

PARSHAT SHEMOT
JANUARY 14, 2012
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This morning we begin our journey with Moses. For the next four books of the Torah he will be the main character in the saga of the Israelite people as they begin their sojourn in Egypt and end on the banks of the Jordan River overlooking the land of Canaan. No person in biblical literature is deemed more important and more critical to the ancient Israelite and to the modern Jew. Moses was the only person to see G-d “face-to-face.” He is considered to be Moses our teacher, the greatest of prophets and the great lover of freedom.

Moses begins his journey far away from his home and family – in the palace in Egypt. After he is forced to flee from Egypt, it is in Midian that he meets the angel of the Lord whose voice he hears in the burning bush instructing him to go back to Egypt and to fight for the freedom of the Israelite people. With that everything in his life changes. Though reluctant to accept the responsibility of being a leader, Moses becomes the archetype of leadership for us all. We continue to learn from his example, we continue to see him as Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher.

In his classic essay “Moses”, Ahad Ha’am, Asher Ginzberg, in 1904, attempts to describe the life of Moses and meditate on his greatness. Ahad Ha’am asks the following questions: “Was he a military hero?... Was he a statesman?... Was he, then, a Lawgiver?” To each of these questions Ahad Ha’am responds, “no, he was not.” “What then was Moses?” asks Ahad Ha’am. “Tradition answers in the most explicit terms: ‘There arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses.’”

According to Ahad Ha’am it is in the realm of prophecy that Moses finds his mission and establishes a high standard. For Ahad Ha’am the prophet has two fundamental qualities: He is a man of truth and he is an extremist. By that he means he sees life as it is and concentrates his whole heart and mind on his ideal, “for there is in his soul a complete ideal world; and on that pattern he labors to reform the external world of reality.” For Ahad Ha’am, the prophet “can accept no excuse, can consent to no compromise, can never cease thundering his passionate denunciations, even if the whole universe is against him.” Righteousness, according to Ahad Ha’am, is in the prophet’s soul, in his every word and action.

Toward the end of the essay Ahad Ha’am states: “When the national traditions sought to describe the greatness of its greatest prophet Moses, it described him as dying with a kiss. Moses died with a kiss after he concluded the task that had been placed upon him, after he bore the burden of life and stood all his life as a sturdy rock in the heart of the sea of turmoil.”

The prophet, according to Ahad Ha’am, is one who is an involved participant. He holds high standards and, come what may, is not frightened to hold others to those

standards as well. Throughout his career Moses attempted to live up to those standards. Like every human being, he was not always successful.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Avraham Feder, suggests that “there are two kinds of seeing: the seeing of the spectator and the seeing of the participant. There is aesthetic seeing which is childlike in its openness, distanced and cathartic; and there is a moral seeing which is engaged, responsible and reactive.” Feder suggests that Moses represented the latter. He sees the suffering of the Israelites; he feels the pain of the lashes of the taskmaster and immediately acts. He hears the voice that comes from the burning bush and recognizes, although at first reluctantly, that he must assume his prophetic responsibility. Since he knows that his cause is just, he is unafraid to confront Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Israelite people.

Last Sunday, we commemorated the 70th anniversary of the Wannsee conference. On January 20, 1942, in a villa on the outskirts of Berlin the Nazi leadership adopted the proposal to implement the Final Solution upon the Jewish people. Using euphemisms and legal language they accepted upon themselves the responsibility, as they saw it, of ridding the world of the Jewish nation. It was the beginning of the mass killings in Auschwitz and Treblinka, among other places. In one 90-minute meeting the fate of Eastern European Jews was doomed.

Raul Hilberg states that there are three types of individuals who must be studied during the years 1933-1945. They are the perpetrators, the victims and the bystanders. For the perpetrators we spare no compassion; for the victims we give honor to their memory; for the bystanders we wonder about their actions. Those of us who have traveled in Germany and throughout Eastern Europe, continue to wonder about those who knew and did nothing. We cannot understand how it was possible to live in Munich and not know about Dachau; to live in Krakow and not know what was going on in Auschwitz; to ride the trains and not know that many of them ended up in Treblinka. Those responses of inaction and indifference we will never understand. And the same questions go for those who lived in the Wannsee neighborhood and did not sound the alarm of what most assuredly was a high level Nazi meeting. Who are the real heroes of our story this morning? The Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, who refused to be either perpetrators or bystanders and who stood up to Pharaoh, are the true heroes.

Ahad Ha'am suggests that Moses' teachings instruct us that one must cry out against injustice, that one cannot abide hurt and injury to another human being, that one cannot abdicate one's responsibility for the welfare of humanity. Lest we think that we're simply dealing with past historical records, let us admit openly that in our own society there continues to be injustice and irrational hatred.

On Monday we will commemorate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His life, which was abruptly and cruelly ended, should be a cause for us to study our society and see if we are living up to the high ideals of this nation. Currently, we have a way to go to live up to the vision of the Founding Fathers and those who have followed in their path. If we are to be like Moses, then we must stand up for what is right, not back down

in the face of injustice and stand strong for the high ideals upon which this nation was established.

In words that echo Moses' call to Pharaoh for freedom for the Israelites, we continue to be challenged by King's famous words on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial. In his visionary prophetic words he said: "When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last." Unfortunately, we are not there yet.

At the end of his life, though Moses did not have all his dreams fulfilled, he could look back at a journey that truly made a difference in the life of his people and the world at-large. We may not be Moses, we may not have the prophetic attributes that are needed to stand in his place, but we most assuredly can take the lessons of his life to heart, see injustice where it exists, feel the hurt of others and act in a responsible manner, just as Shifra and Puah did. As Feder suggests, it is our task to be engaged in the lives of our fellow human being and to react when necessary. As Ahad Ha'am states: "It is the task of the prophet to die, as he as lived in his faith. All the evil that he has seen has been powerless to quench his hope for the future, or dim the brightness of the ideal that illumined his path from afar."

At the end of life, may we be privileged to have encapsulated these words in our journey and in our own small way make the world a better place for all.