

Moses, MLK, and the Pursuit of Liberty: Pharaoh Says “Yes,” Then Pharaoh Says “No”

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Our Torah portion this morning is Va’era.<sup>1</sup>

God chooses Moses to lead his people from slavery to freedom.

Moses must go to Pharaoh and demand, “Let my people go.”

If Pharaoh agrees, then slavery will end. The people will be free.

Three times Moses asks, “Let my people go,” and three times Pharaoh refuses, despite plagues of blood, frogs and lice.

Moses asks a fourth time, and threatens a plague of insects. Pharaoh appears to relent. He says the people can go free.

But Pharaoh changes his mind. The Israelites remain in slavery.

Pharaoh says yes, then Pharaoh says no.

Two more plagues, the death of cattle and the plague of boils, do not persuade Pharaoh.

Under the threat of each of the next two plagues, hail and locusts, Pharaoh agrees. Each time, however, he again changes his mind.

Pharaoh says yes, then Pharaoh says no.

The plague of darkness does not persuade him.

The death of the first born finally forces Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Even then, Pharaoh changes his mind one final time. He chases the fleeing Israelites to the Sea of Reeds.

Pharaoh says yes, then Pharaoh says no.

This time, though, the Israelites escape to freedom as the Egyptian army drowns.

On Monday we will celebrate the life and legacy Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the modern Moses. Dr. King, like Moses, relied on strength he drew from his faith in God. He asked and asked and asked again that his people be allowed to go free from the persistent results of American slavery.

The legal history of that struggle for freedom sadly reminds me of the pattern in today’s reading: the government denies freedom, then seems to grant it, only to change the rules and return to the old pattern of denial of freedom. The government’s “yes” followed by its “no” happens repeatedly.

By the time of the Civil War there were four million slaves here. The story of their liberation we learned as children seemed like the story of the liberation of the Israelites. “The groaning of the slaves reached the ears of President Lincoln, who responded by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation.”

Like Pharaoh’s apparent concessions to Moses, though, that apparent promise of freedom did a lot less for slaves than the name “Emancipation Proclamation” suggests. The Proclamation applied only in the states

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 6:2 – 9:35

that were in rebellion against the United States. They were eight southern states and some counties in two others. No slaves there gained their freedom, since the Union had no power there. The proclamation also did not even claim to end slavery in any of the Union states where slavery still existed. When Lincoln issued the proclamation, therefore, he freed only about 20,000 of the four million slaves.

Pharaoh says yes, then Pharaoh says no.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, some states continued to have laws authorizing slavery. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, however, made involuntary servitude illegal throughout the country. At last, slavery was over.

Or was it? In practical fact, no.

Pharaoh says yes, then Pharaoh says no.

In the same era that the Constitution abolished slavery, Southern states were resisting the Reconstructionist agenda and soon enacted laws that excluded former slaves from participation in civil society. These laws were called Black Codes and then Jim Crow laws.

These laws denied blacks rights to vote, which resulted in denial of the right to sit on juries. Excluded from both the ballot box and the jury box, blacks were denied all political and practical power.

These laws also required racial segregation in public facilities and schools in Southern states. Before 1890, these laws did not even require "separate but equal" status for African Americans. The separation in practice, even after 1890, led to conditions for African Americans that were inferior to those provided for white Americans, systematizing economic, educational and social disadvantages.

The situation for former slaves and their descendants was hardly better in this period in the Northern states. While there were no laws requiring segregation in the north, de facto segregation prevailed for a century after the Civil War ended. Patterns of segregation persisted in housing, in bank lending practices, in job discrimination, and in the inferior education in schools attended by large numbers of African Americans.

Pharaoh says yes, then Pharaoh says no.

In 1896 the Supreme Court ruled that separate facilities for blacks and whites, such as transportation facilities and schools, did not violate the constitutional guarantee of equal protection, so long as those separate facilities were equal. Meanwhile, and for the next half century, Jim Crow laws in the South and private arrangements in the North continued the pattern of segregation in public schools, other public places, public transportation, restrooms, and restaurants. The U.S. military was segregated until 1948. Federal workplaces were segregated officially in 1913 under President Woodrow Wilson, the first Southern president since 1856. His administration practiced overt racial discrimination in hiring, requiring candidates to submit photos.

It seemed in 1954 that this unfair system that so disadvantaged black Americans was finally ending. The unanimous decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in *Brown versus Board of Education* held that separate facilities are inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional.

Pharaoh says yes.

But the Court ruled that changes in the school system need not happen immediately. Rather, states must implement a non-discriminatory system of education only "with all deliberate speed."

Pharaoh says no.

In subsequent decades our country was torn by racial division and our cities experienced white flight as school boards engaged in delaying tactics and white citizens resisted the integration of schools and neighborhoods.

By 1971, the city of Detroit was typical. By then 70% of the students in Detroit's public schools were black.

The NAACP brought a lawsuit called Milliken versus Bradley. The plaintiffs argued that the segregation in the Detroit schools was unlawful. The Court agreed.

Pharaoh says yes.

The plaintiffs presented a plan to integrate the schools of Detroit by including the school systems of suburban communities surrounding the city. Detroit appealed from the allowance of that plan. The Supreme Court, by a ruling of five to four, threw out the plan. The Court held that suburbs could not be required to take part in the desegregation of urban schools.

Pharaoh says no.

Twenty years later, 90% of the students in Detroit public schools were black.

Some progress has occurred. For example, Braintree was one of seven school districts to support the METCO program when it began. That program brings children from the inner city to suburban schools on a voluntary basis to overcome some of the disadvantages of urban schools. Braintree remains an active participant.

Discrimination is illegal in housing, in employment, in voting rights. Agencies of government exist to enforce those laws.

The work of ensuring freedom and equality, echoes of the cry of Moses to Pharaoh and the insistent voice of Martin Luther King, continue. Whenever and however we can, we must join our voices to theirs, to urge our government at all levels to say "yes" to freedom, and not to then say "no."

Our reading begins on page 357, verse 8.