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Parshat Vaera
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Efrat, Israel – What makes Moses Moses? He is certainly the consummate prophet, the man of G-d whose vision of ethical monotheism was expressed in a moral code of law which commands to this very day, more than 4000 years later. He is certainly the consummate leader who took a bedraggled slave-people into freedom and nationhood. But I believe that the central characteristic of Moses is his love of the Jewish people, his “brotherly” love. When he witnesses the slaying of a Hebrew by an Egyptian, he takes action and kills the Egyptian, but he suffers a tremendous loss. All of Egypt sees him as a Prince and, like a Prince of Egypt, he might have concluded his career with his own pyramid one day. Yet Moses risks all because one of his “brothers” has been slain.

Ordinarily, revolutionary careers begin with selfless acts and it would be logical to assume that a fugitive from the law who has put his life on the line for the Hebrews should become a hero at home, among his own people. Moses experiences the exact opposite. On the following day, when he chances upon two Israelites fighting, he wants to stop their wickedness, to defend his brother the underdog, but their response is cynical and arrogant. “Who made you our judge? Do you want to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?” (Ex. 2:14)

In an instant Moses realizes the difficulty in attempting to work with his “brothers” as well as the fact that his prior deed is public knowledge and so Pharaoh’s palace is no longer open to him. Moses becomes a refugee, escaping into the desert with only a shirt on his back.

There, with his new wife and child, earning a living from his flock of sheep, he can live out his years as one more person who tried to make a difference, failed, and left the stage of human history. Let others tackle the problem. But G-d still has His eye on Moses.

The text then tells us that G-d appears to Moses from within the flame of a burning bush, urging him to become the Redeemer of his people. Moses demurs, fearing that as a stutterer, a man whose words trip over his tongue, he will never manage to convince Pharaoh. It is precisely because he loves the Jewish people so much that he wants the best candidate to present their case. Only when G-d informs Moses that his brother Aaron will become his mouthpiece does his resistance cease....for the moment.

The next stage of the redemptive process begins when Moses presents his credentials and G-d’s instructions to Pharaoh. But the result is utter failure. Instead of relenting, Pharaoh tightens the screws, and now the Israelite slaves must gather their own straw for the bricks they bake in the hot sun.

Our portion for the week, Vaera, opens with the verse, “G-d spoke to Moses, and said to him, I am the Lord...” (Exodus 6:2). The Chatam Sofer writes in his work *Torat Moshe* that we should note an interesting use of language in this verse. It relates directly to three verses earlier when Moses’ response to Pharaoh’s increased tyranny was a pointed rebuttal to G-d. “Lord, why do you do evil to this people?” (5:22) Instead of being angered by such strong language, G-d is pleased with Moses’ willingness to confront Him. Better to speak tough with G-d than to speak out against the Jewish people.

The English translation of the opening verse of Vaera does not completely capture the significance the Chatam Sofer alerts us to. The first use of G-d is rendered *Elokim*, signifying the powerful or judging aspect of G-d, while the next use of G-d's name, translated LORD, is in fact the four letter name of G-d. This name signifies the merciful, compassionate nature of G-d. Similarly, the first "speak" uses the word "*vayedaber*," which is a harsher form of speaking, while the second "speak" uses the word "*vayomer*," a softer, gentler form of speaking.

According to the Chatam Sofer, G-d greatly values the extent to which Moses defends the Jewish people, and once Moses calls G-d to task, so to speak, G-d replaces his initial, judgmental name *E-lohim* for the compassionate Y-HVH, and his original harsher form of *Va'yedaber* for the gentler *Va'Yomer*.

Even after Moses was rejected by his own "brothers" and forced to live in Midian, Moses nevertheless forgives the Jewish people. Moses is the leader G-d wants for this new nation because he is ready for anything the Jewish people may throw at him. He has no illusions about the people he will lead. He has experienced their ingratitude and sensed their independence. He can sympathize with Ben Gurion's comment to Truman: "You may be President of 140 million citizens but I am the Prime Minister of 600,000 Prime Ministers."

Rabbi Yitzchak Levi of Berditchev, the great chassidic master, was banished from two rabbinic posts because of his chassidic sympathies. His students wondered what he would do next and he answered that he would seek a third position. But why? they asked. For the honor, he answered. They waited for the wink of his eye, but Rabbi Yitzchak Levi was not being ironic – he was very serious. He explained that leading a Jewish town was always an honor for the rabbi, even if the people didn't honor you in return. Apparently he learned this from Moses.

Moses' outreach towards his hapless and enslaved brothers and his willingness to assume a leadership role only if it is together with his brother as his "front" man, makes him the archetypal brother, the towering figure of the Book of Exodus who is cured of the "brotherly hatred" of the Book of Genesis. It is not easy to love one's brothers, but a true leader is someone who can feel connected to every other Jew, whether from a far away tribe or a DNA related brother. Often parents work out their own problems and short-comings through their children, but siblings have the potential to love each other unconditionally, even when the love is repaid with a curse. This was Moses' greatest gift and his most impressive legacy.

Shabbat Shalom!