

***Parshat Beshalach***  
**January 15, 2011**  
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I had a very strange experience this past week. I was reading an editorial by David Brooks in the New York Times on the terrible tragedy that took place in Arizona where Jared Loughner is accused of shooting 19 people, killing six, including Federal Court Judge John Roll and a nine year old girl and gravely wounding Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. The actions of this one man have created a national trauma. It led President Obama to participate in a memorial service on Wednesday night to try and bring some healing. And it has also resulted in a national debate as to where exactly to lay blame for this horrendous event. And while I was reading this editorial, Brooks used a word to describe the accused killer that I have not heard in 15 years. In fact I know the exact day and place that I last heard this word. I used it in a sermon, on this bema on January 27, 1996. I remember it because it is a very unusual word – and I remember the date – because it was my son Ari's Bar Mitzvah, Parshat Bo! Coincidence? I think not.

The word is: anosognosia (anno-so-NO-zee-uh). In 1996, it was a newly named psychological syndrome that was the product of research that was being done at the University of California into the malfunction of the right and left-brain. David Brooks sites it in his article this past week because he believes it might shed some light on the actions of Jared Lockner who is accused of the horrendous rampage shooting in Tucson. I quoted it in my sermon on the occasion of Ari's Bar Mitzvah 15 years ago because I thought it might shed light on Pharaoh.

Now as you might imagine it is not often that a rabbi gets to use a word like anosognosia – in a sermon, and the chance to use it again? Well – that is an opportunity that I just can't let pass by.

There is an interesting debate raging over where to place responsibility for this terrible crime that occurred in Arizona. Now everyone agrees – that first and foremost – we must hold the shooter accountable for his actions. But beyond that – the question is being hotly debated – as to whether he was motivated by the hostile political rhetoric that has gripped our country and which might have a negative influence on vulnerable people with mental problems – or whether it was his mental illness alone. Brooks argues for the later or as he puts it, "the evidence before us suggests that Lockner was locked in a world far removed from politics as we normally understand it." I am not sure that I agree with Mr. Brooks on this one – but I am, for our purposes this morning – more interested in his embracing the use of anosognosia – as a possible defense for the shooter. As I think the bible attempts a similar defense for Pharaoh to justify his actions over 3000 years ago when he refused to let our people go.

What is anosognosia? Well it is well founded that there is a division of labor between the brain's right and left sides. The left side specializes in language while the right side is good at visual and spatial tasks. We all know people who have suffered strokes or accidents to one side of their brain and have lost very specific kinds of behavior. At any given moment in our waking lives, our brains are flooded with a variety of sensory inputs and the brains job is to make sense out of all this data. We walk outside and our skin feels cold, our breath exhales puffs of smoke, we smell the briskness in the air. As our brain is receiving all this data it pulls from the file what we already know – that it is winter and then our experience makes perfect sense. To act the brain must have some way of selecting from this superabundance of detail and ordering it into a consistent belief system, a story that makes sense of the available

evidence. This is the job of the left-brain. It is the left-brain's job to impose consistency onto the story line. It is the left-brain's job to make sense of all this information it is bombarded with.

Now what happens when something doesn't make sense, when something doesn't fit what you had previously believed? Well, every time we are confronted with a contradiction, we don't rip up the whole story and start from scratch. No, we have developed a whole host of techniques to try and force the contradictory information to fit the big picture. When confronted with an inconsistency our natural tendency is to find a way to dismiss it. For example, you bundle up in your coat because of everything you know about winter – only to step outside and feel warm. Now that doesn't seem right! So what does your brain do? It doesn't immediately throw away all your previous notions and redefine your concept of winter. What it does is look for a way to explain the inconsistency – “ah yes you heard on the radio this morning that some unusually mild weather was setting in,” – so your brain concludes that winter is still a cold time of year, but this is an exception.

Experts tell us that this denial, this unwillingness on our part to redefine things every time there is an inconsistency, this tendency to maintain our original story even in light of contradictions is a critical feature of how our brain works. The left-brain's job is to create a model and maintain it at all costs. The right-brain's job is to detect anomalies, to look for inconsistencies, to force a paradigm shift, to challenge the model the left-brain is so desperately defending.

But there are decisive moments when for all its good efforts – the left-brain has to admit defeat, when those contradictions reach a certain threshold, the left-brain is forced to revise its model. We may know that it is winter, but if day after day we go outside and it is not cold, at a certain point the right-brain forces the left-brain to revise its model, despite its reluctance to do so. After the right-brain presents contradiction after contradiction, the left-brain is forced to revise its concept of winter and conclude that although in many places winter is indeed a cold time of year – that is not the case when you are living in Florida!

That, say experts, is how the brain works. The left-brain tries to cling to old notions, the right brain tries to force paradigm shifts. Or in words a Conservative Jew would understand, the right-brain is committed to change, the left-brain is committed to maintaining tradition.

Anosognosia is a condition resulting from damage to the right side of the brain. As a result the left-brain goes about its merry way denying every contradiction that presents itself as it would in any normal person. But the mechanism in the right hemisphere that would ordinarily force the left to change is absent. No matter how many contradictions or inconsistencies are presented, the person with anosognosia will continue to deny and explain away any anomaly or discrepancy. There is no threshold that will necessitate change.

This claims David Brooks is what plagues the shooter – Jared Loughner. His paranoid beliefs about the world – are, in his opinion, impervious to any input of reality. He believes what he believes and reality is irrelevant. He believes that the government is out to get him – and no amount of reality, or evidence to the contrary can change that belief.

I don't know if David Brooks is correct in his analysis of Mr. Loughner – but it was 15 years ago, that I suggested that this diagnosis might explain the strange behavior of Pharaoh in our Torah reading these past few weeks. The Torah portion for today continues the saga of the liberation of our ancestors from Egyptian slavery. It deals with the final confrontation between Pharaoh

and Moses at the shores of the Red Sea. Israel is finally victorious and Egypt is finally defeated.

Throughout the narrative, the Bible describes Pharaoh as a relentless and ruthless despot. In the words of the Bible, his heart is hardened to the plight of the Jews. Nineteen times, the rabbis point out, the phrase “hard heart” occurs in the description of Pharaoh’s response to Moshe’s plea for freedom. And the last time that he hardened his heart was when he summoned his chariots and his armies to overtake the Israelites and bring them back to Egypt. How do we explain Pharaoh’s hard heart? How do we explain, that a man who was smart enough to be Pharaoh of Egypt; who ably and competently ruled over the most powerful and sophisticated society of the ancient world, could be so *dense* that he cannot see the inevitability of Israel’s liberation from slavery? Not once, but TEN TIMES he ignores the signs – after.

I can understand his initial reticence. Who would want to voluntarily give up such a large source of cheap labor? How could we expect him to make such a dramatic change based on the demands of an invisible God and an untested Moses?

But how many plagues does it take till he gets the message. Now I’m no Pharaoh, but I think I would have caught on after the first plague, after *dam!* Turn all *my* drinking water, all my bath water, all the streams and rivers of my country to blood and then demand: “Let my people go!” – and I would say: “Let ‘em go.” But not ‘ol Pharaoh: Blood, frogs, lice, beasts, cattle plague, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally the slaying of the first-born. And then when he does momentarily relent, he sends out the chariots to bring them back? What was wrong with this guy?

And the only explanation the torah gives us is: “*V’yichazeyk hasem et lev paroh*” – that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Fifteen years ago I suggested that what the Bible may have been trying to tell us – is that Pharaoh had anosognosia, a malfunction of the right side of his brain. As plague after plague, disaster upon disaster continue to mount, demanding some kind of reappraisal, demanding some kind of recalculation – poor Pharaoh’s left brain merrily goes upon its way maintaining the old model at all costs. And if some of you out there try and point out that I am speaking of a brain ailment and the torah speaks of a heart ailment – you will find that the functions ascribed by modern psychologists to the mind, were in the bible, attributed to the heart.

But on this Shabbat, my intention in sharing this with you is not only to present a novel insight into the torah, nor is it merely to help you better understand Pharaoh and his dilemma, nor even to brag that I made this connection about anosognosia 15 years before NY Times columnist David Brooks made it about Jared Loughner. No, 15 years ago I used this insight to help this father deal with the transition of his son to becoming a man on his bar mitzvah day. I remind you of it today for two reasons: I hope it might be of some help to parents who now watch as their daughters experience this very same transition – and to help as that same father from 15 years ago, now has to deal with a very different transition – as that bar mitzvah boy sits here today with *bechirat libo* – the love of his life – in celebration of their *aufruf* and in anticipation of their forthcoming marriage.

If anosognosia represents a mental challenge in its most extreme manifestation – we all manifest lesser degrees of the same dilemma. Pharaoh's problem is to some extent all of our problems.

You see diseases of the mind are not like diseases of the body. With the flu, either you have the virus or you don't. Such is not the case with our minds. Paranoid schizophrenics may get locked up in mental institutions – and we hope that will be the case with Jared Loughner if he is found to be suffering from some kind of derangement – but paranoia is not limited to those who are ill. We have all experienced moments of paranoia. And if Pharaoh was an extreme case of anosognosia, we all have to appreciate how it works to a lesser extent in our own lives.

Life, for all of us is a battle between our right-brain and our left-brain, between the part of us that seeks to impose consistency, the part of us that tries to make sense out of life – and the other side which is constantly bombarding us with the new, with the developments of an ever-changing world. All of us have to learn to deal with tradition *and* change.

Fifteen years ago, I was a father who had come to understand what it meant to be a father – to have children who depended on me, who needed me, children who were, - well – children.

My life had achieved a certain consistency, there was a story line, and it made sense. And then just when I seemed to be putting the whole thing into some kind of perspective, my right-brain intruded, it forced upon me a new disturbing reality – this is what you are going through today Mitchell & Roy.

Fifteen years ago, I had to confront that my son was not a child anymore, he was growing and he was developing into a mature young man. And I had to deal with that.

That is your challenge today. Maybe like Pharaoh I could have tried to ignore the facts, ignore the change – and you can try that if you wish – but I think that is in part what this Bat Mitzvah ceremony is all about - part of its enormous wisdom. What it did for me 15 years ago was to help me confront a new reality. This Bat Mitzvah ceremony does not in itself bring about the change. It just celebrates and responds to the change that has taken place and guides us to see the deeper meaning, the Divine Presence hidden in the event.

You may not want to hear this from me – I know I was resistant. Part of me tried to cling... but the other part pushed me into the future. I didn't want things to change, but I knew they must. The future always wins; it is only a question of how long we resist before we confront this inevitability.

And now I stand before you fifteen years later – and my bar mitzvah boy has truly become a man. Tomorrow he will be getting married – to a wonderful young woman – we could not be happier or prouder.

Here is what I said fifteen years ago, at Ari's bar mitzvah: "For some parents it takes only one knock on the head, for others, like Pharaoh, it took ten knocks – but sooner or later, we all get the message. For me it happened when I saw Ari putting on his *tefillen*. We purchase them in Israel – some of you might remember – it was on a Beth Sholom Family Israel trip. They promised to have them finished in time for his bar mitzvah. I remember Ari's excitement when I told him his *tefillen* had arrived. I was pleased by his excitement. Place these strange black

boxes in the hands of any American 13 year old and they would find them meaningless, too many Jewish 13 year olds who greet them with indifference – but my son was excited – he knew what *tefillen* were and he valued them – I was pleased. He immediately wanted to try them on. “Let me show you how.” I said. “No need *abba*, I know how, I learned at Camp Ramah, I learned at Schechter, I know how.” And there I stood, watching my son put on his own *tefillen*, all by himself, becoming a man, or at the very least becoming something much more than a child. Thankfully, he still needed *some* help. But not as much as he used to, not as much as I would have liked.” And here is how I concluded my comments 15 years ago: “It was a long time ago when I first learned what it meant to be a Bar Mitzvah. I still remember the excitement and the nervousness, the pronouncement: “Today I am a man!” Well, today I am the father of a man – and you know what? That’s ok, that’s just fine with me.”

A lot has happened in the last fifteen years. And he is a man in ways that no longer demand that we chuckle when we say the words. Some very special people who were with us 15 years ago are not with us today and that is very sad; but there are new faces – our family has grown in ways we could never have anticipated – and that makes us very happy.

Sorry Pharaoh, you see being Jewish is about *leaving* Egypt, it is about the journey *to* the Promised Land, it’s about change and it’s about growth; it’s about a warm and wonderful past *and* about a bright new tomorrow; it’s about appreciating the role of tradition and change in your life.

Roya & Mitchell, today you are the parents of two women – enjoy and embrace this moment. Today I am the father of a man who is about to become a husband to a wonderful woman – I couldn’t be happier, we couldn’t be happier and I thank you for sharing in our joy.