

Our parashah is full of drama and miracles: The liberation of the Israelites. HaShem leading by day with a pillar of cloud and by night with a pillar of fire. Splitting the waters to let the Israelites escape and rejoining them to drown Pharaoh and his army. Bitter water made potable. Manna and quails to eat. Prevailing against Amalek. The first four parashiot of the Book of Exodus are the keystone of our existence as Jews, and they are replete with miracles. But looking beyond the miracles we find powerful treatises on human behavior, both individual and collective. We humans have short memories, short attention spans, and short tempers. We jump to conclusions (and to confusions), our relationship to authority often lacks discernment, and we like to take shortcuts. Let's examine three examples from our parashah.

In Pharaoh we have witnessed a classic case of extreme narcissism that culminates now in destruction for him and his loyal followers. On a personal level, his ego-driven, repetitive pattern of short-lived repentance and promise-breaking has ossified into a habit he is powerless to break. However, far more tragic than his own demise is the devastation his behavior has brought upon his people. Fortunately, not all destructive narcissists live on the world stage, but when they do, untold lives are negatively impacted, often for generations.

The Israelites (and humanity in general) are the second example. Upon escaping from Egypt, they are propelled headlong into the challenging phase of learning what it means to be free while coalescing as a people, and it is daunting indeed. Fully aware that as a group, they are neither strong nor courageous, HaShem takes them on a long detour to avoid encountering the Philistines and the possibility of war. So, here they are, encamped between the desert and the sea, with the Egyptians hot in pursuit. Of course, they have every reason to be frightened, but in light of the wealth of miracles they have already witnessed, they should have developed a bit of trust by now. Instead, they cry out to HaShem and then turn on Moses in a fury of recrimination for having taken them out of their far from comfortable, but nonetheless comfortingly familiar, lives as slaves to the Egyptians. Then, despite another miraculous deliverance, they again lose heart and complain, because after a three-day trek through the desert, they have no water to drink. But even after receiving abundant water, they continue to grumble, this time for fear of starving. Hardship and uncertainty, perceived or otherwise, tend to awaken an insidious form of nostalgia – a yearning for the old way of life that conveniently erases the memory of the reasons for having left it behind. When our very survival is threatened, it is easy to forget any other kind of misery. Slavery wasn't ideal, but at least they were well fed, and their lives were predictable. Habits can be personal or collective. We have already seen how Pharaoh developed fatal habits that impacted his entire country. Collectively, the Israelites have also developed some habits. One, already mentioned, is fear of failure, i.e., allowing the urge to return to the past to override the necessity to persevere. The other, is dependence upon miracles. The Israelites have witnessed an astonishing flurry of miracles since Moses and Aaron appeared. Whenever things look hopeless, HaShem comes through with another sign that they are in good hands and not forgotten. But in between, the Israelites exhibit a maddening form of amnesia. Their gratitude and willingness to accept the authority of HaShem last only until the next challenge. It seems they have become addicted to miracles, and that is certainly not the path to independence! Freedom entails responsibility for oneself and for the group, which requires building a whole new set of habits that are founded on honest self-evaluation, discernment, and patience. They – and we – still have far to go.

Moses, the third example, is a textbook study in building leadership skills. (More on that next week.) He obviously has an innate sense of justice, which at the beginning of his adult life compels him to trade the comfort and safety of Pharaoh's court for exile and a new life and family in Midian. Most importantly, he is gifted with empathy – the ability to truly see the needs of others. With these prerequisites for leadership, he is ready for his unexpected encounter with HaShem and for the tasks awaiting him. Even so, he still has much to learn, and like all human beings, he is not perfect. At the outset he must be persuaded to take on the mantle of leadership, which means he must learn to trust himself as well as HaShem. Then, he must develop extraordinary patience and perseverance along with an eloquence he never dreamed he could possess. Finally, after repeated, fruitless negotiations with Pharaoh exacerbated by skepticism from his own people, he must lead the Israelites out of slavery into freedom – only to be forced to contend with their incessant complaining, mistrust, and negativity. Just like all of us, he is not always successful. But through it all he remains focused and optimistic. We can learn much from his behavior as we progress through the rest of our Torah.

Shabbat shalom!