

To hear and to speak

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We come, this week, to a turning point in the story of the Exodus. When we begin the parsha, the Israelites are firmly locked into slavery. When we finish the parsha, we are in the middle of the ten plagues—that is to say, the process of redemption is well underway. And in between, we have the moment that forces this transition—the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh.

So who are these two characters upon whom the shift in the narrative depends?

Moses, as we know, is not a particularly willing leader. In every interaction with God, Moses finds a reason that he cannot or will not or should not be the one to go into Egypt to redeem the Jews. His communication with God toward the beginning of the parsha is no exception. Twice, Moses speaks of himself as "arel s'fatayim"—literally, that he has uncircumcised lips. This is a very strange phrase and we're not quite sure what it means, though several commentators have suggested that the word "arel"—"uncircumcised" means "blocked up." Even though Moses has within himself the power of redemption, there is a block that prevents him from exercising this power.

And Pharaoh, as Moses himself tells us, also has a handicap—he can not, or will not hear. Not only does Pharaoh resist hearing Moses' pleas for redemption, he also resists the cries of his own people's sufferings during the plagues. Either by his own choice, or through divine intervention, Pharaoh's heart remains hardened. He cannot hear the demands of Moses, and similarly, he cannot hear—that is, have compassion for, the cries of his own people.

So there we have it—the redemption from Egypt depends on a person who cannot talk speaking to a person who cannot hear. It's amazing that we're not celebrating Shabbat in Cairo.

How is it that this seemingly impossible situation leads us into redemption? The first clue comes from the Israelites themselves, who are in the strange position of being connected to Moses by virtue of ethnicity; and to Pharaoh, by virtue of having lived and worked in Egypt for hundreds of years.

The Israelites, it seems, are less well equipped to bring about redemption than either Moses or Pharaoh. As slaves, they have no voice—like Moses, they cannot speak. And, as Moses tells God toward the beginning of the parsha—the people, like Pharaoh, will not, or can not hear.

And yet, these slaves who are unable to speak or hear do force the process of redemption to begin. It is the cries of these slaves, we learn, that compel God to bring about the Exodus earlier than planned. Somehow, these slaves find the strength to cry, and with these tears, begin the redemption. Furthermore, while the Israelites remain unwilling—

for a long time—to listen to the words of Moses or of God, their screams and cries reveal that they have managed at least to hear themselves. After hundreds of years of slavery, their burdens finally become too much for them. As one medieval commentator says—it is not that the work has become harder; rather, the people finally realize that slavery is not an acceptable human condition. Realizing this—developing the ability to hear and respond to their own pain—allows the Israelites to scream out and thus move the redemption forward.

And so too—the redemption cannot move into its final stage until Moses learns to speak and Pharaoh learns to hear.

One strange thing you'll notice about the encounters between Moses and Pharaoh is that even though Aaron, Moses' brother, is supposedly meant to be the spokesperson, it is Moses who—despite his uncircumcised lips—does most of the talking. The urgency of redemption has forced Moses to unblock himself and to activate his redemptive powers.

And Pharaoh, slowly, throughout the course of the plagues, learns to hear. With each plague, his resolve diminishes a bit. It is not, however, until the final plague that Pharaoh really hears. In the Plague of the first born, which we will read about next week, Pharaoh awakens in the night to the screams of his own household, as well as to those of his people. Finally, we have the first evidence that Pharaoh has learned to hear and that he perhaps even has compassion, at least for his own people. Only after Pharaoh has learned to hear can the redemption be achieved.

Redemption, then, requires both hearing and speaking. It requires that those without power learn to hear their own pain and speak out about it; and it requires that those in power learn to hear, and respond to the pain of others.

In many cases, it is very clear who needs to focus on speaking and who needs to focus on hearing. Other cases are more complex.

Our parsha presents a glimpse of this complexity. At the beginning of the parsha, it is very clear that we should sympathize with the Israelites and support their efforts to speak. Toward the end of the parsha, with the coming of the plagues, it becomes clear that the Israelites will be redeemed, and that the power of God is far greater than that of Pharaoh. Suddenly, the balance of power shifts, and we are not quite sure how to respond.

Many of us have asked and debated about the necessity of God's bringing the plagues—or at least, about the necessity of having so many plagues. We can respond to these questions in any number of ways, but more important than the answers is the fact that we ask the question at all. In asking the question, we demonstrate an awareness that something has changed—that perhaps, *we*, having acquired a certain power, are now the ones who need to learn to hear.

I thought about this issue of shifting powers often this summer and fall, as I worked on a union campaign to achieve better wages and health benefits for janitors in New Jersey.

The struggle of these minimum wage workers, mostly immigrants, in so many ways parallels the struggles of our grandparents and great grandparents who worked low wage jobs in the hope of "making it in America."

I was struck, over and over, by the strength of janitors who recognized the unfairness of their own situation—who were able to hear that their burdens had become too great—and who were able to speak up and to develop a voice, even when doing so sometimes resulted in their being fired from their jobs.

I was also struck by the depth of the support of the Jewish community in particular, and of the religious community in general. One prominent rabbi told me that he, himself, worked his way through college as a janitor and elevator operator, and therefore could not be silent about the issue. Remembering his own burdens allowed him to hear, and to have compassion for others. At the same time, not everyone was able to make this jump from memory to obligation. The web site of one company that paid its workers particularly low wages featured a story about the grandparents of the owners, who escaped from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, which prompted the rise of the union movement in America. Remembering, and speaking, the pain of their grandparents failed to help these owners hear, or feel compassion for their own workers.

At the Passover seder every year, we speak of the obligation of every Jew "l'rot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim"—to see oneself as having personally come forth from Egypt. Another version of this statement refers to the obligation "l'harot et atzmo"—to show oneself as though one has come forth from Egypt. The challenge for all of us is to do both of these things—to remember and speak about our own struggles and redemption; and also to show ourselves as former slaves—to act in such a way that demonstrates that we remember what it was like, and that this memory forces us to hear, and to have compassion for others.