SHABBAT BO - AND BEFORE PIERRE
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Temple Sholom - Vancouver BC
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Opening remarks: For those who came tonight hoping for more commentary or explanation about the community event this Sunday with Pierre Poilievre I'm not going to be speaking about that on Shabbat. I've been dealing with it all week and Shabbat is a sanctuary for rabbis too. Happy to listen and respond on Sunday after the program as I will be doing with our Kehilateynu group but for now, TGIS, Thank G-d it Shabbes and we have much to celebrate this evening. Lauren and Jonathan, who grew up and was bar mitzvah'd in our synagogue are celebrating their Auf Ruf and will stand beneath the chuppah next weekend. As will become obvious, this incredible couple that has been together for 6 years is about to also welcome a baby in a few months so it's a double mitzvah!

Also Zachary is having his Bar Mitzvah, the first for his family and we are so excited for you Zachary to be called to Torah, your mom and dad are also reading tomorrow - that's a triple mitzvah, maybe a hat trick of mitzvahs. Eight hostages were reunited with their families yesterday and we anticipate three more in a few hours, so much to celebrate and to be thankful for. Politics can wait, Shabbat is here, thank G-d.
Drash:
This week's Torah portion Bo is certainly one of the most dramatic and relevant stories in the Torah.

To remind you where we are in the Exodus story; seven plagues have now struck Egypt. The people are suffering. Several times Pharaoh seems to soften, only to harden his heart again. During the seventh plague, hail, he even seems to admit his mistake.

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. "This time I have sinned," Pharaoh says to them. "The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong."9: 27).

But as soon as the plague is over, he changes his mind. "He and his officials" says the Torah, "hardened their hearts" (9: 34).

And now Moses and Aaron have come to warn of a further plague, potentially devastating, a plague of locusts that, they say, will devour all the grain left after the hail as well as the fruit of the trees. And for the first time we hear something we have not heard before. Pharaoh's own advisors tell him he is making a mistake:

Pharaoh's officials said to him, "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their G-d. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?"

I looked back at how I framed this incident last year on this Shabbat and I could easily give that sermon again. I won't, but it's worth noting that in 2024 the lesson that leaped from the pages then is sadly still relevant today; Pharaoh's ego, hubris and narcissism blind him to the sound advice of those that have the greater interest of the nation and not the pharaoh as their chief concern. Our own experience in watching similar authoritarian rulers confirms that those drunk on power are often surrounded by sycophants and enablers that are attracted to the powerful like a flower turns toward the sun. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his commentary on this parsha which serves as a basis for this drash makes a connection to historian Barbara Tuchman famous book called "The March of Folly".

But as I said earlier in the service enough of politics for this shabbat, there is a deeper and I think my useful lesson from this week's sidra.

The great hasidic master Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak from Pshi'scha, also known as the Yehudi HaKadosh (The Holy Jew), proposes a reading of the story far removed from the realm of political revolutions. The Yehudi imagines Pharaoh challenging Moses over his understanding of spirituality in worship.

As Moses begins to prepare his people to leave, just before Pharaoh hardened his heart Moses demands that the Israelites be allowed to take their cattle and livestock with them so they may make sacrifices and worship G-d in the desert during their journey to the promised land.

Pharaoh responds with a question: "It is possible to worship God [only] in thought and in feeling. So if, in truth, you really desire to worship God--what do you need your flocks and herds for? 'Go, worship God'--with an upright heart and pure intentions, and you won't need to make any physical offerings, so 'only your flocks and herds will remain.'"

Moses answered him: "Intentions alone, without any actions connected to them, aren't important, they aren't anything! The main thing is real action, and thus intentions depend on actions and are deepened through them. Therefore, 'our cattle will also go with us,' (v. 26) because 'we will take from them to worship Adonai our God.'" From actions one is aroused to worship God with great feeling and to embrace the Divine. (Source: Itturei Torah)

Rabbi Neal Loevinger teaches that the Yehudi doesn't actually think that Pharaoh was all that concerned with the spirituality of Moses and the Israelites and that the lesson here is not for Jews then as much as it is for us now.

The Yehudi is addressing those people who want a purely internal spirituality, going deep inside themselves, spurning the physical world. The Yehudi, speaking through the character of Moses, seems to be suggesting that the proper way to deepen one's spiritual life is to align it with your physicality, to literally practice what you preach.

He is talking about ritual action, take for example a simple ritual such as making a blessing before eating. When we do this it can help bring us to feelings of awe and gratitude. One might think that the best thing is to go directly to the proper feelings, and bypass the ritual, but I think it doesn't really work that way. The action attached to the blessing can bring us to a depth of emotion and spiritual understanding unreachable by thought alone; sometimes we don't even understand, on a spiritual level, what the ritual is all about until after we've done it many times. But whats critical is to start, like working out at the gym, or beginning a new bedtime routine or diet, the first step is often the highest to overcome but we build on that foundation of experience till what was once a hurdle becomes a stepping stone to success and ultimately deep meaning.

Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity was credited with the observation, "It's easier to act your way into right thinking than think your way into right acting."

Intellectual preparation is important in Jewish practice, but the Yehudi reminds us that true religious growth isn’t just 'from the neck up.' As Rabbi Loevinger and Moses’ response to Pharaoh show, faith only becomes meaningful when the physical and spiritual come together—when our actions in both the social and religious realms align with our higher purpose.

This lesson is as relevant now as it was in Moses' time. Spirituality isn't just about what we believe or feel—it's about what we do. Judaism has never been a tradition of abstract ideals alone; it is a religion of action, of mitzvot, of bringing the sacred into our everyday lives through tangible practice.

We do not merely think about justice—we pursue it. We do not simply reflect on gratitude—we express it through blessings. We do not only value community—we build it through acts of kindness. Our tradition understands that our inner life is shaped by our outer actions, that meaning is forged through practice, and that holiness is not something we wait to feel, but something we actively create by pursuing it.

So this week, let us take one action—one mitzvah, one moment of intentional practice—to turn thought into deed, belief into embodiment. Because, as the Yehudi HaKadosh teaches us, true faith is not just what we hold in our hearts but what we bring into the world through our hands.

Shabbat Shalom.