

Parshat Va-Ayra: Going Beyond Your Comfort Zone

In this week's parsha, G-d enlists Moses to implore Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt. At first, Moses resists, but ultimately he signs on. The rest is commentary. But before we get to that commentary, let's take a closer look at the text.

The text

In Exodus 6:10-12, G-d asks Moses to speak to Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go out of Egypt. Moses resists, saying, if the children of Israel have not listened to me, "how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?"

As you may recall, Moses had demurred from a similar request in last week's parsha. In Exodus 4:10-16, Moses tells G-d that he is "not a man of words," "slow of speech and of a slow tongue." But G-d assures him that if he speaks to Pharaoh, "I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall speak."

Back in this week's parsha, G-d calls on Moses one more time, and this time Moses responds to the call. In Exodus 7:1-2, G-d tells Moses that his brother Aaron will speak to Pharaoh on Moses' behalf. And in verses 5-6, G-d assures Moses that in the end, G-d will bring the children of Israel out of Egypt with an outstretched hand. At this point, the text shows that Moses and Aaron heeded G-d's command.

Here the 19th century Jewish scholar Marcus Kalisch comments, "Henceforth all diffidence ceased, and they applied themselves in confidence and zeal to their charge."

Two questions

Moses' initial hesitation to heed G-d's call, and eventual decision to answer it, raises two questions: What held Moses back from confronting Pharaoh, and what convinced him to overcome his hesitation and take action? With confidence and zeal, no less?

First, let's look at Moses' hesitation. He argues that he has "uncircumcised lips," in Hebrew A-RAL SUH-FA-TA-YIM, which could refer to a speech impediment (The same metaphor is used of the heart—Lev. 26:41, which the Hertz chumash interprets as "closed to the Divine call or appeal"—and of the ear—Jeremiah 6:10, which Hertz translates as "not heeding the call"). But the ultimate meaning of this excuse, according to Hertz, is that Moses does not feel "properly prepared to deliver an all-important message." He is riddled by self-doubt, by fear of failure to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery.

Second, let's look at Moses' decision to fulfill G-d's request. Back in Exodus 4:10-16, G-d assures Moses, saying "*I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall speak.*" **In other words, G-d calls on Moses to trust that G-d will help him get through this.** Or, perhaps, it is Moses who assures himself that he'll find the right words at the right time.

In Exodus 7:1-2, G-d also assigns Moses, you should excuse the pun, a more palatable role: “*You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall speak to Pharaoh, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land....*” **In effect, G-d appoints Aaron as Moses’ PR rep, providing Moses with support where he believes his skillset falls short.**

It is not entirely clear what else moves Moses to confront Pharaoh beyond G-d’s words of encouragement, but if you allow me some Midrashic license, I suspect that despite his perceived shortcomings, **Moses has total conviction in the mission with which G-d has charged him and Aaron**, recognizing that allowing the Israelites to continue to toil in slavery with no end in sight was simply not an option. Just as it was for the Apollo 13 mission control engineers who overcame obstacles to bring the crew back home, failure was not an option.

Our Hineini moment

Today, one week since Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th U.S. president, many Americans fear that much of what they value is at stake—from civil liberties to affordable healthcare to fair treatment of women, minorities and immigrants to a sustainable planet—and that this president will turn out to be a modern-day Pharaoh, dispensing daily dollops of injustice and oppression in 140 characters or less.

For those of us unaccustomed to taking to the streets, community organizing, and other forms of activism, the prospect of resisting a massive, centralized power that threatens what we hold dear can feel overwhelming. Sometimes I find it so overwhelming that all I want to do is stay glued to the couch, binge-watching Netflix series for the next four years. But before reaching for the remote, I might instead ask myself, “What would Moses do?”

In this week’s parsha, Moses seems to have overcome his self-doubt and fear of failure in confronting Pharaoh—i.e., gone beyond his comfort zone—through a combination of trust, support and conviction. Rabbi David Jaffe, in his book *Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Approach to Personal and Social Change*, underscores this need to **cultivate trust, a network of support, and conviction when confronting injustice.**

“Timidity is a tool of the oppressive system,” Jaffe writes. “Trust in G-d, or something greater than ourselves, is an element in building what Rabbi Tzvi Miller calls ‘bulletproof’ self-esteem. With such self-esteem, we can say ‘Hineini/Here I am,’ despite the opposition.... A *bitachon* (meaning trust or security, relying on others, G-d or something beyond our control) perspective can help us develop the holy chutzpa to continually speak out for justice and a better world.”

On the importance of cultivating a network of support, Jaffe writes: “Social change is a communal endeavor. While one person may need to take the lead or initiate efforts for change, success will only come by enlisting plenty of allies. The best social-change leaders are those who can see the strengths in others and mobilize those strengths on behalf of the group project.”

Finally, Jaffe shows how to strengthen one's sense of conviction: "The key move is not giving up in face of the barrier. Just like the weight of the barbell provides a counterforce to help build muscle, so too does the barrier provide a counterforce against which you can feel how much you want something. When we lean into that barrier, we can feel how much we care."

A case in point is Stephen Mullens, a meteorologist at the University of Oklahoma, who attended the fall meeting of the American Geophysical Union—the first major gathering of the world's earth and climate scientists since Trump was elected president. Rather than simply network with colleagues, listen to talks and browse posters, he participated in his first-ever protest in response to Trump's statements on climate change.

"A lot of us are [INTJs](#) [that's a Meyers-Briggs personality type common to scientists and engineers]; we're engineer people," Mullens said after the protest. "Science is very grueling work, and we have personalities that are more introverted. We're not people who get out there." But this time, Mullen felt compelled to take to the streets: "This is about climate change, but it is also about evidence-based policy," he said. "With this presidential election, I am motivated to be more of an activist."

So, too, am I, a confirmed introvert just like Mullens. First, my very livelihood as a communications director for a leading MIT research group focused on climate science and policy studies is threatened by a new administration that eliminated all references to climate change on Inauguration Day. But more importantly, this new regime's policies and cabinet appointees, dominated by the fossil fuel industry, promise to accelerate global warming, increase pollution, and degrade public health, placing this and future generations at risk.

For many of us at TBZ who see the Trump presidency as a threat to our health, safety and future, this is an historic *Hineini* moment. Compelled to take to the streets, we showed up at last week's historic women's marches in Boston and Washington, and we'll show up at future actions. I'm sure I wasn't the only one at the Boston march who chose to **trust** that despite the enormous power of the Presidency, and ominous signs of how it may soon be wielded, this march would help turn the tide toward justice and a better world; who felt deeply **supported** by thousands of fellow marchers seeking the same outcome; and who found the courage of their **convictions** reinforced with every step along the march route.

If you feel called, as Moses may have, to tap into your capacity to trust, to forge alliances, and to summon the courage of your convictions to confront injustice and oppression, then I hope you'll join me in going beyond your comfort zone to speak out and act out for justice and a better world. This is not only what democracy looks like; it's what a living, thriving Judaism looks like as well. Shabbat Shalom. – Mark Dwortzan