The Temple of Democracy
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My first thought on Thursday morning as I watched rioters, white supremacists, proud boys, anarchists, anti-Semites and seditionists storm the Temple of Democracy that is the US Capitol was of Hanukah.

To the ancient Jews this must have been what it was like when the Assyrian Greeks desecrated the biblical temple, turning over the alter, putting out the holy fire of the *Ner Tamid*, trashing the inner chambers and installing an idol to a Greek god where once stood the holy ark.

Outnumbered in the face of the mighty Greek army, fearing for their lives as the marauders raged against them. To be a Jew inside the temple would have been terrifying. Watching on TV I thought, this is what it must have been like. I was horrified and saddened to see such a hollowed sanctuary defiled by idolators and zealots.

Then a few days later, watching the horrific replays on TV, I had a conflicting thought, an uncomfortable thought; in the minds of the rioters who took control of the capitol building they were the Maccabees, patriots, its current occupants the usurpers. For them January 6 was Hanukah, not the beginning of a year's long battle but if they had their way, the end of it. They were reclaiming their temple.

Aggrieved by an election they had been told was stolen from them. Incited by a demagogic leader who told them they were on a holy crusade. This throng of angry and enraged citizens feel the very core of their identity as Americans was being dismantled by progressives and costal elites. Brainwashed by conspiracy theories that are straight out of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion playbook. In their cult like devotion to a man who promised to 'make their lives great again' in their version of reality these proud and dangerously misguided Americans were not desecrating the temple of democracy, they were reclaiming it.

We've seen this before, zealots of any persuasion are still zealots, fanatics in uncompromising pursuit of their religious, political, or other ideals.

What is the old saying, "one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist?"

I understand where they are coming from, its wrong, its demented, it's inexcusable, but it's not unprecedented or even unimaginable.

I know a little something about America, we all know something about America, because we have long held it high as the beacon of democracy. An example of the good revolution; were good triumphs over evil. Lin Manuel Maranda set it all to rap music.

“I'm just like my country, I'm young
Scrappy and hungry!

I am not throwing away my shot!”

I was raised on stories of the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution. I am well aware of its proud history of rugged individualism and its baked in fear of government authority. The tribalism that is at the core of its social dynamic. The American exceptionalism that is both a *Yetzer HaRah* and a *Yetzer HaTov* – a motivating impulse for evil and the source of incredible generosity.

In America, since its inception, systemic racism has been used as a tool to defend American patriarchy; disenfranchising and ignoring the vital role that immigrants and African-American decedents of slaves have played in making it into a *Goldene Medina*, a new Zion, that shining city of refuge, that beckons your tired, your poor and your huddled masses yearning to breathe free as; Emma Lazarus’ words proclaim at the base of the Statue of Liberty.

Everybody has their own idea about what America should be, and often in America that idea excludes some groups as much as it might strive to include others. To reference one more analogy, it’s a melting pot but from its beginning few have agreed on the essential ingredients.

So, my first reaction was, ‘they are desecrating the temple’.

My second was to see it through the eyes of the rioters, ‘reclaiming the temple’.

My third take which I share with you tonight is that when politics becomes religion, religion itself is desecrated.

What we saw on Tuesday was a desecration of American Religion. The faith that the people place in its founding documents was replaced by seditionists who placed their faith in a man. Both the man and his followers forgot or never really learned what was at the foundation of that faith – the Torah of America, its Constitution.

This shabbat we begin the book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah of our people. It begins with the story of our 430-year sojourn in Egypt. The Jews went down to Egypt a proud and devout family, inheritors of the covenant of Abraham; they were guided by a fidelity to the one and only God. This was a belief system unique in all the known world, it made them an anomaly to most, an enemy to some, and exceedingly successful in their endeavors.

In Egypt our ancestors cast off much of their Jewish identity. With no document, no tablets of commandments to learn and to study they lost their mooring and lost their way.

The midrash teaches us that when Joseph died, they stopped practicing circumcision, they didn’t follow the commandments and instead embraced a society that beheld Pharaoh as an

all-powerful ruler. Material success and social status become their religion. The politics of staying in Pharaoh's favor became their purpose. They no longer prayed to God, they forgot God and God withdrew.

For the first 400 years, when the Pharaoh knew of their linage and was indebted to their patriarch Joseph the Hebrew's station in society was protected, even celebrated. Being in Pharaoh's protectorate served them well; so well they saw no need to return to their homeland particularly long after the famine that led to their first exodus became ancient history. The Jews of Egypt stop telling their origin stories, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob of the sacrifice that was made to become a blessing and a light unto the nations.

To use a baseball analogy, within a few generations the ancient Hebrews believed they were born on third base and thought they hit a triple. In their retelling, God through Joseph didn't save them from a famine in their ancestorial land, Egypt, Pharaoh and their own exceptionalism did.

But then a new pharaoh, who doesn't know Joseph comes to power and the Egypt he creates in one generation is, as described by Leon Kass in his new commentary on Exodus, "built on xenophobia, ceaseless enforced labor, massive construction projects for Pharaoh's profit [and edification], the hoarding of agricultural excess, various attempts to control and restrict fertility (including infanticide), and despotic rule."[1] The Hebrews are enslaved and now they find religion. Now they call out to God to save them; and a new leader rises up, Moses – he is more powerful than Pharaoh and they want to make him their king.

But Moses is different, he is humble, he takes no credit for the miracles and plagues that at first harden and then ultimately break Pharaoh's heart. Every word he says he says in God's name, Moses is a messenger, a prophet, a shepherd, not a king or a Pharaoh. He did not free the people from bondage, God did, and he redirects their affection and adoration in service of a power greater than himself.

Because for Moses this is not about him it's about walking in the way of the Lord.

The Torah is given weeks later at Mt Sinai and the covenant that is established is the antitheses of Egypt. The "Way of the Lord" pointedly rejects those attitudes and practices. It will teach the humane treatment of strangers, weekly Sabbath rest and seven-yearly sabbaticals for the land, a community-built sanctuary for worshipping God, not Moses, who delivered the people from bondage, teachings against hoarding and excess, celebration of procreation in the service of the covenant, and the rule of law in the service of each and all.[2]

And what guarantees this covenant, not a man, a tribe, or a hierarchy; instead, an accessible text, the Torah that every person assembled at Mount Sinai must agree to not only follow but

[1] Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus by Leon Kass
[2] Ibid.

also to read, learn and study. *Naseh v'nishma* the Israelites proclaim, we will do it and we will study its meaning.

The temple of democracy was desecrated by people who forgot their American Torah. You don't attack the democratic institutions of your country to save democracy, you do so only if your end is to subvert democracy.

Following the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, the UN General Assembly convened to discuss measures to prevent terrorism. There was furious debate over the nature of terrorism and the role of armed struggle in national liberation.

During the U.N. debates on terrorism U.N. Ambassador from Mauritania Moulaye el-Hassan argued that "…all liberation movements are described as terrorists by those who have reduced them to slavery. …[The term] terrorist [can] hardly be held to persons who were denied the most elementary human rights, dignity, freedom and independence, and whose countries objected to foreign occupation."

Critics countered that this argument was misleading because it failed to consider the issue in its entirety. What mattered was not the justness of the cause (something that would always be subject to debate) but the legitimacy of the methods used. The ends, they argued, could not be used to justify the means.

When politics becomes religion – the ends justify the means because all is being done in service of your cause, and your cause in your misguided belief is ordained by God. But if that cause tells you to terrorize innocent people, to tear down democratic institutions through violence and threats of violence your methods invalidate your cause.

Rather the way of Torah and Judaism is that religion and its precepts of justice, equality and the respect for every human being as being created in the image of God should guide your politics. When you are guided by these values you don't desecrate temples or brutalize people, you guard and protect them.

In a free and democratic society, be it the United States, Canada, Israel or anywhere else in the world the safeguard against the eroding of the fundamental rights and freedoms of that society is the study of them, the reading and daily application of the Torah of Democracy, our founding documents and constitutions.

Just like in Judaism, if we do not study, discuss, grapple with Torah and Judaism in our lives we will find ourselves in Egypt once again, far from home, far from God, with no idea how we got there, or any clue how to get back. We will confuse the sacred for the profane, tearing down our temples when our sacred calling is to build them up.

America – needs to study its Torah.