

Facing Down Fear **Shemot 5777**

Today we began to read the opening of the narrative that will dominate the rest of the Torah - the journey of our ancestors from slavery to freedom.

This story would not work without its anti-hero - Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

The first thing we find out is that this new P didn't know Joseph. As Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson observed this week, this means he didn't understand what could and could not be changed. He is a person cut off from history. The next thing we read is that he notices the Israelites are numerous and wishes to cut down their numbers. And so he enslaves them. But they become even more numerous. And so he issues another edict:

Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.

My previous senior rabbi, Jonathan Jaffe Bernhard, pointed out what is under our noses if we only care to look. Really, *every*? That includes the Egyptians. What did his people ever do wrong to deserve such a punishment?

The Midrashic tradition and Rashi both notice the anomaly. It gets explained away by a little story that Pharaoh's astrologers foresaw that a boy would be born who would save the Israelites, but were not clear about whether he would be Israelite or Egyptian. I don't find this convincing. It is more interesting and more relevant, I think, to deal with the full implications of this piece of Torah.

And what we have here is an illustration of what happens when a person is motivated by fear.

The source of the fear - that the people are numerous - is rational. But the fear itself is not. And when one attempt to address it does not work, Pharaoh becomes irrational and paranoid.

The key word in the Hebrew here, the one that starts the whole ugly process, is *pen*. We know it from the second paragraph of the Shema, when we are warned against our hearts being tempted away. There, as here, it has a sense of foreboding about it, a 'what if...?' And into that empty space our worst projections begin to manifest. In the Shema, the result is idolatry. For Pharaoh, the result is and will be destruction.

Fear runs like a black thread through the whole of the rest of the Torah narrative. The 'good guys' are not immune. Moses fears the implications of his leadership. Over and over again the people are terrified and plead to go back to Egypt. It is their fear that Moses has abandoned them that drives them to make the golden calf; it is their fear of the native inhabitants of the land that results in an extra 39 years being added to the journey.

And the Egyptians, led by Pharaoh's fear, die in their thousands. In the river, throughout the plagues, at the Sea - their past and their future sacrificed because of their leader's inability to master his own fear.

But the richest and most complex example of the damage fear can do is Pharaoh himself - or, to be exact, Pharaohs 1 and 2, because there are two of them (it is Pharaoh's death that means Moses can return from Midian to lead the people).

Pharaoh 2 has the same fear as Pharaoh 1. *The people of the land are already so numerous, and you would have them cease from their labors?* he cries to Moses and Aaron. But with him the fear of the Israelite's number is combined with an overweening lack of humility. *I don't know this Adonai, this God* he rants, *and I will not let Israel go*. Of course he doesn't. Because for this Pharaoh, his fear is his God. And it turns him into a tyrant. And ultimately it will destroy him.

And it will do so in a very specific way. Because - I am quoting the title of a movie - *fear eats the soul*. In mythology we have many models of this, and not just in ancient myth. In the HP books, the evil Lord Voldemort's fear of death drives him to split his soul in seven pieces and infuse it into objects, Horcruxes. As each object is destroyed, Voldemort becomes more fragile, until ultimately, in his last battle, he hits the floor with a *mundane finality*.

I have been wondering this year whether P also becomes so hollowed out by his fear that there is nothing left of him but a shell, ready to be possessed by the foul wind that the kabbalists call the *sitra ahra*. Perhaps it is fortunate for him that the empty space will be occupied by God, who apparently encounters no resistance when hardening Pharaoh's heart. Why would there be? Pharaoh has no free will any more, nor anything else. His soul has been eaten.

In the figure of Pharaoh, and in the opportunity the Torah gives us to study the toxic effects of fear, there are powerful lessons for our times. I am going to focus on just two: one external and one internal. They are of course related.

The external one has to do with the drumming up of fear by a leader. In Rabbinic tradition, inciting someone to wrongdoing is punished more severely than the wrongdoing itself, depriving the perpetrator of a place in the World to Come. As Jews, we should be scrutinizing our leadership [notice that I said leadership and not government, please] and calling it to account any time it attempts to motivate us by fear. Whether our leaders proceed from ignorance of history like the first Pharaoh, or from arrogance like the second, or from any other destructive place, as Jews it is our obligation to name fear, to call it out and to refuse to be cowed by it. If nothing else, the memory of those innocent, dead Egyptian babies should remind us of the damage a fear-driven leadership can do.

But there's a but. Earlier this week I taught a class about the prophet Amos. One thing that we all noticed was that he did not direct his criticism towards the leadership. No: he placed the obligation to change fairly and squarely on the people themselves.

Every one of us sitting in this room has the personal choice whether to let fear master us as it mastered Pharaoh. Every spiritual tradition recognizes the power of fear to destroy us. Facing it down is some of the hardest work a human being can do; but mastery of our own fear is a vital step in our own spiritual evolution. Each of us has a choice to make about how we deal with that *pen*, that *what if*. Each of us can choose to weaken or strengthen ourselves spiritually.

To take just one aspect of our lives: the way we get our information. Pharaoh didn't have the internet. We do. Will we feed ourselves what is wholesome; will we challenge ourselves to consider alternative points of view? Or will we continue in our own bubbles, reading whatever happens to show up on our own facebook feed and Google searches? This week I saw a chilling piece about how the very Google searches Dylan Root conducted took him to the most extreme of racist websites, feeding his hatred and fuelling his fear. We all know what the results were. Can we retain our objectivity and promise ourselves that we will engage in that time-honored Jewish pursuit of questioning, questioning, questioning?

Earlier this week I was reading a section from the *Sefer Haredim*, a book of ethics by the seventeenth-century Rabbi Elazar ben Moshe Azkiri. He writes:

This world is a storm-tossed sea. A person must imagine himself floating on its surface; he should lift up his head towards his Creator above; he should take great care that the arrogant waters do not enter his mouth; he should beware of the waves coming towards him to sweep him away; and if not, he is responsible for his own destruction.

In these turbulent times, how else can we shore up our spiritual courage? Will we strengthen our bodies, will we meditate, will we write, will we teach our children, will we align ourselves with causes that speak to our hearts? What is our personal practice for getting beyond fear, so that it does not corrode us? How will we fight against becoming hollow?

Because fight we must. Facing down fear is real work; the work of a lifetime. Facing down fear turns an ordinary person into a hero, a leader into a legend.

If - as I have argued - one way of reading the Torah is to see it as a study of what fear can do and how it can be overcome, it is worth looking at the end. When Moses transfers power to Joshua, he says:

Be strong and resolute, [hazak ve-emetz] for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their fathers to give them...God's self will be with you, God will not fail you or forsake you; fear not, nor be dismayed [lo tira ve'lo teihat].

On this first Shabbat of the book of Shemot, when we once again read the beginning of our story, let us remember the undoing of Pharaoh. And let us focus on the courage of our ancestors. And let us commit to facing down fear in the time that is coming.

Hazak ve-emetz. Shabbat shalom.