

Hope and a listening heart, January 13, 2024

FINAL d'var Torah Vaera

I read parshat *Va'era* this year with a different perspective than I have before. I didn't plan to do that. Nothing in the text itself has changed. The circumstances in the world today, however, urged me to hear and understand both the facts and the intention of the parsha, through a modified lens.

I began to think about our ancestors, the patriarchs and matriarchs. Each one had his or her own unique relationship with God. God was, sometimes directly and more often indirectly, involved in their lives. And then I thought about our ancestors, the Israelites, who were slaves to one Pharaoh or another in Egypt for so many generations; more than 400 years. They may have known about their ancestry, but it is unlikely they had any idea about, or experience with, the God who had guided their ancestor's lives.

When God sent Moshe to deliver the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, God promised to show God's wonders as confirmation that Moshe, a person, not a God, had authority ([Exodus 3:20](#)). This confirmation was to serve at least three purposes: first, to show the Israelites that the God of their fathers was indeed, alive and worthy of their worship ([Exodus 6:6-8](#); [12:25-27](#)). Second, to show the Egyptians that their gods were not powerful and (they would have to decide whether or not they were worthy of their worship) ([Exodus 7:5](#); [12:12](#)). And finally, that living with an open heart and an open mind are important, even essential to our evolution as human kind, made in the image of God and also regarding our ability to evolve in our individual and collective partnerships with God.

The Egyptians like many pagan cultures, worshiped a wide variety of nature-gods and attributed to their powers the natural phenomena they saw in the world around them. When Moshe approached Pharaoh, demanding that he let the Israelites go, Pharaoh, who considered himself to be a God, as did all the Egyptians, responded by saying, "Who is

the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go” (Exodus 5:2). Some have said, about those words, the challenge to show whose God was more powerful, began.

That phrase, however, “the challenge to show whose God was more powerful” is not what I understand to be a goal, or even a primary theme; not in this story; not with regard to our partnership with God and certainly not with our relationships to those we love and those whom we don’t know-yet. It is not about power. It is specifically about God’s establishing and evolving in relationship with the Israelites who would ultimately become the Jewish people. And, about the relationships of humankind with each other.

Having been enslaved in Egypt for so many centuries, one generation of Israelites after another, “lost touch” with the God of their biblical ancestors. Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches in her book Torah Journeys, that the enslaved Israelites were unable to respond to the promise of freedom because they didn’t understand what freedom was or even what it meant. She suggests it was a blessing for the Israelites to witness the plagues. “The blessing that comes from witnessing the plagues is the awakening of the inner force of conscience that turns us towards wholeness and balance, and thus towards freedom.”¹

The exile of the Israelites in Egypt for so many generations had produced not only a people in exile but also a people for whom *awareness of God was in exile*. My teacher Rabbi Art Green wrote “The essential message in Torah and in the story of the exodus, is to be aware of the presence of Y-H-W-H in all things and at every moment. It is that awareness that has to be released from Egypt along with the people.”² How could the enslaved Israelites understand the concept of serving God- let alone living a

¹ Rabbi Shefa Gold, *Torah journeys*, p.68

² Art Green *SPEAKING TORAH*

life with the understanding of God's love, compassion and kindness as a model for their own lives?

Given our current worldwide situation, so filled with hate, we are watching, hearing and witnessing the full-blown screaming of our brothers and sisters, all over the world, from a distance. I cry every day. I don't watch the news. But my tears are consoled, and my heart is open, as I am inspired by the stories people have sent me. Some have formed groups here and abroad to organize food for soldiers and families in need, and to help take care of and educate children, both Israeli and Palestinian. Rick and I will go to Israel in February on a JNF sponsored mission to do farm work for soldiers who are fighting on the front lines. It is a small thing but it feels useful and good. It makes me happy.

The Passover story that we read in our Hagaddah during the Seder, comes directly from these portions in the book of Exodus. Its intention is to teach; and to explain the relationship over the centuries between the Jewish people and our God. In today's portion, God tells the Israelite people, "I am the Lord, I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm through extraordinary chastisements. I will take you to be my people and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Isaac and Jacob." (6:6-8)

That last promise is important but, even once we came out of bondage in Egypt we were still exiled from the land which God had promised our ancestors. For many people only the personal attributes remain in exile: love, fear, and glory. Then and now, everyone understands that God exists, accessible to us in many ways and times. Each one has some degree of awareness. Yet our qualities of "being in the world" still remain exiled because we have improper loves, improper fears and often do not act with the understanding that we are made in the image of God. These qualities were imprinted

within us primarily, for the service of Y-H-W-H, but we often use them, even today, to violate God's will. That is why the Torah continually admonishes us to "Recall the day you came out of Egypt" (Deut. 16:3). That is a primary purpose of repeating the story of the liberation of the Israelite slaves from Egypt with a Passover Seder each year. It will activate our curiosity, our sense of responsibility and our natural inclinations toward justice and obtaining freedom for all. It will become a part of our children's Jewish identity. This story, our story, and its repetition, serves as a model of how "be" in the world, as well as how to be "out from exile" emotionally. If we remember that "awareness itself" of our relationship with God, was once in exile, we must appreciate that, eventually, we came forth with it. Then, we would be more aware of God's existence and our personal qualities which will lead us toward goodness and away from evil.

Rick and I have had the pleasure of having our 6 year old grandson, Jonah, with us for more than a week. He is constantly sharing with us amazing facts that he learns, I'm not sure where. Last week he held up his fist and asked if we knew that our hearts are this size; the size of a closed fist. In the last several days, partly because I've been sick, but also because I'm worried and fearful about the world circumstances, I have found myself placing my closed hand against my chest. It feels like what I do when I say Vidui, confession, on the high holy days. In addition to Jonah's comment, this gesture was intimately related to Pharaoh's hardened heart. My fist, on the outside, was a powerful and gentle little hug. Simultaneously, I was quietly listening to the beat of the fist within and feeling the presence of God.

The question of finding *God in our lives, today is a challenge*. There is a short story in [A Different night Hagaddah](#)³ which accomplishes that goal in a startling way. It is entitled: "Who will be today's Midwives?" "One Sunday morning in 1941, in Nazi-occupied Netherlands, a mysterious character rode up on his bicycle and entered the Calvinist

³ A Different Night Haggadah p.51

Church. He ascended to the podium and read aloud the story of the midwives who defied Pharaoh's policy of genocide and saved the Hebrew babies. "Who is today's Pharaoh?" he asked. "Hitler", the congregation replied. "Who are today's Hebrew babies?" "The Jews." "Who will be today's midwives?" he asked. He left the church, leaving his question hanging in the air. During the war (1941-1945) seven families from this little church hid Jews and other resisters from the Nazi's."⁴ God was present in the lives of those midwives; at that church, especially during those special moments; and in our hearts if only we recognize it.

Sometimes we somehow see or feel the presence of God when we are unexpectedly able to rise to the occasion demanded by dramatic circumstances in our lives. In those times we may surprise ourselves in big and even huge ways by doing things we had no idea we were capable of doing. In 2007, Bassam Aramin's 10-year old daughter was killed by an Israeli soldier's rubber bullet outside of her school. Still dressed in her school uniform she had been on her way to buy candy with a friend. After the war broke out on October 7th, Bassam was asked in an interview⁵ what he would tell other parents who have lost their children in the ensuing violence. His voice heavy with emotion, he shared "I know this pain. It's unbearable pain. This pain has a power to create a bridge, or to create more graves."

That is true love and wisdom. It comes from a very blessed, deep place of hope.

It was Theodore Herzl who said about the creation of the State of Israel, "If you will it, it is no Dream." In many ways, to live our lives in ways that will help us connect with God, requires that same will: the hope and the effort to connect more readily with each other. Many of us have never thought of looking for God in the place where God really is-and yet God lies so near. It is here: within ourselves! ⁶

⁴ The full story can be found in the Different night Hagaddah, leader's guide?

⁵ Interview available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGZlR_h96ek

⁶ A different night Hagadah; Theodore Herzl, 1895 p. 172

That is our moral inheritance and our proud history.

We are thoughtful about what we do; guided by our Torah and mindful and supportive of the diversities within our community.

We are all working together to pull each other through the wilderness and out of Egypt and with God's help, into the promised land.

We repeat this story of the liberation of the Israelite slaves from Egypt with a Passover Seder each year, to activate our curiosity, our sense of responsibility and that of our children. But there is one other crucial element.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: ⁷ “This is why I bring challenging contemporary issues to my congregation; so we can fulfill our birthright which begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be.” When we are open, we are able to take action and renew hope in the world. This is how we fulfill our covenant and lead ourselves and our world to be redeemed. This is why I open my hand and rest it flat on my chest. These are the same hands with which I do mundane daily tasks: plant bulbs in the garden, wipe the table and vacuum the floor after dinner, wash my grandchildren's hair, turn the page as I study or read them a story. None of this could happen if my hand is balled into a fist. It requires an opening up. In order to reach out, to grasp the hand of my neighbor, to embrace those we hold dear, I must open my hand and open my heart again and again.

⁷ *The Letter In The Scroll* p. 57