

Where Is Humanity?

Sh'mot, Exodus 1:1–6:1

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This week's Torah portion, *Sh'mot*, begins the well-known narrative of Israelite enslavement and redemption from Egyptian bondage. On face value, it tells us of God's saving power at our greatest moment of need. However, within the twists and turns, we discover the Exodus narrative is as much about absence as it is about action.

The text of the nearly two chapters that open the book of Exodus flows rapidly from Joseph's death to the Israelites' enslavement to Moses' birth and upbringing to the servitude becoming more inhumane. God does not appear until Exodus 2:23-25, as seen here:

...The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew.

These verses beg the question: Where was God during the years of Israelite enslavement?

Asking questions about God at moments of personal or communal suffering is innate to the human condition.

My rabbinical school teacher at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Dr. Eugene Borowitz, z"l – may his memory be for a blessing – had a unique method of approaching this theological question. In the middle of class, Dr. Borowitz would cover his face with his hands and stand before the class for an uncomfortable amount of time. He would then dramatically drop his hands and rotate his body across the expanse of the classroom, looking each student in the eye.

His pantomime demonstrated the concept of God hiding God's face, *hester panav*, which assumes God can help but does not.

This disturbing theology represents one of many understandings of God's nature and power. For example, in Psalm 44:25, the narrator laments, "Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our affliction and distress?" The sense of abandonment stands in stark contrast to feeling blessed by God, as celebrated in the Priestly Benediction, Numbers 6:24-26:

The Eternal bless you and keep you; the Eternal make God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Eternal lift up God's countenance upon you and give you peace.

When God finally responds to the Israelites' cry (Ex. 2:23-25), the 11th-century commentator Rashi explains: "[God] lifted God's heart towards them and no longer hid God's eyes."

The dichotomy between hiding the face and revealing the face is powerful. When we are at our personal depths of trauma, suffering, or illness, we feel the most alone. Today, we even use the verbal expression that we want to be seen, meaning we want to be understood and recognized in our pain. For our ancient ancestors, it must have felt as if, to use another colloquial phrase, God "ghosted" them at their greatest hour of need.

Yet, when I reconsider the nearly two chapters that open the book of Exodus, I do not find a void. Rather, there is plenty of evidence of compassionate, brave activism – including people willing to help others despite the personal risk.

Shiphrah and Puah lied to Pharaoh and saved the male Israelite babies. Yocheved hid baby Moses for three months and then put him in a basket in the Nile. Miriam followed Moses as he floated in the Nile and then courageously stepped forward to speak to Pharaoh's daughter, offering to find a wet nurse. Pharaoh's unnamed daughter, knowing the boy was a Hebrew, took Moses into her father's household to raise him under Pharaoh's nose.

The adult Moses struck and killed the Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave.

In each of these cases, the person acted according to the moral compass embedded in the human spirit, part of God's creation.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg, z"l, believed that God shares power and responsibility with humanity, and therefore we are partners in righting wrongs. "Both He and His creation," Steinberg wrote, "are then faced with a common task and a common battle. They may share together in opposing the same unreason and bringing greater light and order in the universe." (Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme, *Finding God: Selected Responses*, revised edition, UAHC, New York)

The Exodus narrative is perpetually compelling because, unfortunately, in every age there is oppression and suffering. While it is most natural to ask, "Where is God?" perhaps we must also ask, "Where are we?" When we feel as if God has hidden from us, perhaps it is because we have closed our eyes and hearts to each other's pain. We must ask: Has humanity held up our side of the partnership?

Building on rabbinic teachings, the contemporary Torah commentator Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg points out the progression of verbs in verse 25: "God heard ...God remembered...God looked...God knew." (*The Particulars of Rapture*, Schocken Books, New York). With four actions, God transforms from missing to present. I propose God provides us, the human partners, with a model for just, compassionate action. We who are created in God's image can act in godly ways to repair the world.

Hear. All social justice and acts of kindness must start with compassionate listening to understand the extent of the pain.

Remember. God remembered the covenant. Like this foundational value of God's relationship with the Israelites, we must also remember our foundational ethics and values to give us direction.

Look. Examine the problem with its nuance and complications, lest our actions create unintended consequences.

Know. Work to understand the pain and suffering in front of you and prepare to act.

In a world filled with so much brokenness, may we hear, remember, look, and know to be God's partners in the needed repair. As we pray from *Mishkan T'filah*, the words of Michael Waltzer:

**that wherever we are, it is eternally Egypt
that there is a better place, a Promised Land....
That there is no way to get from here to there
Except by joining hands, marching
Together.**