

## Parashat Shemot CBS 1/14/12

Today, we literally begin a new chapter in the lives of our people. The conclusion of Breisheet last week closed the book on the patriarchal narrative, leaving us now to turn to the subject of our people with a capital “P”, as they struggle to become the People of Israel. Starting where Breisheet left off, the first five verses of Parashat Shemot begin by once again listing all of Jacob’s family members who came to Egypt on Joseph’s invitation, and then announcing that that whole generation has died. We are then told, however, the original 70 settlers increased and multiplied, and were successful in Egypt.

And it was this enormous growth and success that marked the beginning of their downfall, when “A new King arose who did not know Joseph.” Threatened by “Am B’Nai Yisrael: the Israelite people,” (the only time in the Torah that the Israelites are referred to as a nation), the new Pharaoh seeks their destruction, first asking the Hebrew midwives to kill all boys that are born and, when that doesn’t work, ordering the people to throw every newborn boy in the Nile.

Thanks to the fortitude and cunning of his mother and sister, one newborn baby is saved: Moses is floated down the river Nile, rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter, and raised as a Prince of Egypt. Not much is said about his growing-up-years in the palace. To fill in the blanks, I recommend that you study the modern Midrash, better known as the film, “The Prince of Egypt.” The next time we are introduced to Moses, he has intervened in an altercation between an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, killing the Egyptian and burying the body in the sand. He is forced to flee to Midian, where he lives a quiet and peaceful life as a shepherd until, tending to his flock one day, he happens upon a burning thornbush, that, although on fire, is not consumed.

And because Moses stops and takes notice of this, the entire course of his life, and ours, changes. As most of us know, G-d appears to Moses out of the flames, and properly introduces Himself:(Gen 3:6): “Vayomer Anochi Elokei Avicha Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak, Velokey Yaacov...I am..the G-d of your father, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob.” And if these words sound familiar, it’s because this is how we begin the first blessing of the Amidah, the standing prayer that we recite each day. G-d then charges Moses with a very special mission: get the people out of Egypt!

We know how the story ends. We read it, not only each year from the Torah, but at Pesach, as we reenact the painful and miraculous journey that ultimately leads to the Israelites’ redemption. And we recall that redemption every day as we chant the Mi Chamocha as part of our prayer service in the morning and evening, confirming our belief that G-d will redeem us at any time, in any age.

And that’s where my own personal struggle begins, and it begins with this question: how do I reconcile the story of the rescue of our people from Egypt, with the non-rescue of the six million victims of the Holocaust? Our Parashah clearly tells us that G-d was there for us way back then. The narrative states: (Ex. 2:23): “The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to G-d. And G-d heard their moaning, and G-d remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. G-d looked upon the Israelites, and G-d took notice of them.”

And a mere seven verses later G-d Himself declares (Ex 3:7-10): “....I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.....Now the cry of the Israelites has

reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.” The message couldn’t be more clear: the people are suffering; they cry out to G-d; G-d listens; G-d remembers His promise to our Patriarchs; G-d responds.

Yet I am left with grappling with trying to answer this question: If G-d was with us in Egypt, where was G-d at Auschwitz?

I am not alone in my struggle to make some sense of these questions. In fact, there is a genre of literature called “Holocaust theology” that has been written by theologians, clergy and scholars over the last few decades that attempts to do just this. As defined by Wikipedia, “Holocaust theology refers to a body of theological and philosophical debate and reflection and related literature, primarily with Judaism, that attempts to come to grips with various conflicting views about the role of G-d in the universe and the human world in light of the Holocaust.” And I’d like to spend a few moments reviewing just a few of these reflections, as described in Rabbi Neil Gillman’s book, “Sacred Fragments; Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew.”

One of the great Jewish existentialist thinkers, Martin Buber, posits that during the Holocaust an “eclipse of G-d” took place, causing G-d to withdraw from us temporarily. This withdrawal is not without precedent; there are times in the Bible itself when G-d appears to be in hiding. In Psalm 13, King David laments, “How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?...Look at me, answer me, O Lord my G-d!” And yet through his suffering, David still concludes, “But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me.”

Martin Buber also holds up the story of Job as an example of this complex relationship with a G-d who hides his face and a man who, nonetheless, doesn't give up on G-d, and, thus, is able to remain in dialogue with the Divine. Rabbi Gillman remarks, "What is significant is not what G-d says but that He speaks to Job again, and in that speaking, He turns His face to him again. Job is reassured not by the substance of the speech but simply by his renewed sense of G-d's presence."

These thoughts are reflected in the writings of contemporary theologian Irving Greenberg, who states that we must balance the tensions inherent in having a relationship with an unseen Presence, a G-d that at times seems so close and can also be so far away. Rabbi Gillman again claims, "The tension itself, the very tenuous and indeterminate nature of religious faith, its fragmented quality is simply inevitable. G-d is a 'moment G-d'; faith is a 'moment faith'.....The full implication of this position is that atheism is an integral part of the experience of faith. There is no faith without moments of despair, just as there is no despair without moments of affirmation."

What a powerful statement. Scary and almost, dare I say it, exhilarating at the same time, granting permission for us to get angry, and doubt, to experience despair, to call G-d out, to even question our faith, while still remaining in relationship with the Eternal.

Eliezer Berkovitz takes this perspective one step further, but contends that G-d at times recuses Himself from our struggles so that humans can be free to choose the paths that they take, even when they lead to destruction. As explained again by Rabbi Gillman, "G-d's tolerance of human cruelty becomes, paradoxically, an affirmation of His respect for humanity. This may lead to human suffering, but there is no escaping that outcome. If G-d exalts human freedom, He must tolerate evil, and if He tolerates evil, people will suffer. Yet G-d waits, even for the sinner and even despite the suffering of the victims. That's what makes Him

G-d.” And yet Berkovitz does contend that G-d was present during the Holocaust, through the many acts of those, both Jewish and not who did help ease the suffering of those in the death camps, and those who helped rescue them, even at great personal risk to themselves.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of our greatest Jewish scholars, teachers and theologians, puts the blame on the “non-rescue” of those who perished not on G-d, but on us. Rabbi Gillman, paraphrasing Rabbi Heschel, states, “Indeed, Auschwitz is but one example of the pervasive human tendency to ignore G-d’s voice, for He is ‘everywhere or nowhere, the Father of all men or no man, concerned about everything or nothing.’ Where is G-d? ‘(He) will return to us when we shall be willing to let Him in....’ In the meantime, He waits for us to redeem the world.”

It is this sentiment that has finally helped me begin to formulate some answers to my original question: “If G-d was with us in Egypt, where was G-d at Auschwitz?” This question, however, assumes that G-d was with us in Egypt because the Torah clearly documents His response to the cries of his people. What I overlooked, however, was the fact that this response, as well as the quintessential revelation at the burning bush, only came after a prolonged period of suffering! So perhaps this question should be reframed, asking instead, “Where was God during those many long years of enslavement years in Egypt, and where was G-d at Auschwitz?” And here’s an answer that makes sense to me: G-d was always there, waiting for us to notice.

In Egypt, I wonder if G-d heard and perhaps sought to reach out to his people right away, right after that “new king who did not know Joseph” took over. But action could only take place many years later when an unassuming shepherd named Moses stopped to look at an unassuming thornbush, aflame in the desert. After all, who knows how long that bush was burning? Days? Years? Decades? And only when G-d sees

that Moses has acknowledged this, does G-d communicate directly with Moses, calling him twice. Moses is fully present and responds without hesitation. His awareness of G-d's presence transforms a vast grazing ground in which a thorny desert plant burns, into a sacred space. In just a moment, Moses recognizes that although he thought he was alone, G-d was there, and always had been. And despite all of Moses' hesitations and reservations G-d knew that He had finally found the right person to get the redemption ball rolling.

So I also choose to believe, like Heschel, that G-d was there in the Shoah too, suffering right alongside the Jewish people, waiting for someone, perhaps someone like Moses, to notice and acknowledge His presence and to stand up and end the inhumanity. And although it took too tragically long, it happened, little by little - with the unprecedented act of defiance during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising; through the courage of righteous gentiles such as Raoul Wallenberg, Irena Sendler and Miep Gies, who risked their lives to help save many others. And, after 6 million tragically perished, the mass murders finally ceased when the Allied forces stormed the camps and led the survivors to freedom. It took the act of many courageous individuals, not just one Moses, to rescue the survivors of the Holocaust, and it will be forever up to many courageous individuals and nations to make sure that it never happens again.

The message that I glean from this is simply that G-d is ever-present, waiting for us to acknowledge His presence, inspiring us to seek out good, maintain, as best we can, structure in a world of chaos, and respond to suffering each to the best of our ability. That's how G-d works through us. And if we choose to see and listen to the cry of others, to be courageous and compassionate enough to answer G-d when G-d calls us wherever we are, perhaps not to move mountains but to reach out to one human being – if each one of us can do just that

- then we will never need to ask the question, "Where is G-d?" We will always know the answer.

Shabbat Shalom