



*Parshat Beha'alotcha*  
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**Time to Drag Out Our Mattresses**  
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I want to speak to you today as a millennial.

As a millennial, people tell me I don't understand—that problems take time to resolve, they take nuance, they take patience. But I know that just because things have been a certain way, doesn't mean that's how they need to stay. As a millennial, I know that often we do not have the luxury of time. If we want to make our world conform to our values, we may have to upset industries, we likely have to forge new paths, and we can't always rely on the systems that existed for our parents and those before them. As a millennial, I know that often the greatest obstacle to the evolution of the planet is the common human aversion to change. As long as we are more attached to the certainty of what is known than the uncertainty of change, progress will remain elusive.

These past few weeks, I have felt beyond challenged. I pride myself on being up to date with all the social justice issues of our time. I pride myself on being forward thinking, on making the right choices, on taking the right stands. And yet, when George Floyd was murdered and hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest, I had to admit that I had failed. While I did not kill George Floyd, I was complicit. I knew and have known about the endemic racism that underpins our justice system. I knew about Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown and so many others who have tragically lost their lives to police brutality. I knew that black Americans are more than five times more likely to be incarcerated, which means that

something like one in four black Americans will spend time behind bars, often for crimes that white Americans walk away from with a slap on the wrist. I knew about systemic economic inequality, about structural racism that infects everything from employment opportunities to the number of responses people receive on dating apps.

I knew, but I did nothing. I stayed silent. I accepted that injustice was a part of our world, a part that could never fully be erased. And in my silence, I was complicit.

We were complicit. It's unpleasant to say, even more unpleasant to consider. How is that we, a people who have been oppressed for thousands of years, a people subject to discriminatory and racist policies, to state-sanctioned violence, how is it that we did not stop to protest this systemic oppression sooner? How is it that we, who claim to never forget, fail to remember our own experiences when they would be most salient?

As the protests around the country quiet, we cannot go back to the way things have been. We have seen the light, and even more, we have seen the darkness. Because of our identity as Jews, because of history and our values, because the moral integrity of our nation is at stake, we must take a stand and speak out for justice as we continue to work for righteous change.

I want to share a powerful Talmudic text with you that I first learned from a colleague and friend, Rabbi Jordan Braunig. At the beginning of Bava Batra, the rabbis discuss the protocol for building new synagogues. The sages agree that you are prohibited from destroying a synagogue unless you have already built a replacement. This is sound logic. With all things being equal, you shouldn't destroy something people depend on without creating an alternate structure of support. However, the Talmud goes on to explain that there is one exception to this

rule: If the synagogue structure has cracks, if the structure of the synagogue is unsound and dangerous, then you may destroy that synagogue without first building a replacement.

This text calls out to us so clearly in this moment. The United States was built as a sanctuary of justice, equality, and freedom. Our national collective consciousness prays at the altar of democracy and our founding documents extoll the belief that all are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And yet, over these past many weeks, we have seen that our sanctuary is cracked; the principled foundation on which we stand can no longer hold us. It is time for us to build anew. And while it might feel safer to make gradual, incremental changes, things are too damaged now for that to be a viable option.

Let me give you an example. Lest you think this is happening in Minneapolis, in Florida, in New York, but not here, I want to share with you a story that happened just a few days ago here in Newton. Tim Duncan, the former deputy athletic director at Northeastern decided to walk with his wife from their Newton home to the Whole Foods on Washington Street for lunch. They left their home and had only been walking for a few minutes when they were surrounded by four police cruisers, standing down the barrel of a drawn gun. The officers were searching for a black suspect and, when they saw a black man walking with his wife, radioed in that they had a “party meeting the description of the party we are looking for.” In other words, they were looking for a black man and found a black man. Racial profiling anyone? Tim wasn’t killed, thank God, but he and his family were put in a life-threatening situation because of the color of his skin. How can we stand by while innocent people are swarmed by armed police for the crime of walking while black? How can we stand by as justice is perverted on our doorsteps?

Our sanctuary is cracked, the principled foundation on which we stand has rotted out from the inside and can no longer hold us. We must dismantle racism and oppression. We must build anew.

In the Talmud, the rabbis share a story. Rav Ashi, once upon a time, saw cracks in his synagogue in Mata Mechasya. Rav Ashi was faithful, so as soon as he saw those cracks, he immediately demolished the synagogue building. Then, he dragged his mattress out to the demolition site. He slept there, in the rain and in the cold and refused to move his mattress back home until they had finished constructing a new synagogue—even waiting for them to attach the drainpipes before he finally slept inside again. Years ago, Rabbi Jordan Braunig shared this text in the Hebrew College Beit Midrash and asked us to think about the issues that would inspire us to drag our mattresses out into the rain. It's one thing for us to claim to value justice, another for us to put our own bodies and lives on the line to demand it.

Today, I can't help but wonder what could be if we were willing to do just this.

For too long, we've been praying in a sanctuary with cracked walls. For too long, we've seen racism and injustice, economic inequality and discrimination. For too long, we've lamented these societal ills, but we haven't made it our problem. We haven't dragged our mattresses out into the public square.

The time has come for us to leave the comfort of our homes. The time has come for us to stand in the places where our nation's values have been destroyed. Let us stand together until our sanctuary is rebuilt, until we can all thrive together in a world free from racism and oppression, a world in which we are no longer complicit in the perpetuation of injustice.

What would happen if, for example, when a black person was pulled over by police, a line of white people stopped to witness and to observe?

What would happen if, any time we saw someone being tailed in a department store based on the color of their skin, we made it our business to speak out against racial profiling?

What would happen if we went out of our way to support black-owned businesses and scholarships for minorities?

What would happen if we demanded not only that schools implement bully-proofing programs, but also that every place of employment was required to implement sensitivity training and implicit bias workshops?

What would happen if we made it our business to camp out in our elected officials' offices until every person, regardless of skin color, had equal access to the right to vote?

Our nation has reached a turning point. The moral integrity of our country rests on our shoulders. Just because things have always been unjust and unequal does not mean that it has to be that way. Once upon a time, movies could only be watched in theaters, and then only rented in stores. Now everyone just streams. We can change. Once upon a time communal davening could only take place in person. Now, everything is digital. We can change. Once upon a time, groceries had to be purchased in the store, now Instacart and delivery services dominate. We can change. Once upon a time, you had to stand out on the street to hail a cab, now you just plug in an app. We can change. Once upon a time there were colored water fountains and Jews were prohibited from swimming in the same pools as other children. We can change.

We can change. But *will* we?