

## Speak Out

What is God looking for from us? Dr. Avivah Zornberg teaches that the book of *Bamidbar*, Numbers, is all about the search for proper *dibur*, speech. Through forty years in the desert, God endures the ex-slaves' complaints, rebellions, and regrets about leaving Egypt. Finally, at the book's end, Tzlofchad's five daughters — Machlah, Noa, Choglah, Milkah, and Tirtzah — come to Moses with a different kind of question (Numbers 27:1). Their father had died in the desert with no son. Under the existing laws, his portion in the land of Israel would go to distant relatives. Could they not inherit instead? God says four words to Moses:

*Ken b'not Tzlofchad dovrot.*

כֵּן בְּנוֹת צְלֹפְחָד דִּבְרַת

**Tzlofchad's daughters speak right.**

For Zornberg, these words relieve the tension of the entire desert journey. All God was looking for was someone to speak up — *ledaber* — for justice, even in their own interest. May our speech-acts merit the same simple, beautiful response: *ken*. Yes.

## Team Up

Regarding how the story of Rosa Parks is told, educator Herbert Kohl writes,

When the story of the Montgomery bus boycott is told merely as a tale of a single heroic person, it leaves children hanging. Not everyone is a hero or heroine...Not every child can be a Rosa Parks, but everyone can imagine herself or himself as a participant in the boycott. As a tale of a social movement and a community effort to overthrow injustice, the Rosa Parks story opens the possibility of every child identifying herself or himself as an activist, as someone who can help make justice happen.

- "The Politics of Children's Literature: What's Wrong with the Rosa Parks Myth," by Herbert Kohl. *Rethinking Our Classrooms* Volume 1:

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/politics-of-childrens-literature-rosa-parks-myth/>

## Here's how you can start....

נִרְצָה  
Nirtzah

## Counting the Omer: Towards Redemption

The seven weeks of the Omer, between Pesach and Shavuot, are traditionally (though somewhat mysteriously) a time of partial mourning. Rabbi Shai Held offers this explanation:

The Exodus may be a paradigm for how Jewish history is supposed (indeed, destined) to look, but for now — tragically, inexplicably — history makes a mockery of this paradigm. Rome is triumphant; a renewed Exodus remains but a dim hope.

And so we mourn. We mourn because our experience falls so unbearably short of the redemption we have been promised and assured will come. There is a stunning degree of audacity — and honesty — in starting to grieve as Pesach begins, because, in fundamental respects, Pesach resides in the future rather than the present. And yet grief does not have the final — or even the loudest — word, because we affirm that the God who redeemed us will, despite all evidence to the contrary, redeem us “a second time.” (In *The Heart of Torah*, Volume 2, p. 75)

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu*

*Melech ha'dlam asher kidshanu*

*bemitzvotav vetzivanu al*

*sefirat ha'omer.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ  
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל  
סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר.

**Blessed are You ETERNAL our God,  
Sovereign of time and space, who sanctified us with commandments  
and commanded us to count the Omer.**

**Today is the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the Omer.**

## RABBIS IN ACTION

There are many ways to effect change: We protest, we petition, we demonstrate. And sometimes we bring our message directly to the seats of power. A few years ago, as the Washington State Legislature was considering a bill on human trafficking, I sought out the sponsoring senator and offered my testimony, as a member of the clergy, in support of the bill during the public hearing. While others spoke of the facts of human trafficking, and a victim shared her story, I offered a spiritual and ethical message based in Jewish teachings. Sitting in that hearing room to share this simple yet fundamental message felt like an important opportunity we have as rabbis to effect change, and to share a message our lawmakers need to hear more often: that lawmaking is as much as moral act as it is a legal act.

– Rabbi Seth Goldstein,  
Temple Beth Hatfiloh,  
Olympia, Wash.

*Organizations that have lobbying arms, such as the local Jewish Federation, can often help connect community leaders with opportunities to give testimony.*

The “Free to Move” platform includes abandoning the slogan “comprehensive immigration reform.” That term, which rose to prominence in 2001, combines increased border security with adjusted status for undocumented immigrants, allowing them to remain in the country. Our partners at United We Dream view this *ab initio* compromise as morally bankrupt. If we do not believe in a militarized border, let us not call for one! If we are in the business of setting forth a vision for public policy, let it be a vision that is truly redemptive.

**How will you lead us there?  
We’re not waiting for  
Moses or a Messiah;  
we’re all working on  
becoming them.**

**לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּיְרוּשָׁלַיִם!**

**Next year in Jerusalem —  
in a renewed world  
where all are free.**

## Redemption Requires Repentance

In the medieval midrash *Pirkei deRebbe Eliezer* (ch. 43), Rabbi Nechunya ben Hakanah teaches that even Pharaoh was capable of teshuvah. Just as Pharaoh sinned by saying, “Who is the ETERNAL/*Mi Adonai?*” (Exodus 5:2), he repented with the same language, saying, “Who is like the ETERNAL/*Mi Chamocha?*” (Exodus 15:11). God rescued him from the Red Sea and made him King of Nineveh. When Jonah came to prophesy the destruction of Nineveh, at once Pharaoh led his people in teshuvah, and God spared the city.

The midrash has an epilogue, though: After 40 years, Nineveh backslid and was swallowed in the depths of the underworld. This teaches us that teshuvah is an ongoing process, never a closed ledger.

What might redemption look like today? What teshuvah does it demand from us?

- **Reparations** for African-Americans and Native Americans/First Nations
- An **immigration policy** that treats all people with respect and compassion — such as the “Free to Move, Free to Stay” framework proposed by United We Dream: <https://unitedwedreamaction.org/framework-2020/>
- **Ecological sustainability**, so that none would have to flee as climate refugees
- A **civilization governed by values** other than the bottom line and production of cheap goods