

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Shemot
January 9, 2021 **** 25 Tevet, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We *welcome* all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Shemot in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3233/jewish/Shemot-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The children of Israel multiply in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill all male babies at birth. When they do not comply, he commands his people to cast the Hebrew babies into the Nile.

A child is born to Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, and her husband, Amram, and placed in a basket on the river, while the baby's sister, Miriam, stands watch from afar. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the boy, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardship of his brethren. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and kills the Egyptian. The next day he sees two Jews fighting; when he admonishes them, they reveal his deed of the previous day, and Moses is forced to flee to Midian. There he rescues Jethro's daughters, marries one of them (Tziporah), and becomes a shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks.

G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai, and instructs him to go to Pharaoh and demand: "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Moses' brother, Aaron, is appointed to serve as his spokesman. In Egypt, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come. The people believe; but Pharaoh refuses to let them go, and even intensifies the suffering of Israel.

Moses returns to G-d to protest: "Why have You done evil to this people?" G-d promises that the redemption is close at hand.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: *Isaiah 27:6–28:13; 29:22–23.*

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah parallels the week's Torah reading on many levels. One of the parallels is the message of redemption conveyed by Isaiah—"and you shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel"—that is reminiscent of the message of redemption that G-d spoke to Moses at the burning bush, a message that Moses then communicated to Pharaoh.

The haftarah vacillates between Isaiah's prophecies concerning the future redemption, and his admonitions concerning the Jews' drunken and G-dless behavior. Isaiah starts on a positive note: "In the coming days, Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom, filling the face of the earth . . ." He mentions G-d's mercy for His nation, and the measure-for-measure punishment He meted out upon the Egyptians who persecuted them. And regarding the future redemption: "You shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel. And it will come to pass on that day that a great shofar will be

sounded, and those lost in the land of Assyria and those exiled in the land of Egypt will come, and they will prostrate themselves before the L-rd on the holy mount in Jerusalem."

The prophet then proceeds to berate the drunkenness of the Ten Tribes, warning them of the punishment that awaits them. "With the feet they shall be trampled, the crown of the pride of the drunkards of Ephraim . . ."

The haftorah ends on a positive note: "Now Jacob will no longer be ashamed, and now his face will not pale. For when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, who shall sanctify My name . . . and the G-d of Israel they will revere."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Women as Leaders (Shemot 5781) By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/shemot-5781/>

This week's parsha could be entitled "The Birth of a Leader." We see Moses, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, growing up as a prince of Egypt. We see him as a young man, for the first time realising the implications of his true identity. He is, and knows he is, a member of an enslaved and suffering people: "Growing up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people" (Ex. 2:10).

He intervenes – he acts: the mark of a true leader. We see him intervene three times, twice in Egypt, once in Midian, to rescue victims of violence. We then witness the great scene at the Burning Bush where God summons him to lead his people to freedom. Moses hesitates four times until God becomes angry and Moses knows he has no other choice. This is a classic account of the genesis of a hero.

But this is only the surface tale. The Torah is a deep and subtle book, and it does not always deliver its message on the surface. Just beneath is another far more remarkable story, not about a hero but about six heroines, six courageous women without whom there would not have been a Moses.

First is Yocheved, wife of Amram and mother of the three people who were to become the great leaders of the Israelites: Miriam, Aaron and Moses himself. It was Yocheved who, at the height of Egyptian persecution, had the courage to have a child, hide him for three months, and then devise a plan to give him a chance of being rescued. We know all too little of Yocheved. In her first appearance in the Torah she is unnamed. Yet, reading the narrative, we are left in no doubt about her bravery and resourcefulness. Not by accident did her children all become leaders.

The second was Miriam, Yocheved's daughter and Moses' elder sister. It was she who kept watch over the child as the small ark floated down the river, and it was she who approached Pharaoh's daughter with the suggestion that he be nursed among his own people. The biblical text paints a portrait of the young Miriam as a figure of unusual fearlessness and presence of mind. Rabbinic tradition goes further. In a remarkable

Midrash, we read of how, upon hearing of the decree that every male Israelite baby would be drowned in the river, Amram led the Israelites in divorcing their wives so that there would be no more children. He had logic on his side. Could it be right to bring children into the world if there were a fifty per cent chance that they would be killed at birth? Yet his young daughter Miriam, so the tradition goes, remonstrated with him and persuaded him to change his mind. "Your decree," she said, "is worse than Pharaoh's. His affects only the boys; yours affects all. His deprives children of life in this world; yours will deprive them of life even in the World to Come." Amram relented, and as a result, Moses was born.[1] The implication is clear: Miriam had more faith than her father.

Third and fourth were the two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who frustrated Pharaoh's first attempt at genocide. Ordered to kill the male Israelite children at birth, they "feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (Ex. 1:17). Summoned and accused of disobedience, they outwitted Pharaoh by constructing an ingenious cover story: the Hebrew women, they said, are vigorous and give birth before we arrive. They escaped punishment and saved many lives. The significance of this story is that it is the first recorded instance of one of Judaism's greatest contributions to civilisation: the idea that there are moral limits to power. There are instructions that should not be obeyed. There are crimes against humanity that cannot be excused by the claim that "I was only obeying orders." This concept, generally known as "civil disobedience", is usually attributed to the nineteenth century American writer Henry David Thoreau, and entered international consciousness after the Holocaust and the Nuremberg trials. Its true origin, though, lies thousands of years earlier in the actions of two women, Shifra and Puah. Through their understated courage they earned a high place among the moral heroes of history, teaching us the primacy of conscience over conformity, the law of justice over the law of the land.[2] The fifth is Tzipporah, Moses' wife. The daughter of a Midianite priest, she was nonetheless determined to accompany Moses on his mission to Egypt, despite the fact that she had no reason to risk her life on such a hazardous venture. In a deeply enigmatic passage, we see it was she who saved Moses' life by performing a circumcision on their son (Ex. 4:24-26). The impression we gain of her is a figure of monumental determination who, at a crucial moment, had a better sense than Moses himself of what God requires.

I have saved until last the most intriguing of them all: Pharaoh's daughter. It was she who had the courage to rescue an Israelite child and bring him up as her own in the very palace where her father was plotting the destruction of the Israelite people. Could we imagine a daughter of Hitler, or Eichmann, or Stalin, doing the same? There is something at once heroic and gracious about this lightly sketched figure, the woman who gave Moses his name.

Who was she? The Torah does not mention her name. However the First Book of Chronicles (4:18) references a daughter of Pharaoh, named Bitya, and it was she whom

the Sages identified as the woman who saved Moses. The name Bitya (sometimes rendered as Batya) means “the daughter of God”. From this, the Sages drew one of their most striking lessons:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: “Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.”[3]

They added that she was one of the few people (tradition enumerates nine) who were so righteous that they entered paradise in their lifetime.[4]

So, on the surface, the parsha of Shemot is about the initiation into leadership of one remarkable man, but just beneath the surface is a counter-narrative of six extraordinary women without whom there would not have been a Moses. They belong to a long tradition of strong women throughout Jewish history, from Deborah, Hannah, Ruth and Esther in the Bible to more modern religious figures like Sarah Schenirer and Nechama Leibowitz to more secular figures like Anne Frank, Hannah Senesh and Golda Meir.

How then, if women emerge so powerfully as leaders, were they excluded in Jewish law from certain leadership roles? If we look carefully we will see that women were historically excluded from two areas. One was the “crown of priesthood”, which went to Aaron and his sons. The other was the “crown of kingship”, which went to David and his sons. These were two roles built on the principle of dynastic succession. From the third crown – the “crown of Torah” – however, women were not excluded. There were Prophetesses, not just Prophets. The Sages enumerated seven of them (Megillah 14a). There have been great women Torah scholars always, from the Mishnaic period (Beruriah, Ima Shalom) until today.

At stake is a more general distinction. Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron in his Responsa, Binyan Av, differentiates between formal or official authority (samchut) and actual leadership (hanhagah).[5] There are figures who hold positions of authority – prime ministers, presidents, CEOs – who may not be leaders at all. They may have the power to force people to do what they say, but they have no followers. They excite no admiration. They inspire no emulation. And there may be leaders who hold no official position at all but who are turned to for advice and are held up as role models. They have no power but great influence. Israel’s Prophets belonged to this category. So, often, did the gedolei Yisrael, the great Sages of each generation. Neither Rashi nor Rambam held any official position (some scholars say that Rambam was chief rabbi of Egypt but most hold that he was not, though his descendants were). Wherever leadership depends on personal qualities – what Max Weber called “charismatic authority” – and not on office or title, there is no distinction between women and men. Yocheved, Miriam, Shifra, Puah, Tzipporah and Batya were leaders not because of any official position they held (in the case of Batya she was a leader despite her official title as a princess of Egypt). They were leaders because they had courage and conscience. They refused to be intimidated by power or defeated by circumstance. They were the

real heroes of the Exodus. Their courage is still a source of inspiration today.[1] Shemot Rabbah 1:13. [2] There is, of course, a Midrashic tradition that Shifra and Puah were other names for Yocheved and Miriam (Sotah 11b). In seeing them as separate women, I am following the interpretation given by Abarbanel and Luzzatto. [3] Vayikra Rabbah 1:3. [4] Derech Eretz Zuta 1 [5] Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, Responsa Binyan Av, 2nd edn., no. 65.

Guided by the Covenant by Arnold M. Eisen

<http://www.jtsa.edu/guided-by-covenant>

There is a wonderful midrash in Pesikta Derav Kahana that suggests a profound relationship between the arrival of the manna described in Parashat Beshallah and the giving of the Ten Commandments recounted in the following parashah, Yitro. Just as the manna tasted different to each and every Israelite, Rabbi Yosi teaches, so each was enabled according to his or her particular capacity to hear the Divine Word differently at Sinai (12:25).

I have wondered, since encountering this midrash, whether we might think of other aspects of the Exodus story in the same way. Perhaps all of what occurs in this book of the Torah, right up to the world-changing events we read about in chapters 19–20, can usefully be seen as preparation for those events. The Israelites needed more than three days at the foot of the mountain to get ready to hear from God what cannot normally be heard and to see what can never be seen. They required all of the awesome experiences of slavery and liberation; of deliverance from Pharaoh's chariots at the Red Sea, and deliverance from their own thirst and impatience in the wilderness. We too, thousands of years after them, need preparation as we make our way as readers through this narrative each year. The Torah clearly does not wish us to come upon Sinai unaware. A lot of thoughts and emotion pave the way.

I will leave aside for the moment the particular sort of preparation that Rabbi Yosi sought to capture in the midrash to which I referred above. Let's reflect rather on the more general themes of the book of Exodus, and how they might get us ready for Sinai. I want to ask, in particular, how immersion in history is connected to acceptance of covenant.

It seems utterly crucial to the Torah that the contract we will "sign" at Sinai be thoroughly grounded in the historical world as it is and always has been. This teaching is not meant as a blueprint for individual enlightenment (though it certainly contains such guidelines). The path up to the mountain, like the path down from it, leads straight into and through the most concrete of historical realities. These include day-to-day facts of life such as those Moses' father-in-law witnesses and helps to improve (dispute and judgment), or those Pharaoh witnesses and works to disrupt (the labor of childbirth and Israelite labor in the fields). The relevant history also encompasses extraordinary realities, blessed or cursed, such as the attempted genocide of an entire people (now all too common an item in the news); or—far less common, but not

unknown—the liberation of an entire people from slavery. The Torah describes a redemption so public, so visible, and so miraculous that it cannot but provoke notice of, and thanks for, the help of God. This experience is perhaps the most important preparatory step to covenant of all.

Either way, however—blessing or curse; day-to-day facts of life or extraordinary reality—the Torah seems to teach that the covenant we are making with one another and God is to be enacted in the human world—pre-eminently social and political—that we all know from experience. It does not pertain to some fantasy utopia not yet created. God wants us to know God here, now, as we are, as the world is. It is this story God wants changed by our reading and our labors.

I don't know about you, but I have long felt challenged by the moment early in the book of Exodus when Moses strikes down the Egyptian who is mercilessly beating an Israelite slave. I realized years ago that by cheering Moses on as the text leads me to do, wishes me to do, I become complicit in a way with the action Moses takes. This, too, is part of the Torah's intention, I believe. It wants me to lose my innocence in this fashion so as to increase my sense of responsibility for the world. The lesson is a hard one to learn, year by year. We want innocence back and can't have it.

The Torah wants us instead to be thoughtful moral actors. As such we are not free of responsibility for the evils in which we acquiesce, and, what is more, we share in guilt for the evils in which we join—and perhaps to a lesser extent, for the evils of which we approve. "Few are guilty, all are responsible," Heschel liked to say. Some of us may choose pacifism as a result of thinking deeply about the costs of the spiraling cycle of violence in the world. This choice, too, involves responsibility and incurs guilt, of course, every bit as much as the decision—based in part on repeated encounters with the story of Israelite suffering in Egypt—that some evil must be stopped by force if necessary. Either way the text haunts us with the tragic knowledge that good rarely comes of violence. The Torah is a determinedly realistic account of history. The covenant it bequeaths us demands wrestling with the deepest of moral dilemmas. No less, I think, the events leading up to Sinai require that we think as well as we can, using all the resources at our disposal, about what it means for finite creatures like ourselves to "hear"—be in touch with, seek to learn from and obey—the infinite God. What does it mean for women and men who walk on two legs and have two feet planted firmly in the earth to direct our minds' eyes heavenwards? Again and again we try to imagine—each in our different ways—what it might have been like for Moses to stand at the top of that mountain as God "came down." The text seems convinced that in order to do so effectively, we had better be able to imagine—each in our different ways—what it might have been like for the Israelites to stand in the "narrow place" of slavery and await deliverance, which for so long did not come.

The Torah puts us into their faraway situation so as to bring us closer to our own. It makes us go through as readers what our ancestors went through in life—so that we work to make sure as many of our children as possible have the good fortune of

merely reading about suffering and slavery rather than living through them. The book of Exodus begins with the names of those who went down to Egypt, one by one, the better perhaps to challenge us to add our names to the list of those who bring the world up from Egypt. We do so guided and informed by the covenant agreed upon at Sinai.

May we read the book of Exodus well this year, and have the courage to act in accordance with what we taste of and hear in its Divine Word. (*Arnold M. Eisen is Chancellor Emeritus and Professor of Jewish Thought at JTS*)

[The World is Charged with the Grandeur of God by Ilana Kurshan](https://drive.google.com/file/d/10_YiXcqiv35N5HeiFXBMK63RSF6u9KCh/view)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/10_YiXcqiv35N5HeiFXBMK63RSF6u9KCh/view

Moshe's encounter with God at the burning bush resembles and perhaps anticipates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. In both experiences of revelation, Moshe is on a lone journey when he encounters the divine amidst fiery conflagration atop a mountain. The Hebrew word used in the Torah for the burning bush is sneh, a near-anagram of Sinai, and indeed this week's parasha, Shemot, explicitly identifies the site of Moshe's first revelation as "Horev, the mountain of the Lord," which is another name for Mount Sinai. Both times, Moshe is shepherding his flock—first his sheep, and then the people of Israel—and both experiences of revelation change him fundamentally. And yet Moshe responds dramatically differently to each divine encounter.

Whereas the revelation at Sinai was foretold by God, the burning bush catches Moshe entirely unawares. An angel of God appears to him in the flames, and Moshe finds himself unable to avert his glance: "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (3:3). God, struck that Moshe turns to look, calls out to him and identifies Himself as the God of his ancestors. What catches Moshe's attention is the unusualness of a bush that is not consumed; but what catches God's attention is that Moshe notices: "When the Lord saw that he had turned to look, God called to him out of the bush" (3:4).

This is not the first time that God has chosen as his prophet the person who stops to notice. The midrash in Genesis Rabbah (39:1) relates a parable to illustrate God's choice of Abraham. According to the midrash, Abraham may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a residential building ablaze. He said, "Is it possible that this building lacks someone to take care of it?" At that point, the owner of the building looked out and said, "I am the owner of the building." Likewise, the midrash continues, Abraham asked, "Is it possible that this universe lacks a person to look after it?" And God responded, "I am the Master of the Universe."

It is notable that in this midrash, God is not the building superintendent, but the owner; it is Abraham whom God will appoint to "care for the building" by teaching the world about monotheism. According to the midrash, Abraham was chosen by God because he was unable to keep walking along on his way when the world was on fire. In the face of so much injustice, he demanded to know who was in charge.

Moshe also notices conflagration, but unlike Abraham, he needs to be told what it signifies. God instructs Moshe to take off his shoes because he is standing on holy ground, and then tells him, "I have marked well the plight of my people in Egypt and have heard their outcry... I am mindful of their sufferings" (3:7). God is essentially informing Moshe that He knows the world is on fire; His people are suffering and their cries have risen up to the heavens like fiery flames. And just as God previously appointed Abraham to care for the world of which He is master, this time God will appoint Moshe to do the job.

Moshe's response to the divine call is somewhat surprising: The man who could not help but look now averts his glance: "And Moshe hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (3:6). Moshe will again and again try to resist his mission, insisting that he is not a man of words and that Pharaoh will not heed him. But the Talmud (Berakhot 7a) regards Moshe's response as praiseworthy. The rabbis state that as a reward for averting his glance, Moshe merited to have his countenance glow when he descended Mount Sinai following the giving of the tablets (Exodus 34:29). With this comment, the rabbis explicitly link the revelations at the sneh and at Sinai – Moshe's behavior in the former determines the outcome of the latter.

And yet Moshe has changed by the time he reaches Mount Sinai – he is no longer averting his glance from God, but rather demanding to catch a glimpse of the divine: "Oh let me behold Your glory" (Exodus 33:18), he pleads following the sin of the golden calf. The continuation of this Talmudic passage once again juxtaposes the sneh and Sinai revelations to imagine a dialogue between God and Moshe in which God says, "When I wanted to show you my glory at the burning bush, you did not want to see it, as it is stated, 'And Moshe concealed his face.' But now that you want to see my glory at Sinai, as you said, 'Oh let me behold Your glory,' I do not want to show it to you" (Berakhot 7a). The rabbis depict God and Moshe as courting lovers who can't quite get their timing right – as soon as one party tries to engage, the other loses interest. God, who chose Moshe because of his knack for noticing, tells Moshe at Sinai that there is a limit to how much even he can see and how close even he can come. Moshe's responses to these two revelations are captured in the angelic call-and-response of the Kedushah prayer, in which some angels ask "Where is the place of His presence?" and others respond, "The entire world is filled with His glory" (Isaiah 6:3). Moshe at Mount Sinai longs to see God's glory, like the angels who ask about the place of God's presence. But Moses at the burning bush is so overcome by the fiery revelation that he averts his glance, all too aware that the entire world is saturated with divinity.

Perhaps our challenge, following Moshe, is to learn not to demand evidence of the divine—"where is the place of His presence"—and instead to train ourselves to notice the spark of God wherever it may be found – on a fiery mountain, in a small burning bush off the beaten track, in a sacred encounter. As Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds us:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from
shook foil.... Why do men then now not reck his rod? Generations have trod, have trod,
have trod.... Nor can foot feel, being shod.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God because the whole world is filled with
His glory. And we are charged to turn aside, take off our shoes, and feel the holiness of
the ground beneath us – wherever we may find ourselves. *(Ilana Kurshan is a faculty
member at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem)*

Searching for Sense by Bex Stern Rosenblatt

https://drive.google.com/file/d/10_YiXcqiv35N5HeiFXBMK63RSF6u9KCh/view

Judaism and the Jewish people survive and thrive because their teachings and
traditions are carefully passed down from one generation to the next. Each successive
generation takes upon itself the mantle to continue the unbroken chain. Our
peoplehood depends on it. And yet, sometimes that chain is broken. When one
generation fails, how is the next generation to learn how to act? Can children learn
without people to teach them?

These questions animate this week's parasha and haftarah. This week, we begin the
book of Exodus. After the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis's obsession with
ensuring correct succession, with passing down blessing to their offspring, Exodus
begins with the separation of Moses from his tradition, to be raised in the house of the
daughter of Pharaoh. Moreover, all the tribes of Israel have lost sight of the promise,
enslaved as they are. The chain of tradition seems to have been broken.

Isaiah addresses the problem directly. Our haftarah pronounces destruction for the
Northern Kingdom of Israel. The leaders of the kingdom have failed. In chapter 28:7-8,
Isaiah says, "Priest and prophet are wrong due to strong wine, they are swallowed up
by wine and have gone astray. From strong wine they are wrong in vision, they stumble
in judgement. For all the tables are full of vomit and excrement, there is no space." The
ones in charge have incapacitated themselves. Rather than teaching the children how
to live in this world, the leaders have become like children themselves, reduced to the
basest bodily functions.

Isaiah continues, "To whom should he teach knowledge? And who can be made to
understand the message? To those being weaned from milk? To those drawn from the
breasts?" In this week's parasha, however, Moses literally retains his connection to his
people through his mother's milk. Even as the formal transmission of knowledge has
been cut off, Moses is bound to his tradition through his nursing. In Isaiah, being
drawn away from mother's milk, the people are cut off and all that is left is vomit and
excrement.

And indeed, the people seem to lose their ability to speak. Just as children who have
been abandoned, they cannot put sounds together to make words. Isaiah 28:10
contains the enigmatic phrase, 'tzav le-tsav, kav le-kav.' The meaning of this phrase is
uncertain. It is often translated as incoherent babbling, what the people of Israel hear

and produce. It is also thought to represent part of an abecedary (listing of the alphabet,) used to help children learn. Here, it appears in a fragment, the remnant of a tradition no longer able to be passed down. Isaiah continues, saying that the words will be spoken, "with stammering speech and in another language."

Moses is another child of stammering speech. In our parasha, he tells God, "I am not a man of words... I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." And yet, when Moses is confronted with God's most enigmatic phrase, Moses understands. Moses has asked for God's name. God replies, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh." Just like the phrase in Isaiah, these words have meaning individually but it is unclear exactly what they mean together or how they should function as a name. Moses takes the mystery with him; he takes the learning to pass onto the people of Israel when they ask for God's name. Rather than dismissing God's words as incomprehensible and thinking of himself as a child incapable of understanding, Moses takes the words he may not fully understand in order to pass them down to the next generation.

When we are faced with the incomprehensible, it is tempting to push it away. It is tempting to see ourselves as incapable and even to blame those who came before us for not giving us the tools to understand. Instead, we can take the message and pass it on. We can refuse to break the chain and perhaps even the name of God will emerge eventually from what seems to us to be incoherent babbling. *(Bex Stern-Rosenblatt is a faculty member at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem)*

Where is Humanity by Rabbi Mary Zamore

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/where-humanity>

This week's Torah portion, Sh'mot, begins the well-known narrative of Israelite enslavement and redemption from Egyptian bondage. On face value, it tells us of God's saving power at our greatest moment of need. However, within the twists and turns, we discover the Exodus narrative is as much about absence as it is about action.

The text of the nearly two chapters that open the book of Exodus flows rapidly from Joseph's death to the Israelites' enslavement to Moses' birth and upbringing to the servitude becoming more inhumane. God does not appear until Exodus 2:23-25, as seen here:

...The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew.

These verses beg the question: Where was God during the years of Israelite enslavement?

Asking questions about God at moments of personal or communal suffering is innate to the human condition.

My rabbinical school teacher at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Dr. Eugene Borowitz, z"l – may his memory be for a blessing – had a unique method of

approaching this theological question. In the middle of class, Dr. Borowitz would cover his face with his hands and stand before the class for an uncomfortable amount of time. He would then dramatically drop his hands and rotate his body across the expanse of the classroom, looking each student in the eye.

His pantomime demonstrated the concept of God hiding God's face, *hester panav*, which assumes God can help but does not.

This disturbing theology represents one of many understandings of God's nature and power. For example, in Psalm 44:25, the narrator laments, "Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our affliction and distress?" The sense of abandonment stands in stark contrast to feeling blessed by God, as celebrated in the Priestly Benediction, Numbers 6:24-26:

The Eternal bless you and keep you; the Eternal make God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Eternal lift up God's countenance upon you and give you peace.

When God finally responds to the Israelites' cry (Ex. 2:23-25), the 11th-century commentator Rashi explains: "[God] lifted God's heart towards them and no longer hid God's eyes."

The dichotomy between hiding the face and revealing the face is powerful. When we are at our personal depths of trauma, suffering, or illness, we feel the most alone. Today, we even use the verbal expression that we want to be seen, meaning we want to be understood and recognized in our pain. For our ancient ancestors, it must have felt as if, to use another colloquial phrase, God "ghosted" them at their greatest hour of need.

Yet, when I reconsider the nearly two chapters that open the book of Exodus, I do not find a void. Rather, there is plenty of evidence of compassionate, brave activism – including people willing to help others despite the personal risk.

Shiphrah and Puah lied to Pharaoh and saved the male Israelite babies. Yocheved hid baby Moses for three months and then put him in a basket in the Nile. Miriam followed Moses as he floated in the Nile and then courageously stepped forward to speak to Pharaoh's daughter, offering to find a wet nurse. Pharaoh's unnamed daughter, knowing the boy was a Hebrew, took Moses into her father's household to raise him under Pharaoh's nose. The adult Moses struck and killed the Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave.

In each of these cases, the person acted according to the moral compass embedded in the human spirit, part of God's creation.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg, z"l, believed that God shares power and responsibility with humanity, and therefore we are partners in righting wrongs. "Both He and His creation," Steinberg wrote, "are then faced with a common task and a common battle. They may share together in opposing the same unreason and bringing greater light and order in the universe." (Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme, *Finding God: Selected Responses*, revised edition, UAHC, New York)

The Exodus narrative is perpetually compelling because, unfortunately, in every age there is oppression and suffering. While it is most natural to ask, "Where is God?" perhaps we must also ask, "Where are we?" When we feel as if God has hidden from us, perhaps it is because we have closed our eyes and hearts to each other's pain. We must ask: Has humanity held up our side of the partnership?

Building on rabbinic teachings, the contemporary Torah commentator Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg points out the progression of verbs in verse 25: "God heard ...God remembered...God looked...God knew." (The Particulars of Rapture, Schocken Books, New York). With four actions, God transforms from missing to present. I propose God provides us, the human partners, with a model for just, compassionate action. We who are created in God's image can act in godly ways to repair the world.

Hear. All social justice and acts of kindness must start with compassionate listening to understand the extent of the pain.

Remember. God remembered the covenant. Like this foundational value of God's relationship with the Israelites, we must also remember our foundational ethics and values to give us direction.

Look. Examine the problem with its nuance and complications, lest our actions create unintended consequences.

Know. Work to understand the pain and suffering in front of you and prepare to act. In a world filled with so much brokenness, may we hear, remember, look, and know to be God's partners in the needed repair. As we pray from Mishkan T'filah, the words of Michael Waltzer:

*that wherever we are, it is eternally Egypt
that there is a better place, a Promised Land....
That there is no way to get from here to there
Except by joining hands, marching
Together.*

(Rabbi Mary L. Zamore (she/her) is the executive director of the Women's Rabbinic Network. She is the editor of The Sacred Exchange: Creating a Jewish Money Ethic (CCAR Press, 2019) and The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic (CCAR Press, 2011), designated a finalist by the National Jewish Book Awards)

Yahrtzeits

Rebecca Greene remembers her father David Schwartz on Saturday January 9th (Tevet 25).

Craig Miller remembers his mother Roberta Miller (Riva bat Henka & Shmulick) on Wednesday January 13th (Tevet 29).

R. Lisa Vernon remembers her grandmother Sadie Hammer Vernon on Friday January 15th.

Blossom Primer remembers her mother Esther Rappaport on Friday January 15th (Shevat 2)

