

This Devar Torah for the week of Parashat Chukat was delivered at City Shul during Pride Week in Toronto, June 2015. This week-long celebration of LGBTQ pride, that evolved from a moment of crisis for gays and lesbians after the "[bathhouse raids](#)" of Toronto, 1981, has become one of the largest celebrations of pride in the world. In the piece, I examine more closely that momentous instant, (the one I call "the Spartacus moment"), that leads long-oppressed communities to regain their pride about who they are.

PARASHAT CHUKAT 5775  
PRIDE WEEK DEVAR TORAH

In 1960, who could have predicted that the three little words "I am Spartacus" would create a world-wide and unstoppable phenomenon with ripple effects lasting until this day? These words, proudly declaimed by a Roman slave in the Stanley Kubrick film of that year, and then echoed again and again in solidarity by the slaves around him, are popularly viewed as one of the influences for rallying cries of the 1960's American civil rights movement, to the world phenomenon of "Je suis Charlie" in the wake of the massacres of the French cartoonists in Paris of just a few months ago. They were a beautiful encapsulation of the *zeitgeist* that was to dominate the second half of the twentieth century. With three little words, we instantly understood – we, of whatever oppressed or discriminated-against group – were proud, splendid, free, our spirit could no longer be squashed. With these three words we were no longer to be silenced. We would speak up and insist on being recognized and counted, and any one who uttered the words in solidarity not only insisted on it as well, but were saying that they, too, would refuse to be silenced. They were willing to face any consequences, even death, to place themselves in the shoes of the formerly downtrodden group.

In Daily Xtra, a Canadian online publication of the gay and lesbian community, Robin Perelle wrote an article, "Nous Sommes Charlie", in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo murders in Paris. In it, the writer makes clear the strong identification of gays and lesbians with the ethos of "Je suis Charlie", or "I am Spartacus". Perelle, in the article, notes that at the heart of the story of Charlie Hebdo is the issue of freedom of expression – the issue that was **the** most essential one to champion in order to bring on the revolutionary changes that have taken place in many parts of the world in the last few decades in relation to gay and lesbian rights. It was only the recognition of this that could have led to today's monumental decision of the U.S. Supreme Court to rule that gay marriage is legal and the ruling that gays and lesbians deserve "equal dignity in the eyes of the law". The pattern is ever the same – hundreds, even thousands of years of oppression, silencing and denial lead to a Spartacus moment that is essential to finally, ultimately, lead to change – from Tiananmen Square to the fall of the Berlin Wall to "I am a man" to Malala Yousafzai. Even in Toronto, the pattern has held true. I was surprised to discover that the turning point for the LGBTQ community here in Toronto was mass arrests of primarily gay men after a series of bathhouse raids in 1981. The large outswelling of outrage and protest – the Spartacus moment for LGBTQ Toronto – evolved to Gay Pride and ultimately the Pride Week we are celebrating now, which is currently one of the largest festivals of gay pride in the world.

What does any of this have to do with us Jews? – this week reading the portion of *Chukat*, a strange collection of ritual law about red cows to a series of narratives about death and thirst in our desert wanderings? In some ways, it has a lot to do with it. Rabbi Shira Milgrom writes,

“The Passover Haggadah famously distinguishes between the wise and wicked children by the singular choice of the wise child to identify with the story: “It is because of what the Eternal did for us [*me*] when *I* came out of Egypt.” At the very core of the Jewish enterprise is the willingness to take the story of our people as our own personal story.”

The decision to frame the people's narrative as our very own is, she notes, the Jewish way. Moses continually says “we” stood at Sinai, “we” went there, or did this. But on a very direct level this is problematic, since we know that by the time of Deuteronomy the entire generation of Sinai had died out. Milgrom asks, “To whom is Moses speaking? Presumably, he is speaking to the next generation. This generation did not stand at Sinai; they were not at Kadesh-barnea. The....[Torah].... has taken the fantastic leap into Jewish storytelling: Yes! **We** did stand at Horeb. Yes! **We** were at Kadesh-barnea! Yes, yes, yes! This story is **ours**. **We** are Jews. **We** all stand proud of who we are and what we have experienced. **We** all own our story and identify with it. **We** Jews were Spartacus long before Spartacus ever lived.

Chukat contains a number of weird and mystifying rituals and stories. Among these is an incident that occurs towards the end of the portion – after the Israelites have lost two of their leaders, Miriam and Aaron, and after they have been thirsty, craved water, been attacked through their wanderings, been denied passage across some territories, and finally, been besieged by fiery serpents at the behest of God merely because they have understandably protested to Moses about their thirst and hunger and wretchedness. They plead with Moses, even admit to having sinned by “speaking against the Eternal One and you (meaning Moses).” They beg him to intercede with God to take away the serpents. God's reaction is strange. God instructs Moses to make a snake figure and mount it on a standard. If any one is bit by the seraph snake, all they need to do is look at the copper serpent mounted on a standard and they would recover. A fascinating explanation of this strange incident is provided by [Malki Rose on “G-dcast”](#). She sees the snakes as a physical symbol of the people's fear and anxiety. The snakes are biting and injuring the people. They want it to stop but they don't know what to do. God's instruction to Moses to mount a strange idol-like copper snake on a standard is a means, she believes, of having the people confront their fears. They have to stare their fear in the face, so to speak. They need to look it in the eyes without blinking. It is, in a way, their Spartacus moment in the desert. And it is only by doing this that they can move on and live and face the future.

So, if not for all this history of oppression leading to each cause's Spartacus moment – fiery snakes in the desert, slavery, abuse of civil rights, suppression of freedom of expression, bathhouse raids and mass protest – we could never have arrived at this unprecedented moment in history. As we first were shown as far back as the age of our Torah, God is waiting for that special Spartacus moment. Surely, finally, now is the moment we must all stand and proudly declare, “This story of the other is **ours**. In fact, by this declaration they are no longer **other**. Through this declaration they have become **us** and we have become **them**. We all stand proud of who we are and what we have experienced. **We** all say, now, at this very second, we own our story and identify with it. **We** are all – no matter whether Jews, blacks, gays, lesbians, or any other historically oppressed group –today, at this moment proud to be Spartacus, proud to be who **we** are.