

The Sacred Call of a New Generation

This week's *parashah*, *Va'eira* ("And I appeared," Exodus 6:2-9:35) contains the unfolding of the dramatic confrontation of Moses against Pharaoh. Moses courageously addressed Pharaoh and demanded that he comply with the moral imperative: "Let my people go!" Again and again Pharaoh hardened his heart to the suffering of the people, ignoring both the suffering of the Israelites and that of his fellow Egyptians. And with each refusal came another round of plagues. In this Torah portion, the first seven of the plagues are described. Nevertheless, Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to free our Hebrew ancestors from slavery. The climatic will be read in next week's *parashah*, but it is a story that we all know so well. It is a story that we share with family and friends every Passover when we read the *Haggadah*.

We tell this story every year because it has eternal relevance. It resonates with each new generation as it, too, considers the challenges, the oppressions, and the injustices of the day. Indeed, it is a story that the Torah intends to be read fresh and newly relevant by each subsequent generation. That message is made clear when God informs Moses that though the previous generations had a sacred relationship, what is about to happen is unique:

² *God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am Adonai.*

³ *I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name YHWH" (Exodus 6:2-3).*

On first glance, it is hard to fathom what the text means when it says that Abraham, Issac, and Jacob did not know God as YHWH (which we pronounce *Adonai*). In fact, we know of many instances in which God appeared to our earliest patriarchs as *Adonai*. See for instance: Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-2; 26:1-5; 28:10-15. Since *Adonai* established a covenantal relationship with each, what does the Torah mean when Moses is told otherwise?

Note that YHWH is a form of God's name "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*," which was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-15). The translation of this Divine name can be a little ambiguous but *Ehyeh* is the future (or imperfect) tense of *Hayah*, the verb that means "to be." Therefore, *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* is most accurately translated as "I will be what I will be." It expresses God's presence as one that is still unfolding; that God belongs to the here and now and most certainly to the future. In this way, Moses understood that history is being made and not simply repeated. Moses understood that the status quo of slavery and oppression, of exile and frustration, is not the fate of our people or of any people. Rather, God has empowered us and every generation to remake the world with justice, freedom and compassion. We need not perpetuate yesterday's evils and flaws. Yes, there is a Promised Land, a better place, a nobler life that we can, with God's help, establish for all.

This message was emphatically demonstrated this past Sunday at Temple Sinai as we gathered with nearly 1,000 friends and neighbors to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The program was organized by Rabbi Zwerin, Steve Tick and the African-American Greater Metro Denver Ministerial Alliance. With 50 clergy representing the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities,

with Mayor Michael Hancock, Congresswoman Diana DeGette, Attorney General Phil Weiser and many other officials, we came together to reaffirm that the exalted cause and vision of peace, freedom, justice and compassion for all is a dream that still alludes us. God's inspired blessing of a world in which spears are turned into pruning hooks, when swords are pounded into plowshares and nations will learn war no more still beckons us from the future. *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, it will be when it will be. And in the meantime, good people of every faith, race, nation, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, need to keep coming together and tell again the heroic story of a brave shepherd who stood up against Pharaoh.

Each of us has a part of Moses's legacy. The Passover story continues to inspire people around the world just as it inspired Dr. King. Let us build on that legacy. Let us turn those dreams into reality.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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