



*Parshat Shemot*  
**January 5, 2013—23 Tevet 5773**  
**How Long?:**  
**Is Patience a Virtue or An Excuse for Inaction?**  
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Is Mahatma Gandhi going to burn in hell?

That provocative question was posed by a parishioner to a charismatic evangelical preacher named Rob Bell, who founded a megachurch called Mars Hill in West Michigan.

Why would Mahatma Gandhi burn in hell, the incredulous preacher asked.

Because he wasn't Christian.

At that point, as Kelefa Sanneh relates in her profile of Rob Bell in a recent New Yorker article, Rob Bell knew that he had important work to do. How could he change deeply entrenched thinking? How could he create a church that was more tolerant and inclusive?

He started preaching greater tolerance and inclusiveness, and he wrote a book called Love Wins, in which he argued for two things. First that God loves all people, not only Christians. Second that Christianity should have a more metaphoric, less literal understanding of heaven and hell.

Bell discovered that it is not easy to change a community's entrenched thinking. He found himself a lightning rod in the evangelical community. In short order, a half dozen rebuttals of Bell's more tolerant theology were published, and demands were made, in his church and beyond, for him to leave the very church he had founded.

*How long?* How long does it take to effect change? How long does it take to change up a community's thinking and its deeds, whether a religious community, a city, or a nation? Is

patience a virtue, bidding us to wait wisely until entrenched patterns are given the time and space to evolve? Or is patience not helpful, an excuse for inaction?

How long is a question that we can take to the morning newspapers every day of the week, and virtually on any important social issue.

Consider Thursday's New York Times front page article about murder in Chicago. The article reported that the homicide rate in Chicago is soaring—there were 506 homicides in 2012—a 16 percent increase over the year before. But to make matters even more complicated, Chicago is a divided city. These murders took place in poor, black Chicago, not in rich, white Chicago. How long the soaring homicide rate? How long the racial divide?

The question of how long applies to global issues. The world was shocked by the story of the young woman in India who was raped, and who subsequently died. Commentators emphasized that the tragedy was not only what happened to this young woman, but that rape is a pervasive, systemic, ongoing problem in India. In an Op Ed piece in Wednesday's Times, a woman named Sonia Faleiro writes as follows:

*I lived for 24 years in New Delhi, a city where sexual harassment is as regular as mealtime. Every day, somewhere in the city, it crosses the line into rape.*

How long can such a terrible wrong go unrighted?

And this question of how long, and is patience a virtue or an excuse for not acting, is not just a social justice issue. It is also very personal, and it deals squarely with the human issues that are most real and raw in our own lives. How long to get our marriage right? How long to find meaning in our work? How long until we get to know financial security? How long until our adult children find their way? How long until we get to dance at their wedding? How long

until grandchildren sit on our lap? How long do we have to struggle with ill health? How long until we can just wake up in the morning and feel good and unafraid? How long?

All of this brings us squarely to our Torah portion this morning, where we begin the story of the Israelites' descent into slavery and their eventual liberation. As Michael Walzer has pointed out in his classic Exodus and Revolution, the Exodus story does not belong only to the Jewish people, but belongs to, and has been claimed by, many groups that have been oppressed and sought deliverance. The Exodus story is the classic paradigm for how a community can free itself from its deepest enslavements. But how long does it take?

How long did the Israelites' slavery last? The Torah answers clearly:

*The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years; at the end of the four hundred and thirtieth year, to the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt. Exodus 12: 40-41.*

What?! 430 years?! Too long! Who has 430 years to wait for redemption to finally come? If the Exodus is such an important liberation story, how can it possibly contain this bitter pill? 430 years means that all those generations of Israelites were born as slaves, lived as slaves, died as slaves, and knew that their children and grandchildren were fated to do the same. Who has 430 years for the murder to stop in the streets of Chicago? Who has 430 years for the racial divide to be healed? Who has 430 years for India to deal with its rape problem? Who has 430 years to fix their marriage, their finances, their work, their health?

What could the Torah possibly be teaching us with this 430 years?

The best interpretation of this conundrum was offered by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who famously remarked: "*The arc of the universe is long. But it bends toward justice.*"

There are two important words in his teaching. The first is *long*. Solving big problems,

changing patterns, disrupting entrenched thinking, does not happen fast or easily. The second important word is *bends*.

If the arc bends, that means that *something* is happening. It could be slow, painfully slow. It could be incremental, painfully incremental. But *some* change is stirring. *Some* traction is happening.

Do we see that bend? If we do, patience is a virtue. Keep on working.

If we don't, if there really is no traction, then patience is no longer a virtue, but an excuse for inaction. Then we need to stop waiting patiently, and start acting urgently.

Which brings us back to pastor Rob Bell, and his attempt to persuade his church that Mahatma Gandhi would not burn in hell because he was not a Christian. Did he see the bend? He did not. He could not honestly look at the arc, and see that it was bending toward justice. To the contrary. The more he preached tolerance and inclusiveness, the more his congregants left his church in droves. The membership of Mars Hill church dropped from its height of 10,000 members to 3,500. Arguing for less fire and brimstone cost him almost two thirds of his members. How long? Bell did not have 430 years, and he did not see the bend towards justice, so he and the Church parted ways. No more waiting. Just a different kind of working. He is taking his teaching on the road, exhorting Christian communities around the world to be more tolerant and inclusive.

The Exodus story counsels us to have patience that is helpful, and a basis for hope that is reasonable, when we *are* able to see the bend in that slow arc of history. That arc, and that hope, have happened in our own lifetime. I was reading a biography about Menachem Begin in Yehuda Avner's [The Prime Ministers](#). Begin lost all of his family in the Shoah. He emerged

after the inferno all alone. Understandably he had great rancor towards Germany. Avner tells the following story in which he quotes Begin:

I cannot forget or forgive what the Germans did to our people. Every German I see of that generation, I think to myself, perhaps he's the one. Years ago, my wife and I visited the Vatican library in Rome. We had both studied Latin as students and were examining a Latin translation of a biblical text, comparing it with the original Hebrew, when a couple approached and asked us in English what language we were speaking. 'Hebrew,' we said. 'So you must be from Israel,' they said. And when they learned that we were, they shook our hands with tremendous enthusiasm. 'Oh, you have no idea how much we admire and respect your country,' they said. 'And where are you from?' I asked. 'Germany,' they said. 'How old are you?' I asked the man. 'Forty-five,' he said. So I said, 'In World War Two, you would have been twenty or so.' He said, 'That's right.' Instantly and instinctively, my wife and I started to back away, and we did not say another word to them. I thought to myself, perhaps this man took part in the slaughter of my father and my mother, and our Jewish children. And when I speak of my father, I speak of all the slaughtered fathers, and when I speak of my mother, I speak of all the slaughtered mothers, and when I speak of my little brother and my little cousins, I speak of all the slaughtered little Jewish children—of all the Moysheles and the Surales and the Yankeles and the Rivkales and the Dovidels. How much of the Jewish genius was choked and charred in the pit?..Who can measure? To us the cost of the Holocaust will forever be paid.

A melancholy silence fell upon the room, and when Begin next spoke it was from behind clenched teeth. 'The Germans bear collective responsibility for a horror the like of which has not been known since God created man and man created Satan...So, no, I shall never shake the hand of a German—NEVER!'

'But what do you do when you have to officially receive Germans as prime minister?' asked a young lady in a flowery frock. She had large, intelligent eyes, and her name was Hilary. She was from Cleveland. 'Don't you shake their hands even then?'

'Oh, then it's quite a different matter,' Begin reassured her. 'As prime minister, I have my official duties to fulfill. When German representatives come to see me, I receive them with formal courtesy.' pages 542-3.

That was in the 1970s. We can certainly understand where Begin was coming from. But since then the arc of the universe has bent, and we can actually see it. Israel's strongest ally in Europe today is Germany. The Jewish community in Berlin is growing. The German government has done *teshuvah*. In the center of Berlin is a monument to the Six Million. Where there was no hope, where there was only the deepest hatred, now there is hope.

How long? Not long. We don't have 430 years to wait. In our own lives, and in our sacred communities, we all have important work to do: bending that long arc towards justice. What will you do to get started? Shabbat shalom.