

Parshat Shmot
January 10, 2015
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I have been thinking a lot about events in Paris. The tragic events at Charlie Hebdo, and the subsequent tragedy at the kosher grocery In Paris. We struggle to know how to respond – we are angry, we don't understand those who perpetrate such outrageous violence and we also don't understand those who try and justify it – people who speak about the frustration of Muslims who feel disrespected and disconnected and feel they have no other alternative but violence and terrorism. One can only imagine the hatred that these young men harbor as they wreck havoc on the streets of Paris. And we worry how many more like them are out there and the damage they can do.

With this week's Torah portion we began the book of *Shmot*, the Book of Exodus, and the scope and scale of our story and our journey has widened from the story of one family to the story of an entire people and a whole nation. The drama broadens and widens -- this week's *parasha* includes the birth of Moses, his youth, his calling by God and the story at the burning bush, his initial confrontations with Pharaoh in Egypt and the recognition of his leadership by the Israelite people. There is an abundant amount of *homer l'drush* - of material to speak about. But I was drawn to one small episode - one that I have always found intriguing. It is only four verses long. Chapter 2 verses 11-15 (the last verse on page 323)

“Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, “Why do you strike your fellow?” He retorted, “Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Moses was frightened and thought: “Then the matter is known!” When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.” End of episode: Five verses - so short - yet so fascinating.

There is a wonderful comment on this verse in our *Etz Hayyim Humash*: on page 324 v.14 on: “Moses was frightened” - it states: “When Moses learned that there were bullies and talebearers among the Israelites, he was afraid that they were unworthy of being saved. Suffering and persecution can bring forth nobility of spirit in some victims, and meanness of spirit in others...” If it weren't Shabbat, I would tell you to underline that comment, highlight it - put stars by it - memorize it!! Suffering and persecution can bring forth nobility of spirit in some victims, and meanness of spirit in others... Now there is a lesson for our times.

When Moses killed the Egyptian in defense of the innocent Israelite - it is not clear what he expected the response would be - he was probably hoping that no one saw him, but if they did, he probably expected a bit of appreciation, maybe a little gratitude that he had intervened on their behalf - but that is not at all what he got, instead he got that comment: “*Mi samha l'ish sar v'shofeyt aleynu... Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill us as you killed the Egyptian.*” Well that's gratitude for you. Moses must have had serious second thoughts about these people and about his actions on their behalf. Why did he stick his neck out at all - if this was the thank you he got.

“Moses shows his maturity as a leader by devoting his efforts to helping his people even though they are less than perfect.” Moses saw first hand the potential for disaster - the potential for squabbling and dissension and murdering one another - but, thanks to his dedication, and his patience he teaches us and he leads us and he inspires us and he speaks to the best in each of us and he transforms this rambunctious rubble of a people, forges them into a nation and leads them not only to the gates of the Promised Land but forges a vision and a value system that will guide and preserve them for the next 3500 years.

Here is my point. We too started as an oppressed, downtrodden, mistreated and powerless people. We found a way forward. What is clear from this episode preserved in our sacred Torah so many thousands of years ago - is that we could have headed down a very different road of murder and violence and that is what this magnificent 5 verses teaches us in today's *parasha*. We could have - but we didn't.

What is the most notable characteristic of the early Israelite people as described in our Torah - as captured by no less than God Himself - as God uses this adjective time and time again to describe our people at this stage in our development - do you remember what He called us?

Does God refer to us as being a kind people? A generous people? A patient people? I am afraid not - we are known as: *am k'shei oref* - a stubborn and stiff-necked people. Yet, we figured out a way. We figured out a way to overcome our stubbornness and surmount our stiff-neckedness.

We, the Jewish people, we understand the dilemma that now confronts the Palestinian people. We understand the kinds of oppression and displacement that exists in Syria and around so much of the Arab and Muslim world. We know what it feels like to exist in poverty - from the Pale of Settlement to the shtetls of Eastern Europe - from the depths of the Holocaust to the pogroms of Europe - we understand because we have been there ourselves. It is that moment of opportunity - that moment when the future beckons, but you are so new at this - so young and immature in your political development that you do not yet have the critical tools needed to make the decisions you are being called upon to make. It is not fair - but it is the choice that confronts you - and fair or not, ready or not - now is the time you must choose. Our Torah portion for this week - captures just such a moment early in our history - early in our political and historical development - when we too were called upon to choose - to make difficult choices - before we were ready - before we had the chance to mature - to learn. The Palestinians, these radicalized Muslims around the world - in some ways, they are like the ancient Israelites so long ago - and as the note in our *Etz Hayyim Chumash* so perfectly captured it: “Suffering and persecution can bring forth nobility of spirit in some victims, and meanness of spirit in others” - and a choice must be made.

How did we find the way to choose nobility over meanness? The answer is in no small part: *Moshe Rabeynu*. We were blessed with the right leader at the right time, a leader with a vision. Imagine how Moshe *might* have reacted so long ago - after coming to the defense of his people - after risking his life and his reputation and all the entitlement that his position as part of Egyptian royalty had conferred upon him - he puts it all on the line for some anonymous suffering Israelite - and his reward? He is rebuffed and rejected by the very people he had sought to defend: “Who made you chief and ruler over us?” But, Moses shows his maturity as a leader - he devotes himself to helping this stiff-necked, stubborn people - even though they are less than perfect. How does he accomplish this? How did we

accomplish this? We formed ourselves into a people - a people with a vision of a better future - a people with a dream. And that dream has guided us, and nurtured us, and enabled us to triumph over any adversity in our way. It is no coincidence that the national anthem for the modern State of Israel - built on that very same vision - that very same dream - first given voice to 3200 years ago - is *Hatikvah* - The Hope! It is a hope and a dream that has never failed us.

We still know how to argue with each other - we still know how to fight with each other - but we are here - *lamrot hakol* - despite everything - because we still know how to dream with each other as well. That dream - *am ehad b'leyv ehad* - that we are one people, with one heart and one land - is bigger than all of our fights and all of our arguments.

So far I have seen no evidence of such a dream emerging from the Arab world. So far I have found no Moshe to lead them. Can they find their Moshe who will lead them - can they find leaders who can rise up over the arguing and the fighting and present them with a vision and a dream that will unite them? I do not know. But, I do know this - unless they can and until they do - theirs will be a future of meanness instead of nobility. And can the rest of the world find the determination to confront this threat? Moshe realized that sometimes evil cannot be reasoned with or negotiated it must just be defeated and destroyed. Moshe tried to reason with Pharaoh, he pleaded time and time again to Let My People Go! But, when he realized that Pharaoh represented an evil beyond reason – there was nothing left to do but destroy him. Can we – the civilized world find such a determination? I hope so. I was impressed that so many rallied this past week to show their solidarity with those who were killed at Charlie Hebdo and began displaying signs and banners that declared, “Je suis Charlie Hebdo” – “I am Charlie Hebdo.” In light of the most recent events at the Koshers Grocery – do you think people will start wearing signs declaring, “je suis juifs?” “We are all Jews?!” I hope so - -but don't hold your breath.

3200 years ago, at the very moment when freedom presented itself to our people, a young Israelite responded with anger and resentment, but Moshe responded with patience and maturity - he led that young man and a whole nation like him - in a very different direction. He taught them to choose nobility over resentment and hope over self-destruction. Can the Arabs and Muslims today find such a leader who will embrace that kind of vision? For their sake and for ours, I hope so.