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 Parashat Bo 5782

### Go to Pharaoh

In the days of Rabbi Yitzhak Kalish of Varka (1779-1848) there was a Polish minister who wanted to collect every copy of *Hoshen Mishpat* in Poland and burn it. *Hoshen Mishpat* is the section of the *Shulhan Arukh* that contains Jewish civil law and court proceedings and this antisemitic minister believed that it was problematic for Jews to have our own laws and *batei din* to enforce them. There could be only one law in the land. Motel Kalish was a prominent Jewish community member at the time who had business in Warsaw and was frequently involved in Jewish communal affairs. He was an obvious choice as an emissary of the Jewish community to appear before this minister to plead for our freedom and for our Torah itself. And it fell to Rabbi Yitzhak Kalish of Varka to be the one to inform Motel that he had been selected for this mission.

Motel was terrified. The minister was rumored to keep a loaded pistol on his desk and to shoot those who came before him for an audience and angered him or annoyed him.

Rabbi Yitzhak Kalish turned to Motel and referred him to the opening words of this week's Torah portion.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה

And God said: come to Pharaoh for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them,

The word one would expect for instructions of this sort is "Lekh" or "go to Pharaoh." בֹּא or "come" to Pharaoh is unexpected.

I remember when one of our children was very young he entertained himself by running back and forth and one of us said to him, "why are you running back and forth." And he responded, "wait- remind me, which one is back and which one is forth." So it can be confusing, but it should not have been confusing for God talking to Moshe!

Rabbi Yitzhak Kalsih said that God noticed that Moshe was afraid to return to Pharaoh. Their initial interactions had ended in disaster and Moshe had not accomplished any piece of his mission. God was saying to Moshe, "come with me to Pharaoh." I will be with you.

"And you, Motel," Rabbi Yitzhak Kalish of Vorke said, "when you go to the minister to advocate on behalf of our community, God will be with you too." Motel was so encouraged by this message that he marched into the minister's office with joy and confidence radiating from his face. The minister was not used to applicants appearing before him in that way and he was startled and intimidated and he revoked the decree.

An precedent for Rabbi Yitzhak Kalish of Vorke's insight can be found in the commentary of Rabbi Yitzhak Bechor Shor, a 12th century French scholar who writes:

The implication of “Bo” in place of “Lekh” is that I will walk with you.

I hope the message of **בא אל־פרעה** can be helpful to us in at least two ways:

Sometimes, we have to do frightening things. And each one of us face different challenges that frighten us in different ways: Scheduling the medical test your doctor recommended but whose result you don't want to know? Disclosing an injustice that was committed by powerful people. Telling a parent that you now only eat kosher food. Being openly and proudly Jewish in a setting where that doesn't feel so comfortable.

A life of integrity requires courage because integrity makes itself known when it encounters some opposition or some dissonance that must be overcome. And I hope we can all find the courage to do the right thing for all of the big or small, grand or mundane moments that require courage. It doesn't help to say that whatever task you need to accomplish is no big deal if the person who needs to overcome that fear experiences it as a big deal. But we can remember in our own **בא אל־פרעה** moments that God is with us whenever we confront our fears to do the right thing.

But, we can also provide that comforting Divine presence to others who need it. Human language cannot accurately describe an Infinite God which means that the character of God as described in the Torah exists to give us a model of how we are supposed to act. We need to be the comforting presence alongside those who are acting with courage and need support. Those of us who are parents know how helpful our simple presence can be for young children who are scared or anxious. But, in truth, adults are the same, and you can help someone profoundly just by being near them when they do something frightening. Our presence is healing, our presence is powerful and our presence is an echo of God's presence whenever people act in a righteous way.

When I was not able to be in shul for a number of days following my own Covid diagnosis two weeks ago, many of you reached out to show your concern and offer to help and to say that I was missed. Others pitched in at shul to help things run smoothly in my absence; Rabbanit Goldie wrote a sermon on her birthday! Thankfully, none of us were very sick at all and I didn't experience fear. But I did experience your presence in precisely the ways that we need to make our presences felt - to those of us who are with us in shul this morning and to the many more who are not able to be in shul today but who need to feel our love and support now.