

A Toothbrush in the Pocket: Parashat Vaera

When actor Billy Crystal was a young boy, well before *Saturday Night Live* or *City Slickers* or *When Harry Met Sally*, he would watch the Academy Awards each year, always being sent to bed before the broadcast was over. As he was putting on his pajamas and washing his face, he would hold his toothbrush like an imaginary Oscar trophy and practice his acceptance speech. The next morning, slid under the cereal bowl, his mother would leave him a napkin covered with names of all the award winners he had missed while sleeping.

Crystal, as we know, grew up and became a famous comedian, writer, director, and producer; in 1990 he was asked for the first time to host the very awards show he had watched as a child. He went on to emcee the broadcast another eight times after that, winning two Emmys for hosting and writing the 63rd annual Academy Awards and an Emmy for writing the 64th. Each time that Crystal suited up for his duties, along with donning a crisp tuxedo and polished dress shoes, he would always tuck a very special keepsake into his pocket - a memento to remind him from whence he had come. Right there next to his heart, along with a folded handkerchief, would be a cheap, plastic, child-sized drugstore toothbrush.

What did Moses carry in his pocket as he led the Israelites out of slavery? A wicker swatch from his baby basket? A lock of Yocheved's hair, secretly tucked away while his mother nursed him in Pharaoh's palace? Or perhaps something more quintessentially Egyptian in nature – a bow from target practice, a piece of iron from his first chariot, a scrap of unused kohl? I ask this question about Moses' prized possessions not to suggest moderating influences that might have kept our great leader humble; after all, Moses is known for being *ish anavah*, a person of tremendous modesty who even at the moment of

being called to Divine service demurred, insisting he was of impeded speech and unworthy for the task. Rather, my interest in the things that Moses carried comes from wondering about how our great prophet saw himself – as Israelite, Egyptian, or something in between. As he returned to the land of his birth, preparing to free a people he had never quite been a part of from the traumas of bondage, I am curious to explore how Moses thought about issues of identity.

While we know a great deal about Moses' early childhood – how he was saved from Pharaoh's genocidal decree and hidden by the banks of the Nile only to be found by Pharaoh's daughter who hired the baby's own mother to serve as nursemaid – we learn very little about what happens between the time that Moses is weaned and the time that he reaches adulthood. Biblical scholar Nahum Sarna indicates that young Moses presumably received the kind of classical education that other sons of privilege enjoyed at that time, studying arithmetic, reading, and writing where penmanship, in particular, was highly esteemed in ancient Egypt as part of the society's general appreciation for all things aesthetic. Moses' *academic* pedigree, however, is of no interest to the Biblical author who is far more concerned with our leader's *moral* bone fides. It is here, for the first time, that questions of who Moses is and what he knows of his background first come into play.

In last week's Torah portion, *Parashat Shemot*, we read of an incident in which Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and immediately kills him. Did Moses already know at this time that he, too, was Israelite and is this what motivated his act of vigilante justice? Or is Moses, at his very core, simply a person who cannot tolerate cruelty in any form as evidenced by his intervening not only here but also later when he sees two Hebrews fighting and then again at the well when he drives off the throng of shepherds harassing a group of Midianite women? Moses is clearly a person who stands up for the

vulnerable, whether or not they are his kin. In this iconic scene, is he acting simply as a good Samaritan or as an indignant member of the tribe protecting his own?

The great medieval rabbi, Ramban, points to the word *vayigdal* (and he grew up) used to describe Moses in the episode with the Egyptian and takes it to mean that Moses had arrived at a sufficiently mature age here that Pharaoh's daughter could finally share with him the truth of his heritage, imagining that it was actually on this selfsame day that Moses learned he was himself a Hebrew which perhaps led to his oversized reaction. Other commentators highlight the word *echav* – “his brothers” – that occurs twice in this verse, indicating that Moses had “fraternal feelings”¹ towards the Hebrews and “shared in their distress”² because he knew himself to be one of them. Contemporary scholar Aviva Zornberg points out that the Hebrew word *vayar*, used here to describe Moses *seeing* the labors of the Israelites, is also used in Exodus 1 when Pharaoh commands midwives Shifra and Puah to *look at (uriten)* the birth-stool to determine if it's a baby boy to be killed or a baby girl to let live. While Pharaoh stands apart from what he witnesses, killing it without remorse, Moses is so deeply connected to the suffering he sees that he can't help but react.

Even if Moses considers himself an Israelite by the time he kills the Egyptian, the local population tends to view him differently. A midrash in Shemot Rabbah picks up on the backlash Moses experiences after he confronts two Hebrew men fighting, them accosting him with the accusation “Who made you chief and ruler over us?” (Exodus 2:14). Embellishing upon the Biblical text, the midrash imagines that the men first impugn Moses' age (which, according to the midrash is just 20 years old at the time) and then ask him: “Are you indeed the son of Yocheved? Then why do they call you the son of Batya?”³ Moses

¹ Sforno on Exodus 2:11

² Rashi on Exodus 2:11

³ Shemot Rabbah 1:29

may be trying to align himself with the Israelite community, but his supposed brethren see him squarely as Egyptian. He can claim whatever parentage he wants, but he cannot escape the stain of royalty.

When Moses first arrives in Midian and meets Zipporah and her sisters at the well, he is also identified as non-Israelite as the women describe this foreigner to their father as *ish Miztri* – an Egyptian man (Exodus 2:18). We can easily imagine that Moses looked and sounded Egyptian, that his attire and speech reflected the culture of the home in which he had spent his formative years, and Yitro's daughters reasonably assume that Moses' outer trappings reflect his inner identity. Dr. Leon Kass, Professor of Social Thought at the University of Chicago, wonders about Moses' experience growing up in Pharaoh's palace and the kinds of messages he received there about his background. Did Pharaoh's daughter try to preserve elements of Israelite identity for her son, as with his name, so as to honor the people of his birth or did she try to Egyptianize him as much as possible in order to prepare him to be one-day heir to the throne? Did others in Pharaoh's palace know of Moses' Hebrew origins and view him with suspicion or did they pander to Moses as a powerful young prince? Kass points to the word *vayetze* – [Moses] *went out* – that describes the prophet's first adult decision, choosing to leave his home and enter the outer world where he ultimately encounters the Egyptian beating his slave (Exodus 2:11). He writes, "Which is Moses' true home, the inside place where he grew up and from which he went out, or the outside places where his brothers could be found?"⁴ Despite his desire for connection and belonging, Moses is not entirely at home anywhere – not with the Israelite kinsfolk of his birth and not with his adopted Egyptian family and community.

And so we arrive this week at *Parashat Vaera*, Moses finally returning back to Egypt to begin freeing his people from the brutalities of slavery. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the first questions that Moses

⁴ Leon Kass, Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus, p. 48.

asks at the Burning Bush is “*Mi anochi* – Who am I?” a phrase that conveys both his deep humility in the face of the task he has been assigned and also his identify confusion, heightened at this particular moment by the complexities of his mission (Exodus 3:11). Moses is being sent to save the Israelite people, by whom he has never been fully accepted, and in doing so to stand up to the power of Egypt, of which he was once, at least partially, a beneficiary. He is also being asked to leave Midian, the only place in which he has found a true sense of acceptance and belonging in the warmth of Zipporah’s family and the friendship of her father. Perhaps it is this very combination of experiences that makes Moses uniquely qualified to lead the people at this time – he has not been demoralized by slavery, even as he’s witnessed its pernicious effects; he has a deep sense of connection to the Israelite people but enough distance, too, to remain objective; his years tending flocks in Midian have familiarized him with the wilderness, a place where he will shepherd the Jewish people over the next four decades. The amalgam of Moses’ overlapping identities may seem to him a source of liability and pain. It is precisely his distinctive background, however, that makes him the right person for the job.

This past week I returned, along with 20 teenagers from the TIC and broader community, from a Civil Rights trip to Atlanta, Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham run by the organization Etgar. I hope that some of you will plan to join us in shul on Shabbat morning, February 11th, when a few of our teens will speak about this incredible experience! But for now, in honor of *Parashat Vaera*, I’ll share just one thought related to our time away.

Many of us may be familiar with the Edmund Pettus Bridge which served as the site for two failed marches from Selma to Montgomery before the third was ultimately successful, the very police officers who had brutalized activists on the first attempted march, now known as Bloody Sunday, ultimately being forced by the National Guard to protect the protesters on their 50 mile walk. The Edmund Pettus

bridge is the site of the iconic picture of Dr. Martin Luther King walking arm-in-arm with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. The bridge is also named for a Klansman.

Edmund Pettus was a Confederate general and grand dragon of the Alabama KKK, and the now infamous bridge was named after him in 1940, 25 years before the Bloody Sunday march which would come to galvanize the civil rights movement and ultimately lead to the passing of the Voting Rights Act. Before his death, Congressman John Lewis, who had helped to lead the Selma-Montgomery march, was approached about changing the bridge's name from Pettus' to his own, eliminating the blaring incongruity and lifting up heroes rather than villains of the civil rights movement. Lewis declined, indicating that it is important to confront, rather than to re-write our history. He also pointed out that there's no better revenge against a white supremacist than to have his eponymous bridge become a symbol of equality and justice!

People, places - both rarely fit into neat and perfect categories. A Biblical prophet can be both insider and outsider at the very same time; a storied landmark can represent both incredible progress and deep, enduring pain. The names, experiences, and mementos that we carry help to shape who we are, the unique combination of qualities, perspectives, memories, and motivations that give each of us our own distinctive voice and tools with which to confront the challenges of the day. It is our job to use these gifts wisely in order to bring greater right and good into the world!

And so this Shabbat we remember an ancient prophet who led his people from slavery to freedom, and so many modern prophets who did the same – taking our country from the segregation of Jim Crow into an era of more equal integration and opportunity. We are still far away from the Promised Land as we look out at a world of mass incarceration, police brutality, voter suppression, and threats to democracy.

Yet we have only to gaze upon a bridge named Pettus in order to remember how dramatically communities can change with the right leadership, determination, and courage.

May we, like Moses, draw upon the unique identity and experiences that are ours to become champions for justice and freedom. Perhaps we will even stick a toothbrush in our pocket to remember the way!

Shabbat Shalom!

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