

Torah Talk with Rabbi Rozenwasser 2021.01.15 Parashat Va'era

This week's Torah portion, Va'era, brings the biblical narrative to the beginning of the end of slavery in Egypt.

We read last week that there was a new king in Egypt who did not know Joseph. As a result of a thinking process that could be considered a model for discrimination and antisemitism, this new king thinks in the following terms: there is a nation within our nation, they reside here but they are not a part of us, they are not like us, they have their own customs, they don't dress like us, they have their own rituals and celebrations, in addition to our language they speak their own language, they worship a different god; if an enemy would declare war on us, they will join our enemy against us. Let's strip them of their rights, let's kill their new born males and let's enslave them. This way we will minimize the threat they represent.

I now invite you to fast forward the story a few hundred years. God 'hears' the suffering of the Israelites and appoints Moses as the leader who will intercede in front of Pharaoh on behalf of his brothers and sisters. Moses's cry become a universal cry for freedom: 'Let my people go!'

As part of the negotiating process between Moses and Pharaoh, many times the text makes a curious reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart; 'kaved lev Paro.'

Interestingly enough, the term kaved, which is used here with a negative undertone – hardening Pharaoh's heart, making him insensitive, could also be used in a neutral context such as kaved as a reference to the liver, the organ in the human body, and could also have a very positive connotation when we use kavod as a term for honoring. We are familiar with kvod av veem – honoring father and mother, kvod hamet – honoring the dead – and many other examples where the term kavod is used in the context of relationships that are filled with value, honor and recognition.

For a long time, I have been troubled by the apparent contradiction where one linguistic root, the same word, can be used both with a positive and with a negative connotation.

I will humbly suggest that I was on the wrong track. What I considered positive (kavod, as in honor) and negative (kaved, as in heavy/insensitive) are not really opposites. They are part of a continuum! The king (Pharaoh) deserves honor-kavod; but, when that same king only wants honor for himself, when it is all about him and no volume of honor is enough, then it becomes burdensome, it becomes insensitive, it becomes unbearable, it becomes kaved, heavy.

When the honor that we all deserve turns into an insatiable need for honor and recognition, it becomes intolerable, impenetrable and very isolating.

King Pharaoh belonged to a royal dynasty. As any member of the royal family, he deserved honor. The moment he turned against the Children of Israel, the moment he defined himself as superior and decided to turn the Israelites into slaves, his need for honor (kavod) became kaved-heavy/insensitive, blocked and impenetrable to the needs of others; it became about himself only and exclusively about his glory. The lack of balance is what brought him down to his demise.

We don't need to be kings or Pharaohs. We all have many good reasons to be honored and valued; we all have the potential to be valuable members of our society. We all deserve to be honored for our multiple contributions; for our hard work and dedication. The moment we turn so dramatically into ourselves to the point where the only thing that matters is the compliments and the recognition that we

will get, we rapidly fall from kavod-from being honorable contributors to our society into kaved-into insensitive seekers of personal recognition and only that; we stop caring about others, we care only about ourselves.

It is a continuum. Our values and actions will help us stay on the side of kavod-honorable contributors to our society or, if that is not the case, we will easily slide into kaved-becoming individuals with a heavy heart who are only and exclusively about ourselves. The choice is ours.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Eliseo D. Rozenwasser