

You Cannot Bully Your Way to Freedom – Transformation and Exodus

Shabbat Va-eira, Jan 21 2023q, 3 Shevat 5783

Introduction : Eliza, whose bat mitzvah it is today, has seen so much change in her family. Her brother Ben had his bar mitzvah 5 years ago, my first in this synagogue. I was probably more nervous than he was! And her middle brother Archie was our first bar mitzvah at home under lockdown and online.

These are huge changes. But they are not as significant as you might think. The first kind of change is the technical sort. These don't make any serious or radical innovations. We moved our world online; it may like a revolutionary change. But we just used technology to enable us to do what we always do; albeit in your home and even wearing your slippers! The big changes will go to the heart of our experience. These are called *adaptive*. These changes get to the *why* and *how* of who we are.

Every year at Pesach we lift up the matzah, and we say, "this is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt." We drink 4 cups of wine that recall the four promises by God to free us from slavery. We tell the story about a journey of 40 years in the wilderness; a time of transition from being slaves to becoming free. All of that is familiar. But these are not the real and significant moments of enduring transformation, even though we think it is.

I want to thank Eliza for pointing to something that I had never really understood. Moses doesn't want to be chosen. He is not the person who is brimming with confidence and rushing to act in ways that will make other people like him. He doesn't want to go. He does all he can to stop this. Moses knows all about power. He's lived in the Kings Palace. He understands how hard it is to speak so that others will listen.

And it's not just the Pharaoh whom he knows will never listen to him. It's also us. His own people. He doesn't want the job.

He says 'I am heavy of tongue'.

He was described as beautiful at birth. It's likely that there was nothing physically and noticeably different about him. Was he burdened by the challenge of speaking two languages? Was it the challenge of balancing within himself the struggle of two different cultures? Did this cause him to stammer or stutter? Did the experience of stammering or stuttering bring him shame? Was he just not so articulate? Was this someone who just had never built the confidence to say what he thinks? Who is the frightened and modest man who doesn't want to go, the 'most modest man on all the earth'?

Could anyone ever be so different from Pharaoh the king? They are extreme opposites. Pharaoh will hold onto power at all costs. Even when the impact of the plagues frighten him and threaten him. He only stops at his own son's death. Moses has no sense he has within him the potential to speak to a king.

This is that change.

The power of the Exodus that we remember each year is not in the miracles. Not in the plagues; or the parting of the sea of reeds. It's not in the Egyptian's cries. It's not in the sudden escape in the middle of the night.

The power of the Exodus is not in the drama and the trauma of leaving Egypt.

The real change is in that choice. This modest man. That God invests power in someone who cannot trust his own voice. To the extent that he will take his brother to do the speaking for him.

We live in a time of the immense abuse power. To the east, we see a nation fighting for her very existence against a despotic ruler whom like Pharaoh, will stop at nothing.

We are living in a time when in Afghanistan and Iran, women have been taken from the universities and workplace and girls are not allowed to go to school. When women are being ripped out of the modern world.

We are living in a time also when in our own heart-land, Israel, there are challenges to democracy, and the place that justice and the supreme court must hold in creating an equal society.

No one is immune to the quest for power. But some are more accustomed to having it.

That is so central to the genius of who Moshe was, and who, for us, he is. He grows up in the heart of power, but he doesn't seek it. He knows that when he's he speaks, we will struggle to actually listen.

This is the one whom God has chosen. Why? Because true transformation is born when there is also a deep change into how things are done, in how we live, in who we are. You cannot bring about this deep drive for freedom by continuing Pharaoh's urge for dominance, for absorbing the ways of the Egyptian bullies.

We cannot bully our way to freedom.

You cannot be like a copy of the abusive overlord when we are looking for own liberation.

It turns out it will take us generations to leave Egypt behind, to take the Egyptian out of us. Perhaps it's something we still carry inside? All of us have some trace of the trauma of our past generations. All of us remember in some way their suffering. All of us struggle to balance that incredible sense of pride. When we lift up the plate a Pesach and uncover the matzah and say, 'this is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.' All of us feel in some way that awkward ambivalence, as we find space in our minds and in our mouths for Hebrew as well as being the equivalent of Egyptian.

Perhaps if we are lucky we have a trace of what it means to be modest. Of been the one who wishes just to take a step back, to bring along someone else with us, to share that load, to partner with someone we can trust. To be really brave. To go where we have to go and see where the journey takes us. To open our mouth knowing that we fear speech. And that we are unable to control how the other person will truly listen.

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