

Moses 'Spoke to' [not 'Shouted at'] Pharaoh; Lessons for Today from Parashat Va'era
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I am truly astonished, even a bit perplexed by how conciliatory Moses is to Pharaoh. In my imagination, I picture Moses, the ragtag freedom fighter blowing into Pharaoh's court from the desert, pointing his blessed staff at the world's most powerful political leader and demanding his people's freedom. Their encounter would be tense and belligerent, voices raised, fists and jaws clenched, faces flush with anger and fury. The slave master and vindicator challenging each other with reproach and threatening body language...

Well, that's all in my imagination, because the Torah's report of what transpired in the sequence of encounters between Moses and Pharaoh could not be more different! When God instructs Moses to go to Pharaoh, the language God uses is surprisingly meek and deferential:

God tells Moses: "Dabeir el Paro," speak to Pharaoh (don't scream, yell, or holler).

God says to Moses: "Hityatzeiv lifnei Paro," present yourself before Pharaoh, don't barge in like a bull in a China shop!

And although we might have envisioned Moses demanding with righteous indignation that Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" [exclamation point], that famous line is preceded by the words "v'amarta eilav," say to Pharaoh, Let my people go.

Now, there is not shortage of words for crying out or shrieking or shouting in the Hebrew language. Remember Esau's "tza'akah gedolah," his bitter wailing that his father should bless him too? (Gen. 27:34) Or the prophet Elijah in I Kings 18:27, "vay'hatel bahem Eliyahu," Elijah mocked and ridiculed the prophets of Ba'al.

But there are no "tza'akot;" there's no shouting in parashat Vayera. No "hitul," no mockery or ridicule. Everything is spoken, said, and presented in seemingly the most diplomatic manner by Moses and Aaron.

What do we make of this? How is this even possible??

I'll tell you how I stumbled upon this idea...I was searching our holy Torah and parashat Va'era in particular for some wisdom, some solace after these crazy, infamous weeks in the life of our nation. I'm always looking for sermon material, but I was really looking for something to sooth my soul as well. These have been very hard times in America. And one of the traces of the miraculous in the world is that the parasha always seems to come through with something enlightening if you dig deep enough! There is a rather obscure statement in Exodus 6:13. It is so cryptic that it demands explanation and commentary:

“Vay’dabeir Hashem el Moseh v’el Aharon,” And God spoke to Moses and Aaron, “vayitzaveim el b’nai Yisrael v’el Paro,” and God instructed them with regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh...

So just before they depart for Pharaoh’s palace, God takes Moses and Aaron into a huddle, so-to-speak, and like any great Coach, God gives them a final pep talk, one final exhortation before they go out onto the field. But what did God say to them? What were God’s instructions in that huddle? The Torah doesn’t tell us!

Rashi offers something incredible: “Tzivam aleihem,” God instructed them, “le’hanicham be’nachat, ve’lisbol otam.” Concerning the Jewish people, God tells Moses and Aaron to “be sensitive and patient with them.” Look, God says, they’ve been slaves for a long time. They are beaten down, dejected, almost without hope. They’re not going to be an easy bunch to rally or to lead. Just be gentle, be understanding of their plight. Ibn Ezra, the medieval Spanish commentator adds, “don’t lose your temper with them. Their spirits have been crushed in Egypt.” And with respect to Pharaoh, what did God tell Moses and Aaron? Rashi explains that God commanded them, “lachalok lo kavod be’divreihem,” to show respect to Pharaoh in the words you speak to him. The midrash adds that God tells them, “af al pi she’ani tzarich la’asot bo et hadin,” Even though I have to execute judgment upon Pharaoh, you must show “kavod le’malchut,” respect for his majesty, his position as ruler of Egypt.” (Exodus Rabbah 7:3)

Perhaps this is why, as I said a few moments ago, the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh is so measured. Perhaps this is why there are no insults, curses, taunts or incivility of any kind between these two tremendous, opposing forces. The Godly way, it seems, is to show respect even to one’s enemies; to not antagonize or inflame already tense situations; to approach those with whom we vehemently disagree with a modicum of humanity and even respect for their station in life. How radically different this approach is from what we so often witness in our world! Sometimes the ancients were so much more progressive than we moderns!

This week, another great transition of power will take place. But this time it will occur beneath an ominous cloud of potential violence and unlawful protest. Would that parashat Va’era be required reading for not only for Jews in synagogues this weekend, but for all Americans! Would that those who shout each other down and brow beat their political opponents understand the deep wisdom of our Torah! So much more can be accomplished when we don’t terrorize those with whom we disagree!

Everybody loves both to quote and to claim Abraham Lincoln these days...from the political right to the left end of the spectrum. I was thinking about that gorgeous Second Inaugural address he gave in 1865. The Civil War began just one month after Lincoln took office and ended only five days before he died. During his presidency, 11 states seceded from the Union. They elected their own president, established their own legislature, printed their own currency, raised their own army. Hundreds of thousands of Americans massacred each other in some of the fiercest and bloodiest battles ever fought. And what does President Lincoln do in the midst of all that bloodshed and division? He said those immortal words: “With malice toward none; with charity for all...let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Lincoln did not utter a single word of condemnation about the South. He did not hijack the opportunity to disparage his political or military opponents. Rising above personal attacks and vendettas, he called for healing and unity.

I think the first presidential concession speech I remember paying attention to was in 1996. Senator Bob Dole announced to his throng of supporters that he phoned President Clinton to congratulate him on his victory. This was met with a thundering chorus of boos. Dole then admonished the crowd and said, "No, wait a minute. Wait a minute. No, I've said repeatedly in this campaign that the president was my opponent and not my enemy." I didn't vote for Senator Dole in that election, but I certainly remember feeling tremendous respect for him when he reminded the crowd that political opponents are not enemies. I happened to be in Phoenix, AZ at a conference on Election Day in 2008, just minutes away from where John McCain gave his concession speech after losing to Barack Obama. I listened to him say about President-elect Obama, "Whatever our differences, we are fellow Americans. And please believe me when I say no association has ever meant more to me than that." My eyes welled up with tears when he spoke those words with such sincerity and honor.

Look, Moses and Pharaoh were more than political opponents. Pharaoh was a megalomaniac; a stubborn, abusive, recalcitrant tyrant. And Moses of course was a prophet of God, a liberator of his oppressed people, a person of uncommon humility. Yet, God uses this confrontation between the two most opposite characters imaginable to teach us about how to interact with our own adversaries, rivals, and foes. The author Michael Anthony Peterson said, "I'm tired of making history. I want to make progress." A lot of history has been made in the past few weeks. Most of it not very good. Hopefully in the coming weeks, months, and years we'll be much more focused on making progress. I believe that begins by taking our Torah's words to heart. Enough demonization of the other; enough belligerence and bellicosity; enough slandering and humiliating those we disagree with... Rather, like Moses, let's talk instead of shout; let's present ourselves with civility rather than rancor; let's have more kavod bidvareinu, respect in the words we speak to one another, so that progress and healing may be our long awaited blessing.

Please God, may it be Your will. Amen.