

**Resisting the Influence**  
***Parashat Va-era***  
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Just yesterday, I read an article in the paper (that is, I read an essay on-line) about several people who you have probably never heard of who became famous almost overnight.

That seems like a contradiction, so let me explain.

Once upon a time, movies and television shows were the source of our celebrities. People emotionally glom onto celebrities. We think we know who they are, and it is appealing to us to identify with them. We get something from that association.

About twenty-five years ago, we entered the era of reality TV. Instead of actors playing roles, America began identifying with so-called ordinary people who would take part in contests of one kind or another and would generate attention.

I'm sure that all of us have, at one time or another, watched an episode of "Dancing with the Stars," or "Survivor," or "American Idol," etc.

More recently, internet influencers have become the newest stars in this firmament. These are people who post on Facebook or Instagram or any of a number of other social media sites, generating followers, which brings them—they hope—a certain amount of fame and fortune.

For the most part, following celebrities is fairly harmless. Are any of us worse off for having seen a few episodes of "The Crown?"

On the other hand, can you think of any better proof of the truth of that immortal phrase that celebrities are people who are famous for being famous?<sup>1</sup> At this very moment, you can watch (a) "The Crown;" (b) a documentary program that focuses on The Windsor dynasty as a whole; or (c) another documentary that focuses on Lady Diana specifically. And that's only on Netflix!

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://tinyurl.com/yyeyvqfc> .

But, ... so what? What's the big deal?

Well, sometimes, we lose more than the hours of our time devoted to focusing our eyes on our screens.

We might imagine that in this new world of social media it's the more ambitious, industrious, or smart influencers who succeed. That's undoubtedly true. But there is another factor that can contribute, pretty significantly, to the success of some influencers, and that is how willing they are to traffic in conspiracy theories and outright misinformation and disinformation.

The article I read in the *Times*—which I encourage you to read—showed how the success of certain influencers dramatically improved once they began to feed the demand for unsubstantiated—even mendacious—and wildly absurd yet strangely believable fantasies.<sup>2</sup>

The article pointed out that much of the responsibility for this falls on the algorithms that our social media platforms use to push out content to us.

Algorithms are the rules that the platforms set up to “customize” our viewing experience. It's pretty easy to see those algorithms at work. It seems as though all you have to do is to say out loud, “I could really use a new pair of socks,” and before you know it, you're seeing ads for socks every time you open up your phone! It's actually more complicated than that. The companies are probably not bothering to listen to you. They have other ways of understanding your wants and needs.

Now, that's in the commercial context. Such algorithms also operate to push *political* content in our direction.

What's apparently been true over the past several months is that the more *extreme*, and the more *absurd* the content, the more exposure it has gotten and the more traction it has developed.

This is very disturbing. It teaches us that as a society, if we want to try to protect ourselves from misinformation and disinformation, we will have to work harder

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/opinion/facebook-far-right.html> .

with the social media companies to blunt this distortion of our individual and collective thinking.

And yet some of the blame, of course—maybe most of it—rests with us. We, the people, are ultimately the source of the demand for the content that is being pushed out to us.

Where is that demand coming from?

Apparently, within each of us is a desire to escape this complex, complicated, challenging world in which there don't seem to be easy answers, and to retreat into a world in which we can instead identify with simpler, clearer messages.

One of those messages, for example, is that of **grievance**. Over the past several months, “Stop the Steal” became a powerful unifying message—even though it was founded on groundless accusations of widespread voter fraud.

How is it that so many people seized on this slogan and became convinced—honestly convinced—that such fraud had taken place? How is it that so many people can get so worked up, so convinced that they are right, so convinced that they have been wronged, that they can find themselves rioting in Washington, rebelling against our government?

Yes, they've been egged on. They've been lied to. This we know. But let's stop and think: what makes us, as human beings, susceptible to that?

I think we can learn a lesson from this week's parashah.

At the very beginning of the parashah, God speaks to Moses and makes clear: God has gotten the message. He's heard the moaning of the Israelites. He promises to **free** them and **deliver** them and **redeem** them and **take them out** of Egypt.

You'd think, after that speech, that the Exodus story would be over and done with.

But when Moses shares this news with the people, “*lo sham-u el Moshe*—they didn't listen to Moses.”

Unbelievable. The people who have the most to gain are not listening! We can readily understand why, later in the chapter, when Moses goes before Pharaoh, Pharaoh doesn't want to listen to him, but why not the Israelites?

Many suggestions have been offered. One possibility offered by Rabbi Harold Kushner, which I think is germane here, is this: “[Perhaps] they sensed that freedom would require hard work—that it would not happen quickly or easily.”

There is an appeal to simplicity. KISS is a well-known aphorism. But when our desire for simplicity becomes a craving for the *simplistic*, danger lurks.

In the Bible, this is described as **idolatry**. Idolatry happens when we seek easy solutions to complex problems. It’s a natural, easy lapse. Perhaps that’s why, repeatedly, the Bible stresses the importance of believing in God, and being loyal to God—rather than following our self-centered whims, desires, and instincts to do otherwise.

When I watched the riot at the Capitol last Wednesday on television, all I could think of was an image from a midrashic rendering of the Biblical account of the Exodus—which, incidentally, is depicted very well in the Cecil B. DeMille movie, *The Ten Commandments*: Pharaoh’s army is charging after the Israelites, and the waters close over them, killing them all – except for their leader, Pharaoh, who stands alone, unscathed. Pharaoh was the one who egged them all, yet in the end he didn’t follow them into the sea. He was smarter than that. He might have fed them simplistic stories but he didn’t believe them himself.

The lesson for us, which is age-old—and yet which needs to be repeated, generation after generation—is this: as human beings, we have freedom—freedom of choice and freedom of will. We have to exercise our freedom to think for ourselves and remain independent of the charlatans who promise us great rewards for little effort. Yes, we have to do something about the algorithms. But ultimately, it is we who have to resist the influencers.

Shabbat shalom.