

## Va-era through a Lens of the Middah of Patience

Contemplative Shabbat

Va-era 5776

January 8, 2016

A word of Torah: Va-era is the second portion in the Book of Exodus. It provides a continuation of the story of Moses, his appointment by God, and the beginnings of the redemption of the people Israel from their suffering in Mitzrayim, understood as Egypt or as narrow straits.

If one focuses on Moses, one might wonder what qualities commend him for the prominent role of leader, shepherd for a large flock of unruly people, and then receiver and giver of the law. Rabbi Marc Gellman [*Does God Have a Big Toe?*] sets a midrashic response to this question at the burning bush, a key scene in last week's Torah portion. In Gellman's retelling, the burning bush comprises a test for the quality of patience, patience in the sense of the ability to wait or to move slowly enough and with enough awareness in order to pay careful attention to one's surroundings, to details, and to the needs of others. As Gellman describes it, unlike the other shepherds who are rushing to and fro to do their chores, Moses notices the peculiar bush that burns without being burned up. He pauses in order to allow his curiosity about the strangely burning bush to bubble forth. He delays his personal agenda in order to observe the bush and to watch and listen for the unfolding. According to Gellman, God has set the burning bush in place to screen for the quality of patience. Patience, God knows, will be essential for the one who will lead the Israelites to their freedom.

In Hebrew, patience/*savlanut* is related to the word for suffering or burdens (like the *sivlot/burdens* endured by the enslaved Israelites). The verb *saval* means "to bear" as in "to bear or carry a burden." A *Sablan* is one who carries stuff, that is, a porter. Thus, *savlanut* comes to be regarded not only as patience in the sense that requires waiting but also forbearance in the sense of bearing a burden until the appropriate time comes – if it comes -- for setting it down. The burden might take the form of annoyance or anger, frustration or embarrassment.

When the young Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster out of his youthful sense of self-righteous indignation, he has failed to exhibit forbearance and, perhaps, for that reason, is not yet ready to assume the mantle of leadership. He must first go off to get some schooling, get a job, and acquire some life experience in the territory of Midian. [It occurs to me that Midian could be understood as the

place of middot, a place well suited for the cultivation of qualities of character.] Years later, older, wiser, and more patient, Moses returns, as ready as possible to withstand the inevitable frustrations associated with the task before him. The task of confronting a powerful, resistant enemy king, leading an often unwilling and contentious people, and constantly answering to an invisible, often inscrutable Boss will tax his quality of patience again and again.

As for us, the cultivation of the middah, the quality of patience/*savlanut* begins with noticing the moments when it is challenged. When do we notice a knot of anger or irritation or frustration forming in the stomach or the jaw? Can we notice the knot with curiosity and without immediately acting on it? Both Moses and God sometimes manifest the quality of *savlanut* through an apparent failure. Both, at times, give in to their anger. Both, at times, require the other to talk them away from the edge. Both, at times, discern that anger-infused action is the justified and the appropriate way to discharge the particular burden weighing on them.

For now, for me, and I would imagine for most of us, the task of cultivating the capacity to bear burdens until the appropriate time for setting them down begins with simply noticing when and how the challenges to this capacity arise. So it was for Moses. So it is for us.

May we be granted skill in the art of noticing patience.