Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Shemot)

It was late in the day, and dark had fallen; people were headed home after a long work day, and Theodore was headed back to his hotel room with a few hours work ahead of him on the portable typewriter he had brought with him from Vienna to cover the events of the trial. There was much to write about, and the events of the day had made him extremely uncomfortable, though he could not quite put his finger on it. He was covering the espionage trial of a young Captain in the French army's staff headquarters accused of passing top secret information to the Germans.

The winds of war were blowing once again in Europe in December 1894, and tensions were high. All eyes were on the trial, which Theodore Herzl's paper had dispatched him to cover. The French had suspected for some time that there was a high placed leak in the French army staff and recent events had confirmed this. The trial should have been all about whether there was evidence to suggest Dreyfus was indeed the spy; his cultural heritage should have been germane to the issue at hand. But Herzl had begun to notice far too much attention being paid in the court to the fact that Dreyfus was in fact Jewish. And it was beginning to make him extremely uncomfortable.

Interestingly, neither Dreyfus nor Herzl, both Jewish, viewed themselves as Jews first; Judaism was to them simply a cultural heritage thy possessed; an accident of birth which played little role in who they were or who they wanted to be. But the French crowds did not seem to see it that way.

*As he walked along the Parisian avenue that evening he noticed a few fellows, dressed clearly in religious Jewish garb walking along across the avenue. A few Frenchmen walking towards them noticed them as well, and began to taunt them with anti-Jewish epithets. Joined quickly by more people, a crowd soon gathered, surrounding the hapless Jews and shouting "**Mort aux Juifs!**"; "**Death to the Jews!**"*

More than the screaming, pushing and shoving that ensued as he watched the helpless Jews pushed down and beaten, what shocked Herzl most was how many of the Frenchmen in that mob seemed like middle class well-dressed French citizens. In that moment as he would later recall, Herzl finally understood there was no future for the Jews of Europe. And in that moment, a dream was born; it was time for the Jews to have a state of their own; it was time for the Jews to come home.

Most people would have left it there, but Herzl began a world-wide campaign to see the creation of a Jewish Homeland in the territory then known as Palestine. It would take fifty years and

untold tragedy and horror for the Jews of Europe before his dream would finally be realized, and one wonders what might have been had the Jews actually listened to Herzl half a century earlier.

Someone once remarked to me that if Herzl had been religious, we might not yet have a state of Israel, because he would simply have walked home with a heavy heart that night trusting in G-d to eventually save the Jewish people. Where lies the balance between our trust in Hashem (G-d) and our own responsibility to act; to make a difference?

This week's portion of ***Shemot*** offers a fascinating opportunity to consider this question against the backdrop of the challenging dialogue that takes place between Moshe and G-d at the burning bush.

Moshe escaped Egypt under threat of death after killing an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish slave. Just like Theodore Herzl, Moshe the Egyptian Prince discovered all too quickly that to the rest of the world he was just a Jew. For near on forty years he had found an idyllic life as a shepherd married into an illustrious Midianite family, until one day, out in the desert with his flock he spied something unusual in the distance: a bush was burning but somehow it was not being consumed.

It is interesting that this symbol represents the beginning of Moshe's journey back from being a shepherd in the desert of Midian to becoming the savior of the Jewish people and the greatest prophet that ever lived.

G-d could have set an entire mountain range on fire to make His point; why a lowly burning bush? Perhaps the message of a lowly bush that will not be consumed was more to the point: the Jewish people, no matter how downtrodden and how seemingly on the verge of destruction, will never be consumed. And for Moshe himself, perhaps as well a message that deep inside there is a fire that still burns, of injustice; of the knowledge that, having seen the suffering of the Jewish people held in indescribable suffering as an enslaved people, something needs to be done.

All of which leads us to the dramatic and confounding dialogue that takes place between G-d and Moshe at the burning bush. Put simply, G-d tells Moshe it is time at last for the Jewish people to be redeemed, and Moshe is G-d's choice to be their redeemer. G-d tells Moshe to leave Midian behind and journey back down to Egypt to redeem the Jewish people.

And, incredibly, Moshe … disagrees!?

For twenty-nine verses (Shemot (Exodus) 3:11-4:17) Moshe literally debates G-d! And G-d, surprisingly, goes along with the discussion responding to each of Moshe's challenges, until the fourth one.

Moshe's fourth and final explanation as to why he need not (should not?) be the one to redeem the Jewish people is pretty straightforward: Moshe points out that he is a man with a speech impediment:

"…*I am not a man of words…for I am heavy of speech and tongue*" (ibid 4:10)

So Hashem responds (ibid. v. 11-12) "Who *has made man's mouth? … Now go! …I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say! "*

To which Moshe logically responds: "Send *whoever you decide*…" (Which some suggest is a reference to Aharon who is already in Egypt).

And at this point, G-d finally gets 'angry':

"And *G-d displayed anger against Moshe: 'Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he knows how to speak*…!" (ibid. v. 14)

A bizarre dialogue to say the least! In truth, Moshe would seem to be logically correct: Moshe has no doubt that Hashem can perform miracles allowing Moshe despite his stutter to speak eloquently. But in that case, why does Hashem need Moshe at all? If G-d's miracles are the vehicle through which the Jews will be released why is anyone necessary? Certainly Moshe is not critical to the task; whether the Jewish people will be redeemed is entirely dependent on G-d's will, so why is Hashem so insistent?

One might even suggest that this dialogue is really about a much larger question: why are we here at all? Why does G-d need *anything* we do?

Ever wonder how the greatest leader the Jewish people had ever known could just put his people's suffering aside and retire to Midian for an idyllic life as a shepherd?

How could he run from Egypt simply because Pharaoh sentenced him to death? Where was Moshe's faith? Truth be told, perhaps Moshe had a little too much faith?

What if Moshe, upon seeing that he was sentenced to death assumes that maybe G-d wants him to leave Egypt! After all, if Hashem wants to redeem the Jewish people he certainly does not need Moshe! And there is no reason for Moshe o worry or make an effort for his brethren enslaved and suffering in Egypt, because when G-d is ready to set them free he will!

Sound familiar? What need is there for us to work for a living, or serve in the Israeli army? If Hashem wants the state to be born and our borders to be protected does He really need our help?

And now, nearly forty years later, Moshe even in his dialogue with Hashem (or the G-dly voice within himself?) is still having the same dialogue? Why am I even necessary? Hashem will redeem the Jewish people with or without my help!

This is the fatal flaw in Moshe's position, because Hashem wants us to know how much we actually do matter. Just because Hashem can perform miracles does not man we are meant to depend on them! If we are meaningless before G-d then why are we here at all?

G-d clearly wants us to be partners in making a better world, and only when we have done our bit have we earned the right to depend on Hashem's miraculous salvation.

(Interestingly, Moshe is almost killed by G-d for not circumcising his son (ibid. 4:24-26) and the circumcision represents the idea that we are created incomplete, and are meant to be partners in making a better world; perhaps Moshe is still struggling with this very question?)

Maybe this is why G-d entertains this entire 'debate' with Moshe: because Moshe is finally standing up and recognizing Hashem wants us to struggle with what ***we*** can do, and our voice matters!

Hidden in this dialogue is the secret to Hashem's greatest desire for us: to be His partners.

Way back in the story of creation the Torah has Hashem say:

"…*Let us make man in our image*..." (Bereishit (Genesis) 1:26),

And one wonders: to whom is G-d speaking?

Rav Soleveitchik suggests that Hashem is speaking to man himself! Every day, Hashem is saying to each and every one of us:

'***I want you to be a partner with me, in the creation of you, every single day***…'

Theodore Herzl understood that while the task may be great, and the work hard and long, we are not; are never; free to desist from our part in getting the job done.

Moshe's role in the redemption of the Jewish people challenges all of us to ask ourselves: how will we be partners in redeeming our own world today, so that our children will inherit a better one tomorrow?

Something to think about…

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

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