

**D'var Torah I:
Women's League Anniversary Shabbat: *Parashat Va'era*
And Now for the Rest of the Story**

Let My people go...

Today's Torah reading is a very well known one that we also retell at our seder tables. The children love to re-enact Moses and Aaron, with rod in hand, approaching Pharaoh with these words: *Let my people go*. Other oppressed peoples have adopted these words and even put them to music. Unfortunately, for many the story stops there.

And now for the rest of the story...Let's set the scene...

Towards the end of last week's parasha, Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh and say:

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let my people go... that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness.

This demand was as much for Pharaoh as it was for the Israelites. The point of this confrontation is to illustrate the tug of war, who possessed more power, Pharaoh or God? Pharaoh asks, "Who is this God of yours?" Moses has trouble answering him, as he did when the Israelites posed the same question. But God answers this question with signs, which we know as the plagues. The first four were nuisances; the next four were attacks upon the Egyptian people and their property. The ninth and tenth were ones of terror, especially the tenth, the plague of death, that led to Israel's liberation.

The first part of the mandate – "*Let my people go*" was intended for Pharaoh. The second part, "*so that they may celebrate a festival for Me*"...was for the Israelites. With liberation comes responsibility. The newly liberated Israelites needed the opportunity to get to know God within their own experience. God had to be more personal to them beyond being the God of their ancestors. God needed time to accomplish this. That opportunity manifests itself with signs/plagues.

In today's Torah reading, God says, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply my signs and marvels in the Land of Egypt."

Each time, in response to the effect of the plagues, Pharaoh's first reaction is to say, "Stop, get them out of here!" He was disturbed by all these disruptions. The Israelites could not focus on their labors and they slacked off in their work. They were punished by having to find their own straw to make the bricks.

But God hardened Pharaoh's heart each time and Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go. Pharaoh was not God's puppet. He was already inclined to behave this way. God "nudged" him along his preferred path.

God's purpose was to show the Israelites **and** the Egyptians the strength and consequences of His power. Freedom for the Israelites was not to be shown as if it came from Pharaoh's relenting. The Israelites had to know that it was God's doing, not Pharaoh's, that freed them.

Once the Israelites acknowledged the existence and power of God within their own experiences, they were ready for liberation and the responsibility that went along with it. May we be strengthened daily by the words of the *Shema*, “*V’ahvta et Adonai Elohekha b’kol l’vav’kha u-v’khol nafsh’kha u-v’khol m’odekha*” [You shall love Adonai your God with all your **heart, with all your soul**, and with all your might.And teach them diligently to your children]. At the celebration of the Passover seder we fulfill this mitzvah by retelling the story of the Exodus and how God made it possible for the Israelites to leave Egypt so that they may get to know Him.

Throughout the generations, **with heart and soul**, “*lev v’nefesh*,” we have kept close to God, celebrated our sorrows and blessings together as a community within our synagogues, sisterhoods and homes.

Shabbat shalom

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