



WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Women's League Shabbat 2015/5775

Parashat Vaera

D'VAR TORAH I (on the Parashah)

In today's Torah portion, God tells Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh to demand freedom from slavery for the Israelites. Pharaoh refuses to free the slaves and God unleashes seven of the ten plagues on the Egyptians. With each plague, Pharaoh promises to free the Israelites and asks Moses to stop the plague, but each time God hardens Pharaoh's heart and he changes his mind as soon as the plague is over.

Many would say that the story of the Exodus, even without the miracle at the sea, is an unbelievable drama. The three principal characters are Moses, Pharaoh and the Israelites and each is an unwilling participant, reluctant to play their assigned roles.

First there is Moses. When God appears to Moses and announces that He has heard the groans of the Israelites, seen their suffering, and plans to liberate them via Moses, Moses protests his total unfitness for the job. "Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, neither in the past nor since you spoke to your servant for I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue."

In effect he is telling God that he could hardly have chosen a less qualified spokesman.

Our next character is Pharaoh. When the Egyptian monarch is approached with the preposterous request to liberate all his slaves, his answer is predictable, especially when the request is made in the name of some invisible God. "Who is the Lord that I should listen to "His" voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord and moreover, I will not let Israel go."

Then there is our third unwilling participant, the enslaved Israelites. Moses' intercession with Pharaoh on their behalf only enrages the monarch and makes him increase their workload, and they now have to provide their own straw while their quota of bricks remains the same. No wonder that Moses' promise that the God of their ancestors is about to redeem them from bondage leaves them disbelieving and unmoved.

Along with its cast of a self-doubting messenger, intransigent monarch, and despairing Israelites, the plot of the Exodus is as incredulous as it is unprecedented. Never before was a ruler coerced into freeing his slaves, his own property, and never before were the slaves freed.

So who is the real hero of our drama with its unwilling players and unbelievable plot?

God, of course, is the true hero. It is God who enables a stammering, tongue-tied Moses to deliver the great words, and it is God who takes down the inflated tyrant and transforms an oppressed group of slaves into “a kingdom of priests and a holy people.”

Every year at Pesach, we, the descendants of those ex-slaves, retell and re-enact this ancient drama, making it the longest running play in history. But besides retelling it, what can we learn from it?

Like Moses, we may often create excuses. It’s too hard! I can’t speak well! I don’t have enough time!

Like the Israelites, we may not have the courage and strength to overcome adversity and handicaps and fight for what is right. But, as members of sisterhood and the Jewish community, we need to not create excuses but reasons to rise to the challenges that we face. By doing so, we will make a difference and make our communities stronger and the world better.

How many times have those asked to lead a Divrei Hokhmah (Women’s League mini study session) or other sisterhood role, responded: I can’t do it. I’m not comfortable doing it. I’m not good in front of groups.

Or when asked about other tasks in the congregation responded, I can’t. I don’t know how. I’m not good at?

These obstacles are self imposed. Let’s look at the biblical models, novices, reluctant leaders, inarticulate spokesmen. Where would we be if Moses, or Esther, or Golda had said, “I can’t.... “ By doing so, we can make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of those in our communities.

Shabbat shalom.

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