

Bridging the Generations

Moshe, Pharaoh, and a Philosophy of Religious Inclusion

Rabbi Daniel Fridman

Faced with the looming threat of a herd of locusts, on a scale unprecedented in Egyptian history, and having just received a shocking rebuke from his closest advisors, Pharaoh opens a dialogue with Moshe and Aharon. These brothers, representing the Interests of the Hebrew slaves, had demanded, from their very first meeting with Pharaoh, a respite from the slavery, and an opportunity to go into the desert to engage in a holiday of religious worship. This demand was then repeated on six subsequent occasions¹. Now, for the first time, faced with the threat of the locusts, isolated from his advisors, Pharaoh opens up the negotiations by making a considerable concession, accepting, in principle, the notion of a religious festival.

Reasonably, Pharaoh queries Moshe as to which people he intends to bring with him on this religious festival, **ומי ההולכים**?² Moshe responds that there can be no question whatsoever of bringing certain demographics, but not others; on the contrary, the touchstone of the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which was now poised to emerge in a new national form from the Egyptian sands, would be that service of God cannot be limited to a particular age or gender. Moshe responds, “with our young and with our old we will go, with our sons and with our daughters we will go....for there is a holiday unto Hashem for us,” **בנערינו ובזקינינו נלך**, **בבנינו ובבנותינו נלך**....**כי חג ה' לנו**.

Pharaoh's response is one of sheer incredulity. Not only does he deny Moshe's terms of including the entire nation, but Pharaoh is completely indignant. He accuses Moshe of negotiating in bad faith, put simply, lying, as it was self-evident to the Egyptian dictator that women and children could not possibly be included in religious worship⁴. Clearly, Pharaoh concluded, Moshe was disgracefully using his 'religion' as a cover for leading the slaves out of Egypt. Unsurprisingly, Pharaoh, incensed by what he perceives to be nothing short of insolence, summarily expels Moshe and Aharon from his palace⁵.

Yet, insolence it was not, nor was it any form of dishonesty. Judaism is built on the premise that God is “close to all those who call to him, provided they do so earnestly⁶.” Every seven years, as we recreate the experience of standing at Sinai, we do so with our entire community: men, women, and children. The Tosafists⁷ understood that this was the basis of the practice of bringing children along to synagogue.

¹ Before the plagues of blood, frogs, wild animals, pestilence, hail, and now locusts (plagues 1,2,4,5,7,8). No warning, and thus, no demand for the Jewish people to be released for a holiday of Divine worship, was issued before lice or boils.

² Shemot 10:8.

³ Ibid, 10:9.

⁴ See commentary of Ramban (Shemot 10:10) who is partial to this interpretation of Pharaoh's cryptic comment, **ראו כי רעה נגד פניכם**.

⁵ Following the ninth plague, darkness, Pharaoh reconsiders and allows all of the Jewish people to go on the journey. However, still concerned about the possibility of escape, he demands that the Jewish people leave their animals behind.

⁶ Psalms 145:18.

⁷ S.v. Kedei Liten Sachar L'Mevieihen, Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 3a.

The prophet Zechariah's vision of a redeemed and healed Jerusalem evoked precisely this image, "so said Hashem, Master of Hosts, there will yet be old men and old women in the streets of Jerusalem, and each man will carry his cane, from old age. And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls, playing joyfully in her streets⁸." These inimitable words, that the streets of the city, רחובות ירושלים, will be shared by those of advanced age, and the very young, is a sign, in Zechariah's telling, of God's presence in the city, "I have returned to Zion and I dwell in the midst of Jerusalem⁹."

Yet, it is not merely the case that communing with God's presence is not reserved for the old or young, men or women, but something far more significant. It is that our service of the Almighty is at its highest form, not only when all demographics are merely present, but when they serve God *together*. In the words of the Psalmist, "Young men and women, the old together with the young. They will praise the name of Hashem..."¹⁰ In other words, it is not merely the representation of all demographics which is critical to service of Hashem, but that they do so together. God's majesty is exalted in a far more potent manner when the unified voice which rises up like a torrent from this earth, and ascends to the heavens, represents a diverse group of individuals.

This week we have seen how life saving this intergenerational approach can truly be. The younger members of our congregation have helped register so many of our veteran members for vaccination. It's a beautiful thing to watch- the computer language of the young, fueled with a deep desire to help all those amongst us, has literally worked to bring life saving vaccines to those who need them the most. How proud would Moshe himself be, בנעריו ובזקיניו נלך?

What Moshe laid down as the foundational principle of our attitude towards religious inclusion, what Pharaoh could simply not fathom, is our greatest source of strength. May the Jewish Center of Teaneck always continue to be the model synagogue for intergenerational cohesion, where friendships transcend the barriers of age, and where young and old together fulfill that timeless prayer, מדור לדור נגיד גדלך, 'from one generation, to the next, we shall tell of Your greatness.'

⁸ Zechariah 8:4-5.

⁹ Zechariah 8:3.

¹⁰ Psalms 148:12-13.