

Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin  
Kol Nidrei 5780/2019  
"God's Power and Ours"

It is a part of the Torah really pulls on our heart strings. It's from an incident in the Book of Numbers and is repeated multiple times in the book of Deuteronomy. It is the fact that Moses never gets to go to the Promised Land. We feel terribly for him. It feels so unfair. He has worked so hard, and the people have been so difficult to lead. We want a happy ending for him. We want him to enjoy the fruit of his labors.

But he does not get to go because of a single incident that occurs some 38 years prior to the Israelites leaving the wilderness. The people were in Zin and they lacked water. To remedy this, God told Moses to speak to a rock and it would provide water. But rather than speaking to it, Moses hit the rock. Water came pouring out and the people were sated. But, after, God tells Moses that he would not be permitted into the Promised Land.

Why was his crime considered so severe? Well, God explains, Moses was supposed to use this opportunity to encourage people to have greater faith in God, and therefore, trust God that things would be okay. By hitting the rock, Moses made it look as though he was the source of the water. In that moment, Moses made it all about him.

Now, this is highly unusual for Moses. From the beginning, he was so humble that he argued that he wasn't the right choice for this task. He didn't speak well; he had no leadership experience. It was probably this humility that made him the perfect choice as a leader, because he would not make it about him, rather, he would focus on the bigger mission on which he was to lead the people. But, when he hit the rock and suddenly made himself look like the savior, he couldn't be trusted in the same way. By hitting the rock, he derailed the people's focus and faith. By hitting the rock, he abused his power.

Now, back in May, when I decided to dedicate my time this evening to a discussion of abuse of power, I could not have fathomed how much we would all be talking about it today. The current state of our country's affairs means that the issue of abuse of power is daily on our minds. But, of course, abuse of power is not just about politicians and world leaders, it is an issue every person must consider for ourselves. When we talk about abuse of power, we often think about it in the realm of the people with the most obvious power. Yet, we all have power. And we all run the risk of abusing it when we are not careful and if we are not aware of the power we have.

Abuse of power is at the heart of most identifiable sins that humans commit, if not all of them. It is derived from selfishness, which, according to Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors, is the worst characteristic a person can have. Yohannan ben Zakkai charged five different rabbis with going out into the world to assess the worst way a person can be. Rabbi Joshua suggested "greedy", Rabbi Eliezer said "hateful", Rabbi Yose offered "argumentative", Rabbi Simeon said, "One who borrows but does not repay", and finally Rabbi Elazar suggested "selfishness." Yochanan ben Zakkai concluded that selfishness was indeed the worst characteristic, for within selfishness, all the other traits are included. And, when one is consumed entirely with one's own needs and desires, they are likely to use all the means at their disposal to support and promote themselves, even when it takes something from others, even if it harms them. Think of some of the major issues that we face today: racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, classism, anti-environmentalism, war, persecution, oppression. At the heart of every one of these issues lies selfishness, that leads to an abuse of power. It is powerful people controlling and subordinating the needs of others, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously when we don't know what power we have. When we focus on ourselves, we leave less room for compassion, empathy,

generosity and good will, some of the qualities included in the characteristic that Yochanan ben Zakkai deemed to be the best: unselfishness.

Now, the concern with abuse of power is so crucial to Judaism that it is a major theme throughout Torah. Many characters, including Moses, have situations where they wrestle with the power they have, trying to understand the best use of it. The most prevalent example of this in Torah is God.

God is, literally, the definition of all powerful; the ultimate creator, the one who determines the fate of all human beings. There is no check to God's power, no limit, no restriction. God can do whatever God decides to do. And so, as we know, in the time of Noah, when humanity was evil beyond what God could stand, God sent a flood and destroyed nearly all life on the planet. God's use of power was both heavy handed and absolute. Yet, after this episode, God expresses regret in the use of that power, by promising never to flood the earth to destroy all of life again.

God never sends that kind of destruction again, however, there are still numerous instances of God using excessive amounts of power, arguably, to the point of abuse. All through the desert, for instance, when the Israelites complained, a severe punishment was sent, often in the form of some kind of plague. And, God was so frustrated with the people that, twice, Moses had to talk God out of destroying the Israelites all together.

And, then, there is God's use of power in the events leading up to the Exodus. As you know, we are told that Moses goes to Pharaoh many times, asking him to let the Israelites leave Egypt, but God hardens Pharaoh's heart, not giving him the chance to let the people go before God demonstrates God's full power. Indeed, God relieves the suffering of the Israelites, but at the same time, God harshly punishes the Egyptians, and doesn't give them a chance to change their ways. Did God need to be so heavy handed. Could the Israelites have been freed without so much suffering and destruction for the Egyptians?

We have spent a lot of time throughout Jewish history trying to justify God's use of extreme force in these instances in Torah. But, maybe, the point of the story is not that God is always right and justified. Maybe Torah is trying to teach us something else. Perhaps it is meant to be viewed as a progression, a narrative that tells the story of this character whom we know as God and how God's relationship with God's creation changes over time. How God learns, and for our purposes today, specifically, how God comes to terms with God's power; learning to use it effectively and meaningfully.

By the time we get to the end of the Torah, God has learned to be far less active in the people's lives, allowing them to make choices and learn from their mistakes. In fact, we really don't see God in the book of Deuteronomy until the very end, when Moses dies. Perhaps God changes after a discussion with Moses, wherein, Moses asks God not to destroy the people, reminding God, that God has the capacity to be kind, gracious and forgiving, not just destructive. Shortly after that episode that we read the story of Balaam and Balak. Balak was king of Moab, and hired Balaam, a prophet, to curse the Israelites. Now, God was not in favor of the prophet cursing the Israelites, but, as opposed to the events with Pharaoh, God gave the king a chance to follow a different path. Multiple times, God told the prophet to tell the king that the Israelites could not be cursed, yet the king persisted. And in the prophet's final attempt to curse the Israelites, at the king's bidding, the prophet blesses them instead. Things turned out the way God wanted, but not through the same destruction and coercion that we had seen previously. God

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could have put an end to the king and the prophet right then and there, but God chose to use power differently. So, God evolves, God learns and, God changes.

And, we are made in that image; that image of a powerful being, with the ability to learn and to change. Torah explains that in the very beginning. If that is so, then we are to imagine that our power is like God's power in Torah in that it is without restriction, nothing to limit us. We are to imagine that every action we take has the capacity to forever change others' lives and situations. If we can believe that all actions and consequences are up to us, no one is controlling us, what would we do? What must we consider before we do anything? Most of the time, we identify with the human beings when we read the text, and so we see the situation from their perspective. But when we do, we are aware of the limits of our power. We see ourselves as having to deal with what we can't control, and wrestling with the ways that we are powerless, especially against God. We remember to follow the rules, so we fare well, but the rules are not ours. We react to power; we are not in the power position. But, if we imagine things from God's perspective, and identify with God's emotions and actions, then perhaps we would be more aware of the power we have, that we instigate action, that we create, we are not just the creation. Instead of asking ourselves how we should act so that we don't get punished, we might ask ourselves, how should we act to be sure that we don't over punish others? What would we have done when the Israelites complained that they wanted to go back to Egypt because the food was so much better there? Can we imagine being in God's position at that moment? Would we have been angry and frustrated at the lack of gratitude? How would we have responded?

Can you think of a time when you were so angry you took extreme measures to make sure everyone around you knew exactly what they had done wrong and that you were upset about it? Or think of a time that you were so frustrated that you said or did something you regretted later? What do we do when people fall short and disappoint us? What is our instinctual reaction, and what would we like our reaction to be? If there are no limits, no restrictions on what we say and do in those passionate moments, how do we use our power?

Indeed, we are not God, nor do we have all of God's power, but we have far more than we often realize. The story of Torah urges us to understand the expanse of our power, to see ourselves in God's image, so that we learn to use it wisely.

I was struck by reading the letter that Felicity Huffman wrote right before she was sentenced in the college admissions cheating scandal. She said that, at some point, with the option to change her daughter's answers on the standardized test, she felt as though if she didn't do it, she would be a bad mother. If she didn't do all that was in her power, then she felt as though she would be letting her daughter down. Now, if that was true, then she didn't understand how much power she had, how much power her wealth and her connections gave her. If that was true, then she was lost in her own reality without acknowledging how she fit into the world with others. She saw herself, at the time, dealing with typical options, not extraordinary ones. And, thus, her decision abused the extreme power that she had.

That may have been Moses' mistake as well. Perhaps he didn't realize how powerful he was in the eyes of the people, how easy it was for them to put all of their faith in him and not in the grander plan, and then, how the entire system would fall apart when, at some point, he would no longer be able to lead. If we don't know what our power is, it is far more easily abused.

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So, what extraordinary powers do we possess that we may or may not be aware of? The power of wealth, the power of privilege, the power of status and of influence? What power do we have over people who work for us and with us? What power do we have over our families or in our social circles? How do we get what we want and need? Do we work with other people? Do we compromise? How often do we use our power to make sacrifices? How often have our decisions prioritized our own interests without taking others into consideration? How often was it conscious or unconscious? Looking back, what effect has that had?

We usually think of the power we don't have, not the power that we do. Yet, we have power to shape people's lives: to help people see potential or to feel like failures, to affect them through kindness and compassion, or through judgement and criticism, to instill fear, or to comfort and encourage openness. We have the power to shape people's lives, but when we don't realize it, we won't be as careful and thoughtful as we need to be.

So, let's become more aware. We do so both by being reflective of our actions in the past, and in being open to hearing the reflections of others. After the flood, God reflected on the destruction and vowed to do differently the next time. In the desert, God heard Moses' encouraging words to be forgiving, patient and kind. And, Moses heard God as well, for after hitting the rock, Moses regained his humility, and he focused on what was in the best interest of the people.

We, too, can evolve, and grow and change, when we honestly reflect, and are open to hearing how we impact others. And, we have to give that feedback to others as well, to enable them to be reflective, to understand their impact, and to see the effect of their power.

Most, if not all, sins in this world can be distilled down to some form of abuse of power. If we are to truly be successful on this Yom Kippur in turning from ways that are harmful to others, and harmful to ourselves, the key is for each of us to better understand the power we have and to be conscious of the ways in which we use it.

May we have the wisdom to understand ourselves, the courage to help others see themselves, and the strength to use our power responsibly.

Kein yihi ratzon.