

Shabbat Parashat Va-Era, 1 Shevat 5764 - The Hope Discovered in Despair

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Torah Reading: Exodus 6:2-9:35

Maftir: Numbers 28:9-15

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 66:1-24

We live in trying times – terror around the world, freedom under assault, poverty and starvation in many regions of the world, ignorance and bigotry persistent despite great efforts. It is easy to despair of a better tomorrow. It is easy to throw up our hands in hopelessness against the entrenched resilience of evil, of suffering, of hate.

We are surely not the first to feel the urge to surrender. This week's Torah portion recounts our ancestors' brush with despair. Having survived centuries of slavery in Egypt, they were shocked and elated by the good news brought to them by Moses. God had heard their cry! Liberation was at hand! The Torah recounts that they believed in Moses – and yet the awaited liberation did not come. Having their hopes raised to almost unimaginable heights, and then dashed down as the painful reality of their enslavement continued, the Israelites abandoned their dreams of freedom. The Torah recounts, “they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage (6:9).”

Many of the great Torah commentators of the medieval period worked to explain the nature of the Israelites' despair. Rashi (France, 1040-1105) recognized that “they did not accept consolation.” He noticed that the Hebrew words for “crushed spirits” is the same expression for “shortness of breath.” Using that similarity as his springboard, Rashi teaches, “Anyone who is under stress is short of wind and breath, and is unable to breathe deeply.” To this day, breathing deeply is a way to release tension, and a sign of a bounty of spirit. The weight of slavery was so onerous, the pain of lost hope so searing, that our very breath was constricted.

Another great commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra (Spain, 1089-1164) noticed that the Hebrew could also mean “impatience.” He tells us “Israel did not hearken nor pay attention to the words of Moses, as their spirit was impatient because of the length of their exile and the hard labor which was recently put upon them.”

For Rashi, their abandonment of hope is physically crushing. For ibn Ezra, their suffering made them impatient, hence unable to accept a message of hope. For Sforno (Italy, 1475-1550), the gap between their expectation and reality was too great for hope to exist: “It did not appear believable to their present state of mind, so that their hearts could not assimilate such a promise.”

Most intriguing of all, perhaps, is the psychological insight offered by Rabbi Hayim ben Attar (Morocco, Italy, and Israel, 1696-1743). He understands that an infusion of new hope can make suffering even harder to tolerate. The closer liberation comes, the more difficult it is to tolerate one's oppression: "The people had good reason for becoming impatient at their fate because when Moses had come, he had given them hope that their liberation was close at hand. This had given them a new and broader perspective on life."

Three different insights each illumine the nature of despair: that it can be physically devastating, that it can preclude accepting the good news of redemption, and that hope can itself make a bad reality even less acceptable. There is yet one more comment to make about despair, ancient or contemporary. There are insights that can only be accessed from a place of despair. There are times when only by hitting rock bottom, being forced to abandon our own self-centeredness or sense of being in control, that we can become open to real help from beyond. Only when we despair of ourselves providing ultimate comfort can we then reach beyond ourselves for consolation and for help. In the brilliant words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

Only those who have gone through days on which words were of no avail, on which the most brilliant theories jarred the ear like mere slang; only those who have experienced ultimate not-knowing, the voicelessness of a soul struck by wonder, total muteness, are able to enter the meaning of God, a meaning greater than the mind. There is a loneliness in us that hears. When the soul parts from the company of the ego and its retinue of petty conceits; when we cease to exploit all things but instead pray the world's cry, the world's sigh, our loneliness may hear the living grace beyond all power.

Abandoning the pretense of our own self-sufficiency can open doors to a deeper sustenance. Releasing our own delusion of power and control can permit us to flow with currents far more profound than our own. Turning our destiny back to the One who actually writes the script can be both liberating and a source of deep illumination.

By feeling the fullness of despair, the Israelites became open to the possibility of liberation. Perhaps we – too – need to invest less energy in distracting ourselves from our sorrows, and open ourselves to their embrace, and to our consequent transformation.

Shabbat Shalom!