

Shabbat Parashat Bo 5784
Rabbi David Englander

It was bound to happen and it finally did; this week I was in need of a medical appointment, nothing serious thankfully, so I poked around and got some names and started making calls. The basic summary is something that I think is instructive, and because our Torah is eternally relevant, also connected to a key aspect of understanding the part of the Torah we are in, and the moment of history in which Israel now finds itself.

The summary of my first call goes like this. Good morning, how can I help you? Well I'd like to inquire about making an appointment preferably as soon as one is available. And I kid you not, this question came as a response. Want to guess? The first question was: What insurance do you have? Now, I shouldn't be surprised and I get that the receptionist was just doing her job, I mean, why get into an extended conversation if you're just going to say well you don't take my insurance. But still, I was feeling defined more as the company name printed on my Beth El provided laminated insurance card than like a person, and even more to the point, a potential patient. I was not impressed. Anyway they didn't have any appointments soon.

So I made another call. And the summary goes like this. Good morning, how can I help you? Well I'd like to inquire about making an appointment preferably as soon as one is available. After saying she would be glad to help with that the first question was "can I ask for your name please"? And then the second question, is it ok if I call you by your first name or do you

prefer something else? I didn't even crack my favorite rabbi joke which is that David is actually my middle name. The next question was about what I was calling about and how she hoped that I was feeling ok despite what may have been going on. And somewhere around her tenth question was: do you have medical insurance and can I take that information if you have it nearby? Needless to say I booked with that office, and no it didn't hurt that they had a same day appointment available. Not only was the doc fantastic but everyone I interacted with from start to finish seemed to have one goal in mind which was to be of help by communicating clearly and in a friendly way toward making my interaction with their practice a positive one. I've never been so glad to fill out the obligatory phone survey that came afterward.

It was a reminder to me and I think to everyone who ever has the chance to welcome someone, let's say specifically to Beth El, of just how important the simple act of saying hello I'm Beth or Bryan or Bill or Becky - what's your name? Because that rings a bell that we all carry within us, our humanity, individuality, worth, and need to be connected to others so that we can live out our fullest lives. We are not summarized by the information on any laminated card we carry around, we are each unique and of infinite value and we should treat ourselves and especially each other on that premise. When we do, everything is possible. When we forget, we are wise to return to that path with every ounce of effort we can gather.

It was Pharaoh's main error to ignore the humanity of the Israelites, as almost every slaveholder in history has diminished the humanity of the ones they thought were destined to be slaves. God's intervention into their

plight is rife with affirmations of the rights of the Israelites to live out their fuller humanity. One of the most powerful and for some lasting images and realities of the Shoah is the numbers that were assigned to some in concentration camps and permanently etched into their skin. The Nazi's way of saying you're not a person, you're a number, and only as useful as your usefulness to us. And it is the single most destructive underpinning of Hamas ideology toward Israel that makes it such a ruthless enemy. Jews are not human and not worthy of their names, and so can be flicked away and extinguished, and indeed should be, whenever possible.

In a strange verse following the terrible tenth plague, one that could clearly have been avoided if Pharaoh had listened to the message embedded in any of the prior nine of them, the very last thing he says to Moses and Aaron after "be gone" is 'u'veirachtem gam oti' - And may you bring a blessing upon me also. Pharaoh was a first born, the only one in Egypt who survived the plague. He was asking for his life to be spared. But perhaps more deeply he came around to realizing, at least for a moment, that his former slaves were more than that. No one asks for a blessing from their slave but only from one who has something to offer by way of blessing, something of meaning and spiritual worth. By asking for a blessing from Moses, Pharaoh momentarily has affirmed not only the power of a redeeming God but the humanity of those God has now set free. No one knows if, when, or whether Israel's modern day enemies will have the veil lifted from their eyes to see Israel as a human entity. Until they do, we have two jobs.

One is to never give up on the possibility that it could happen. Germany is today one of Israel's strongest allies and the staunchest opponent of anti-Semitism in the world. Japan is a western ally that not so long ago was bent on the death of our grandparents and destruction of this country. It's not the same in the middle east but it is not so very different either.

And the second is to never violate what I call the Elliot Ness rule from The Untouchables, who in finally putting away Capone says something to the effect of "I have become what I despised and I am convinced that I have done right." Well Kevin Costner says that anyway. We cannot become what we despise. Every resident of Gaza is the victim of Hamas ideology and atrocity and the best outcome of this war is not their destruction but their fuller potential and possibility. And we will never forget the names of those for whom we pray, which is why we name soldiers who have been killed in the past week, making the ultimate sacrifice for all of Israel. This week we have posted the known names of hostages outside of our prayer spaces, my suggestion is you spot one of them and carry them with you and pray for them because prayer is one way that we bend the spiritual arc of our world toward the better future it might be difficult to envision, but one toward which we will never stop working.

Am Yisrael Chai and Shabbat shalom.