexorably, justice prevailed.

And now it is our turn to see our voices raised against the injustices in our time like the women who we

have recently lost. Like Betty Friedan, we must create language to speak truth to power. Like Coretta Scott King, we must carry on in the face of tragedy and disappointment. Like Rosa Parks, we need not be shrill. But we must be determined and unafraid. As Rosa Parks reminds us, we have the strength of our ancestors with us—the hopeful who came to these shores believing that here, they would find equality and justice; the persecuted whose faces were illuminated by the lamp in Lady Liberty's welcoming hand, the proud who fought against the poll tax, and then dressed themselves and their children in their festive holiday best to go to the polls to vote. For them, democracy was precious, engaging and hard won. Today, the democracy our ancestors dreamt of, believed in, fought for, is endangered. Today, our democracy is frayed. We must place this fragile democracy on our copious, variegated colorful looms, and weave justice back into our borders. We cannot be seduced by truthiness. We must not be trapped by cynicism. And above all, we must not be silenced or immobilized by fear. Psalms proclaims, "I will not be afraid of the myriads of people that have set themselves against me round about." Betty Friedan set herself to respond to those myriads that misunderstood or underestimated her vision. Coretta Scott King watched

those myriads, yet marched forward. Rosa Parks, in her moment of decision was not afraid, certain she was a child of God, filled with God's protection. Like these strong and courageous women, let us live with wholeness and hope. Let us overcome our fear, weaving the voices deep within us with the voices echoing from Sinai, calling for justice. Let all of the people see our voices-clear, strong and fearless. May we all be full of courage, living our lives with wholeness and hope, as we taste the wine of truth and sing the music of justice. Ken Yehi Ratzon, So may this be the fulfillment of God's will.

ⁱ <http://www.harpercollins.com.au/drstephenjuan/0207news.htm>

ⁱⁱ Cynthia Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question" in Susannah Heschel's On Being a Jewish Feminist, pps. 145, 147

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.americandialect.org/>

^{iv} Parker Palmer, "Divided No More: Teaching from a Heart of Hope", The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, p. 171