

Shabbat Shemot – D’var Torah

This morning’s Parasha is Shemot, the start of the book of Shemot, wherein the several inter-weaving strands of the Exodus narrative are originated, creating as between the Israelites, Moses and God a complex triple-helix of relationships which are, as it were, so much the DNA of our Jewish identity.

In particular, today we read from the Parasha’s middle, 3:1–15, which you will find on [] of the S and [] of the P, being Moses’s first encounter with God, containing the profound, natural, timeless and limitless self-expression of God’s identity, beyond any totemic manmade name, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, I am that I am.

אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, for all this encapsulates, this mirror to God - how simple; less is truly more. Indeed, no exceptional leyning melody attaches to it, illustrating that it is we, with all our excuses, who make the recognition of God in our lives extraordinary, not God or Torah. I am that I am, says God, now deal with it.

Everything in Torah is significant, and nothing is superfluous, so we are bound to take notice of and ask why Torah not only places Moses and God on Mount Horeb, the Har Ha Elohim, for this moment and at this time, but also presents God and Moses’s physical experience of God in the way that Torah does.

Why, then, Horeb? We can’t help but stand back in radical amazement, to use a phrase of the great 20th century progressive Rabbi, A J Heschel, at the sight of Mount Horeb, Mount Sinai as we will know it later in the narrative, even if we see it only through our mind’s eye based on our knowledge of mountains.

How immense, how majestic, how demonstrative of the power of the God of creation. As the world of Torah starts to turn on the axis of history, there is surely no other place for Torah to position God and Moses, for she immediately demands we contrast this place with the pyramids of the Egyptians.

See, Torah says – to Moses, to us - how small, how symbolic, how artificial the pyramids are, poor imitations of reality, as expressions of mortal Pharaonic power, divinity and endurance they are nothing against Horeb, the awesome, mountainous manifestation of God’s might, sanctity and eternity.

Placing Moses on Horeb, Torah grounds him in reality. His head is not in the clouds, nor is he undertaking a mythic quest for the otherwise unreachable. Rather, Moses will find that God, like Torah herself, is not remote, is not in the heavens or the depths, but is accessible even to a simple shepherd.

Yet, why place Moses on such hazardous terrain from where, with one lapse of concentration, he could fall to his end? Torah is surely not seeking to endanger Moses physically, so that she is speaking less to Moses’s need to keep his footing and perhaps more to Moses’s desire to find his identity and purpose.

For Moses, the drawn-out one, מִצְיֵתוֹ, so named by his adoptive mother as she drew him out of the water, has always been uncertain of the ground he stands on in the narrow political world of Egypt, like the Nile, a fluid, ever-changing perilous environment, always rising and falling, full of hidden currents and hazards.

Where else then could Torah draw out Moses to, for him to resolve his personal crisis, to reconcile himself to who he is and what he stands for, other than here, amid Horeb's vastness, solidity, silence, solitude and stillness, above and as far removed from all he has ever known, yet surrounded by God's presence.

Drawing Moses here, Torah brings him to a point of decision, without which he can not move forward with his life, and this is always where God is for us. But, with his characteristic hesitancy, Moses refrains from immediately recognising what is before him, from recognising God, so that Torah has to force the issue.

Perhaps Horeb is too overwhelming for Moses; he can not visualise or conceptualise God for the mountain, he can not see the wood for the trees. Or maybe Moses can not see past the darkness of his life – abandoned, adopted, righteous murderer, Hebrew reject, fugitive, prince now shepherd, powerful now powerless.

Almost in despair, therefore, Torah presents God to Moses in the most enlightening way she can, the burning bush, kindling but not flaming, illuminating but not incinerating, brilliant but visible with eyes wide open, intense but approachable. Moses's choice, our choice, Torah says, is always to notice God or turn away.

As we carry Torah from generation to generation, so too we always carry this moment of ignition with us. For, like Moses, our Judaism requires the spark of God to ignite it, the mitzvotic energy transforming both the everyday and the extraordinary into the Jewish.

However fleeting, this spark is the flash of uniquely Jewish inspiration, the realisation and acceptance of the obligation that leaps out from the striking of liberty against tyranny, of conscience against indifference, of hope against despair, of now against never, from the striking of the sacred against the mundane.

Often, such sparks fall where the tinder of faith and belief is so sparse that it is difficult for a flame to build, our hearts perhaps lacking the courage, our minds perhaps lacking the strength, our souls perhaps lacking the resolve to recognise, catch hold of and feed the moment, whatever it may be.

There is a beginning, a Bereshit, but there is no creation, no Bara, no positive act of Judaism, until the moment is fuelled by God's presence, until we add Elohim. So it was that Moses never quite realised what his unique role was, until, ready to accept, to see and to hear God, Torah brought God directly into his life.

May we always be ready to see the light of God in our lives and in the world around us. Baruch Ha Shem, blessed be the One that is אֱהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, I am that I am.

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