

God, soften our hearts.¹

Attune us as keenly to the pain of other human beings

as “we are exquisitely sensitive to our own”² distress.

Remind us that strength and vulnerability are not opposites, but one.

Author of the universe, you gave us a story.

Help us remember Pharaoh, whose stiff heart brought him ruin.

All his power could not bring him peace.

The price of privilege is fear.³

Lord, you give us the capacity to be courageous.

Let us fear nothing but our own hubris.⁴

Remind us how little we know, how even your “divine disclosures
are filtered through our human fallibility.”⁵

Adonai, you made me a woman.

You did not give me the bogus protection of armor or a shell.

You gave me a spine.

I can carry and lift and electrically slide. I can stand up.

I can march. I can lend my arms to a person who needs them.

Help me reach beyond myself. Show me when to yield.

Remind me that my range of movement is always larger than I know.

Creator, as I plead for you to help me grow into the person

I am supposed to be, allow me to nurture the growth of others as well.

May I never stand in the way of another person on her journey

from slavery to freedom.

Rebbe Dylan asks, “How many years can some people exist before they’re allowed to be free?

Yes, how many times can a man turn his head pretending he just doesn’t see? . .

And how many ears must one [woman] have before she can hear people cry?”⁶

Justice, justice, we should seek always justice,⁷
but how, in our smug comfort, will we know when we find it?
Pharoah did not know the bitterness of slavery.
When life is so good for us, we are sometimes blind
to hunger and heartbreak, violence and despair,
to cold and cruelty outside the warm circle of our sweet lives.
Adonai, awaken our senses. Give us the courage to listen to voices
“quieted”⁸ by the din of commerce and our petty obsessions.

Rabbi Schulweis teaches that a slave,
a person who is still bound to the will of another,
cannot commit herself to a transcendent purpose.⁹
God, we are still fettered by chains of our own making:
envy, vanity, ambition, and the rush to accumulate.
Unchain our hearts.¹⁰ Bring us back to your purpose.
Let our hearts be hungry¹¹ to “do justice, love mercy,
and walk humbly with [You, our] God.”¹²

Amen



¹ I thought about ending the prayer here. I do think this short version will do in a pinch - when I am feeling angry or resistant to liking or listening to someone.

² In a brief, waiting-to-pick-up-kids conversation in front of Kealing several years ago, my friend Christiana Park remarked that we are often indifferent to other people's pain but invariably "exquisitely sensitive to our own." The phrase stuck with me, and I've especially been thinking about it and Christiana this week. Christiana was born on February 18, 1961 and died on a bitterly cold day, two years ago, January 4, 2009.

³ My father worked for IBM and when I was six years old we went to live in Johannesburg, South Africa. This was 1963; we came back in the summer of 1965. Later - in high school - I learned that IBM had helped design and implement the infrastructure for apartheid, specifically the passbook system. I didn't know that as a kid, but I remember bars, a locked metal fence *inside* our house, between the ground floor and our bedrooms. We were all locked upstairs at night. I remember knowing that there was a gun in our house. When our nanny went to the post office, I couldn't go inside with her, but had to wait on the sidewalk, because we couldn't enter a building through the same door. I remember the extreme anger (or what I took to be anger) on her face when I spilled orange juice in the kitchen one time. Much later I realized that orange juice is a luxury, and in my thirties at the beach with my family I wondered if she had ever been able to give orange juice to her own children, from whom she was almost definitely separated.

The first thing I came to understand as a little white girl living in South Africa in the 1960s: people who have more, much more than the people who live around them and whom they treat as less than human, live fearfully. But you don't have to live in South Africa to figure this out.

⁴ So this is the big dilemma. We're supposed to be courageous, we're supposed to stand up for what is right, we are supposed to be good women and men in bad times. On the other hand, at Yom Kippur, we confess that we are "zealots for bad causes." How do we know when we are right? William Butler Yeats observed in "The Second Coming" that "[t]he best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity" (1919). Is this situation always true? Is it necessarily true?

⁵ Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, *In God's Mirror*, xx (2003)

⁶ Bob Dylan, "Blowin' in the Wind," on *Bob Dylan* (1963)

⁷ Deuteronomy 16: 20

⁸ Rebecca Pauline Raymond-Kolker, , "Voice and Quiet," final paper for English 348/African American Studies 348, *Black Women Writers*, with Professor Kevin Quashie, Smith College, December 20, 2010

⁹ Harold M. Schulweis, *In God's Mirror*, 238

¹⁰ Bobby Sharp, "Unchain my heart," first recorded by Ray Charles (1961). The phrase "unchain my heart" makes me think about ambivalence. We get used to our chains, sometimes. We are not so sure we want to be unchained. But I don't mean to equate emotional or metaphorical slavery with actual slavery.

¹¹ Bruce Springsteen, "Hungry Heart," *The River* (1980). The chorus is, "Everybody's got a hungry heart, Everybody's got a hungry heart, Lay down your money and you play your part. Everybody's got a hu-uh-hun-gry heart." According to, um, Wikipedia, the phrase "hungry heart" comes from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, "Ulysses," for the king who was "always roaming with a hungry heart" (1842).

¹² Micah 6:8

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