

Dvar Shabbat Sh'mot – Jan. 16, 2009 / 21 Tevet 5769 – Marvin Levin
Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago, Illinois

Shabbat Shalom.

The Torah portion for this Shabbat is Parshat *Sh'mot* – Names – which begins the book of Exodus. “These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt.”

This *parsha* then moves on to a new story. It introduces us to a new leader, Moses, who will play a significant role in the life of the Jews. Much of the commentary about this Torah portion is devoted to the person Moses. Who is he? Why does he react to the things he sees in the way that he does? Clearly he knows his background, know that he's a kinsman of the Hebrews. What makes him react so strongly to the injustices he sees about him?

The *parsha* contains many familiar Bible stories:

- “A new king [who] arose over Egypt [and] who did not know Joseph.”
- how this king – this Pharaoh – set taskmasters over the Israelites.
- the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who defy Pharaoh's instructions to kill all baby boys “at the birthstool.”
- Pharaoh's subsequent charge to all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile ...”
- how Moses as a 3-month old baby is set floating in a basket lest he be killed.
- how Pharaoh's daughter finds the child and turns him over to a Hebrew woman – actually Moses' mother – to nurse him.
- Pharaoh's daughter naming the child Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”
- Moses seeing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew (whom Moses knew was one of his kinsmen), striking the Egyptian and killing him.
- Moses fleeing from Pharaoh to Midian, where he has his first encounter with God, who speaks to him from a burning bush and commands him to return to Egypt.
- The encounter with Pharaoh – “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let My people go.” And Pharaoh's refusal.

The parsha ends after the Israelites complain to Moses about their newly-increased labor. "Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.' Then the Lord said to Moses, 'You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land.'"

I'd like to address the passage of Moses killing the Egyptian. The wording of it is unclear as to whether Moses meant to kill the Egyptian or whether it was accidental – an act of manslaughter. Rabbinic tradition and several Midrashim hold the slaying to be manslaughter. In the Torah, Moses encounters two Hebrews fighting the next day and, when he intercedes, is told by one of the men, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" This alerts Moses to the fact that the matter is known and results in his fleeing from Pharaoh. One added point: Rabbi Edwards has suggested that the quarrel between Hebrews is kind of a foreshadowing of all the trouble Moses is going to have leading these quarrelsome people through the wilderness.

Plaut's commentary includes a section from the Koran recounting the Islamic version of this incident. Here the Hebrew who is being beaten turns out to be somewhat of a troublemaker.

And when he had reached his age of strength and had become a man, we bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge; for thus do we reward the righteous.

And he entered a city at the time when its inhabitants would not observe him [i.e., at the noon hour when they were resting] and found therein two men fighting: the one, of his own people; the other, of his enemies. And he who was of his own people asked his help against him who was of his enemies. And Moses smote him with his fist and slew him. Said he [Moses], "This is a work of Satan; for he [the Israelite] is an enemy, a manifest misleader."

He said, "O my Lord, I have sinned to mine own hurt: forgive me." So God forgave him; for He is the Forgiving, the Merciful.

He said, "Lord, because thou hast showed me this grace, I will never again be the helper of the wicked."

And in the city at noon he was full of fear, casting furtive glances round him; and lo! The man whom he had helped the day before cried out to him again for help. Said Moses to him, "You are plainly a most depraved person."

And when he would have laid violent hands on him who was their common foe, he said to him, "O Moses, do you desire to slay me, as you slew a man yesterday? You desire only to become a tyrant in the land and desire not to become a peacemaker." Sura XXVIII:13-18 (The Story)

Clearly the Islamic version is unambiguous. Although the sense of the Egyptian beating a defenseless Hebrew is missing here, Moses obviously views the slaying as a sin. And we're really back to my original question: why did Moses react so strongly? In the Torah Moses reacts not to a plea for help, but to the injustice he witnesses. One commentator writes, "Righteousness begins when one see the yoke others bear." In our contemporary world, how do we respond to injustice? There's a big difference to say, a group response and speaking out about what's happening in Darfur and an individual taking personal action in the face of injustice. I'm not sure if I would ever physically attempt to stop someone if I saw that person beating another individual.

As I said earlier, this *parsha* is the beginning of a new story. It's the first section of the book of Exodus. It introduces us to a new leader. In four days, we will see the beginning of a new chapter in American history. I'm certainly not making any comparison between Moses and Barack Obama, but I wonder what a new leader for the United States means for us – for all of us as Americans and for us as Jews and as members of the GLBT community. So I'd like to end this d'var by asking you to turn to page 162 of our prayerbook and read responsively the Prayer for our Country.

Prayer for our Country

Creator of the universe:

We, the gay and lesbian Jewish community ask Your blessing for our country, state and city,
For their governments, for their leaders and advisors,
And for all who exercise just and rightful authority.

Teach them insights of Your Torah,
That they may administer all affairs of state fairly,
That peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom, abide forever in our midst.

Creator of all flesh, bless the inhabitants of our country with Your spirit.
Then citizens of all races and creeds, gay and straight, will forge a common bond to banish all hatred and bigotry,
And to safeguard the ideal and free institutions which are our country's pride and glory.

May this land under Your providence be an influence for good throughout the world,
Uniting all people in peace and freedom, and helping them to fulfill the vision of Your prophet:
"Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more."
And let us say: Amen.