

Shabbat Teaching 06.19.21 **Parsha Chukat** Numbers 20:07 – 20:13
Raven Deerwater



When I started to write this *drash*, I knew it would be given on Juneteenth. I had no idea, however, that it would be recognized as a federal holiday as happened on Thursday. So it's pretty exciting to be part of the cohort that is giving the first *drash* on the first time that Juneteenth is an official holiday in the United States.

I want to start by referring to a blog (<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-is-juneteenth/>) by Henry Louis Gates on the history of Juneteenth: *When Maj.*

Gen. Gordon Granger issued the order that “the people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free”, he had no idea that, in establishing the Union Army’s authority over the people of Texas, he was also establishing the basis for a holiday, “Juneteenth” (“June” plus “nineteenth”), today the most popular annual celebration of emancipation from slavery in the United States.

Gates goes on to write: *When Texas fell and Granger dispatched his now famous order No. 3, it wasn’t exactly instant magic for most of the Lone Star State’s 250,000 slaves. On plantations, masters had to decide when and how to announce the news — or wait for a government agent to arrive — and it was not uncommon for them to delay until after the harvest. Even in Galveston city, the ex-Confederate mayor flouted the Army by forcing the freed people back to work.*

When I volunteered to do the teaching for today, I wanted to make a connection between Juneteenth and our Torah portion. You might think this was an easy task, but it was quite a challenge for me. Certainly we as Jews were also emancipated from slavery in Torah, but the other circumstances could not be more different. We entered Egypt on our own volition, and we escaped Egypt to wander for 40 years before being brought to a promised land. African American slaves did not choose to

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come to America, and they are still waiting, over 150 years later, for this land to deliver on its promise of freedom.

I was reading an interview and an article in the most recent issue of the Emerson College alumni association about Lee Pelton who, for the last 10 years, has been the President of Emerson College in Boston. He is leaving the position to become the lead of the Boston Foundation. I met Dr. Pelton during the weekend of my daughter Raina's graduation in 2016. He knew Raina and greeted me affectionately. He is at the pinnacle of what can be achieved in this country.

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder he wrote the following to the Emerson community(<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2020/06/05/lee-pelton-letter/>):

I watched the video over and over again well into the morning hours because I was mesmerized by the casualness with which the Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd. George Floyd was invisible. And it was his invisibility, a brutal white power structure and Chauvin's dehumanization of him that killed him.

Floyd has a history. And so do I.

I was born in a house that had no indoor plumbing until I was six years old. Until they died, my mother and both of my grandmothers cleaned houses for middle class and rich white folks. My father was a laborer until he got a good paying job working at the City of Wichita, Kansas, where I was born and raised.

In my lifetime, I have been called the n-word by white people in every state and every city that I have ever lived in.

I have been pulled over driving while black more times than I can remember. I have been spit on by a white parking lot attendant. I was stopped 20 feet from my house by two white police officers in their cruiser, the searing heat of their spot lights on the back of my neck, guns drawn on either side of my car because I looked like a black man who was alleged to have stolen something from a convenience store. When I was living

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on the West Coast, I was pulled over twice in a single night by police officers because, according to each, I didn't turn on my turn signal the proper feet before a stop sign. As President of Willamette University, two teenage boys drove up on the sidewalk to block my path home because I looked like someone who was suspected of stealing from neighborhood homes. When I asked what that person looked like they described someone more than twenty years younger than me. While visiting my cousins in Conway, Arkansas in the 70's, I suffered the deep humiliation of having to go to the back alley of a local restaurant to order food. I was twenty years old. I was angry at the overt racism and at my cousins for enduring such indignities almost a decade after the passages of the two Civil Rights Acts of the mid-60's.

That's my history. And I have dedicated my life's work to social justice in just about every aspect of American life, but especially for young people who grew up like me.

Dr. Pelton is a shining example of what can be achieved in this country, but I'm not sure that he would say he and his peers have reached the promised land.

Our aliyah today has a famous and classic Biblical story: Moses and the rock. Let me read it to you.

HASHEM spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the staff and gather together the assembly, you and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes that it shall give its waters. You shall bring forth for them water from the rock and give drink to the assembly and to their animals."

Moses took the staff from before HASHEM, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation before the rock and he said to them, "Listen now, O rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice; abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank.

HASHEM said to Moses and to Aaron, "Because you did not believe in Me and sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them. They are the waters of strife, where

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*the Children of Israel contended with HASHEM, and He was sanctified through them.
(from the Stone Edition of The Tanach)*

In this aliyah, we learn, as does Moses, that he will never reach the promised land.

There are many ways that this story can be taken. The most common one is that God commanded Moses to talk to the rock, but Moses struck the rock. Many have used this to say that we should use words, not violence, to achieve our ends. I certainly can understand this interpretation, but in light of last week's portion where God destroyed 15,000 Israelites by burial, fire, and plague; I'm not sure the lack of violence really resonates.

A more modern interpretation is that to get resources from a rock, to get resources from the Earth, we must not use force, but we must work with and "talk" to the Earth. Force upon the environment leads to the ultimate destruction of the Earth.

In a departure from my usual teachings, I lean towards the literal explanation given in the text: "Because you did not believe in Me and sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel." Moses did not approach the rock in a posture of humility; rather he comes off as boastful and full of his own power: "Listen now, O rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?"

Where do we get the promise of freedom, the promise of unity, the promise of environmental stewardship? It comes from faith. It comes from the recognition that we are powerless beings in the presence of the divine. It comes from the realization that we are all created in God's image.

How have African Americans survived in this country? How has Lee Pelton overcome such unwarranted insults to become so accomplished? It is because a humble faith in God gives you a different sort of power; not the power to enslave others; not the power to destroy environmental resources; but the power of spirit;

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the power to profoundly connect with others, especially those of different backgrounds and identities; and the power to integrate into the physical environment as one creature of many.

Juneteenth celebrates an important message finally getting delivered. How long will it take us to accept the divine messages we receive? Juneteenth also reminds us that true freedom has yet to be achieved. Even knowing he would never reach the promised land, Moses continued to lead the Israelites in that direction. Faith is hard at times to hold on to, and like Moses in this aliyah, our egos may overcome our better judgment. But our faith and our better judgment know the way to freedom, and so on this Juneteenth, let's head together in that direction.