

Finite Disappointment and Infinite Hope

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Around the time of my ordination from Rabbinical School, a friend of mine bought me this book as a gift that I'm sure she thought would help get my career off to a great start. The book, written by David J. Lieberman, PhD, who Amazon.com considers the "legendary leader in the field of human behavior," is titled: "Get Anyone to Do Anything." Now of course I salivated at the thought of this...after all the book jacket promises to:

Get anyone to find you attractive

Get the instant advantage in any relationship

Get anyone to take your advice

Get a stubborn person to change his mind about anything

Get anyone to do a favor for you

Get anyone to return your phone call

Stop verbal abuse instantly

Get anyone to confide in you and confess anything

In my mind as a newly minted rabbi I of course also added to the list:

Get anyone to keep kosher

Get anyone to observe Shabbat

Get anyone to give tzedaka

Get anyone to clothe the naked and feed the hungry

Get anyone to come to shul every week

Get anyone to stay awake during the rabbi's sermons...

And so it was that I plunged into this book imagining that this would be the key to inspiring a religious revival! This little book would give me the key to people's hearts and minds and souls...with it, I could accomplish anything for God, for Torah, for the Jewish people. Now, a decade later, I want you to know just how I feel about this book...

Look, there are cute techniques and some clever things to think about with respect to how you communicate or use voice and body language effectively; there's some nice insight into interpersonal dynamics...but friends, I am sorry to say that it is not a book of magic spells or Kool Aid recipes. And I can pretty much guarantee that it can't get anyone to do anything. Because, dear friends, no matter how clever we are...no matter how silver tongued or smooth spoken any of us may be, there are some times when others are going to do what they may whether we like it or not.

And by the way, if you thought you could convince people to do your bidding if only you could wield some supernatural powers; if you could only, I don't know turn water into blood, or summon a swarm of locusts, they don't seem all they're cracked up to be either. Just ask Moses! Ten plagues of fantastic, unbelievable, unprecedented proportions...And by the way Moses also had the most eloquent spokesperson by his side, and yet Pharaoh repeatedly refuses to acquiesce every single time. The Torah waits until the very end of the sequence to reveal how Moses felt about having to keep going back to Pharaoh with another demand for freedom followed by a rejection followed by a devastating plague. After announcing the tenth plague, undoubtedly the most dreadful of them all, the Torah cracks open the window of Moses's emotions: Surprisingly, prior to this the Torah doesn't tell us about how Moses felt during this whole plague sequence. But just before the 10th plague, when Pharaoh banishes Moses and basically threatens that if he comes back he will kill him, the Torah says: *Vayeitzei mei'im Paro ba'chori af...*Moses left Pharaoh's presence in hot anger.¹ That's a vivid description, "hot anger." You can almost imagine Moses's face flush with redness, his heart pounding, his fists clenched and jaw clamped. The commentaries suggest that he is enraged by Pharaoh's death threat. But I think it's got to be something else. How afraid can Moses be of a death threat when he has God on his side. The reason I think Moses's blood is boiling is because none of these plagues, and certainly not this last most devastating plague ever had to happen. Pharaoh over and over had had it in his power to spare his own people more misery...to stop the madness! If he would only be sensible; if he would only be reasonable and rational and let the Israelites go free then his own people wouldn't have to be inflicted with that terrifying plague of the death of the firstborn. But Moses knows Pharaoh all too well by now. He's had enough dealings with him; enough summits and negotiations and conferences and high-level meetings to know exactly what he's going to do and exactly what he's going to say. Moses knows that Pharaoh isn't going to budge one iota, and that there will be, as the Torah predicts a "*tza'akah gedolah be'chol ha'aretz*," a loud cry in all the land,² when this plague is executed. Moses is fuming precisely because he can't get Pharaoh to change, and I don't think that book would help him...Neither did his convincing older brother or the natural disasters or the signs and wonders. And Moses, who is on the right side of history; who is the freedom fighter, the liberator, the good guy...Moses is the one left feeling sad and bitter and angry that he doesn't have the power to change the unfortunate course of events that is about to unfold.

I'm sure that all of us can identify with that kind of frustration...There are people in our lives who may remind us a bit of pharaoh now and again; People whose stubbornness and inflexibility can make us livid. In fact there's even an adjective in the English language that comes from the word Pharaoh—if

¹ Exodus 11:8

² Exodus 11:6

you are being 'pharaonic,' you are being tyrannical and oppressive and stubborn like the Pharaoh in our parasha. How about that for a legacy! And what patience we must exercise with such personalities. If Moses was a cartoon, he would definitely have steam shooting out of his ears. But he doesn't throw anything or break anything or kill anyone...He has to walk away from that encounter believing that wrongs will be made right by a Power greater than himself.

Chevrei, I felt Moses's hot anger and frustration this week as I shuddered to read about the comments of President Mohamed Morsi of Egypt [who has some pharaonic trappings of his own], who just two years ago said that all Jews, not just those living in Israel, not just Zionists, but all Jews are descendants of apes and pigs. In a speech to his fellow Muslim Brotherhood members, Morsi urged them to "nurse our children and grandchildren on hatred" for Jews. These comments were not uttered when he was a young revolutionary, or when he was an impressionable, firebrand youth. The man is in his sixties, an engineer educated not only at Cairo University but also at the University of Southern California. And I don't think his half-hearted apology, demanded by the White House is particularly convincing to anyone. The New York Times ran an article³ this week by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, herself a dissident of Islamic extremism, entitled "Raised on Hatred." She described regularly listening to friends, neighbors, even her own mother in her native Somalia speak with raw hatred of Jews. She noted how Muslim preachers and teachers in religious schools would take extra time to indoctrinate students and "pray for the destruction of the Jews." She described how saturated the Arab world is with anti-Semitism: "In songs, books, newspaper articles and blogs, Jews are variously compared to pigs, donkeys, rats and cockroaches, and also to vampires and a host of other imaginary creatures...Millions of Muslims have been conditioned to regard Jews not only as the enemies of Palestine but as the enemies of all Muslims, of God and of all humanity." Listen to a dialogue, broadcast on a popular television show carried by a Saudi satellite network...The host of the program, titled *Muslim Women Magazine* asked a **three year old child**:

Presenter: "Do you like Jews?"

Three-year-old: "No."

"Why don't you like them?"

"Jews are apes and pigs."

"Who said this?"

"Our God."

"Where did he say this?"

"In the Koran."

³ "Raised on Hatred," by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. *The New York Times*, January 17, 2013

The presenter responds approvingly: “No [parents] could wish for Allah to give them a more believing girl than she ... May Allah bless her, her father and mother.”

My friends, we are not without our own extremists...but those extremist occupy a miniscule fringe of the Jewish world, and they are roundly repudiated by the rest of it. Most Jews dream of peace. Most Israelis want peace with their neighbors more than anything else in the world. But considering that tomorrow’s peacemakers are being “nursed on hatred” of Jews and Zionists it is maddening; it makes the idea of peace seem ludicrous. How will that three year old, whose appalling interview probably made her a superstar across the Arab world be able to untangle the hatred she has been taught since the cradle? It is an issue of pharaonic proportions! And it can leave us downright miserable.

But there is a glimmer of hope in all this darkness. And I am clinging, hopefully not irrationally, to the leadership of Moses of antiquity and the Martin of modernity. Moses—who began his own journey with many more questions than answers—walks away from an impossible Pharaoh believing in the goodness of God and the promise of redemption. Martin of modernity, Dr. Martin Luther King, whose legacy we celebrate this weekend, once said “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” What a Jewish statement that is! Mohamed Morsi is hardly the first nor the most influential person in history to proclaim hatred and bigotry. The Arab world is certainly not the first civilization to be nursed on savage myths and crazy falsehoods. We Jews have known many eras of finite disappointment...but we have never lost infinite hope!

There is a new plague of darkness that has descended over Egypt, and a leader who has pharaonic inclinations. Like the Pharaoh, he could be a peacemaker; a progressive leader; a harbinger of a new era in the Middle East **if he so chooses**. Or he can continue to stoke the flames of irrational hatred like his ancient predecessor, and as a result be plagued by backwardness, isolation, and cultural deterioration. Whatever he chooses, we, the Jewish people, must continue to have infinite hope. We must continue, like Moses, to be *rodfei shalom*, to pursue peace rather than getting dragged into reciprocating hatred with hatred. Let it never be said that stooped to their level, rather that took the high road, the path of decency and goodness, and despite *finite* disappointment, that we never, ever gave up on *infinite* hope.