

Sermon Parashat Shemot 5766
Rabbi Jay M. Stein

I love having my own seat on the bimah because I need my own space. That is why we drive a Sequoia which is the largest vehicle in its class. The next size car is in the industrial class. When I arrive every Shabbat my empty seat is waiting for me. No where else do I have that much room. When we watch T.V. my wife has to beg the children to let me sit somewhere because they could care less. At dinner I have a seat but usually it is the most uncomfortable chair at the table. On Friday nights I sit, but usually someone is sitting on me. I have no room and it's getting worse. I thought when the kids were little it was bad, but as they get bigger they just take up more room. It's cute when they are little and come up to your knee and they hug you, but as they get bigger and they jump on you they are bonier because they have lost their baby fat, and it hurts.

The truth is I really like the contact, the hugs and the kisses.

However, it is their stuff I can do without. I'm tired of carrying their coats and bags. Recently we went on a trip and my wife had each child pack their own carry-on luggage. This way each child had what they wanted on the plane. They each packed a bag with a snack and some things to pass the time like a book to read, an I-pod and then the really essential "Mr. Blankie" and "Friendly."

Each child is to be responsible for their own bag. That was of course until they got tired and then I was stuck carrying their carry-on. When we got on the plane and sat down they each handed me their bag, to which I responded, "Do I look like an overhead compartment?" I always find myself underneath a pile of coats and bags and stuff. They spread out whether it's on the couch or at the table, on the plane or in the theatre, I get all the paraphernalia.

So the way I figure it I can either go crazy, which I almost never do... or I can embrace my role as "holder" of everything. Either I can feel trapped or I can seize my destiny becoming a great holder of things. Maybe I should make them carry their own stuff to

teach them responsibility. However, I have chosen to hold on to my role in life, not as leader of our people, not as counselor to those in pain, not as a teacher ---but as the “holder of things.” I can even hold everything and get the luggage off the conveyor belt at the same time. I’m not even shooting for “great husband” or “father” anymore, I’m just the great holder of things. I am the Stein Family sherpa and I love it. I have given up on achieving great things in life. I have resolved to be really good at carrying stuff, you should see me bring in the grocery bags.

Look--our famous prayer Yigdal reminds us Lo Kam B’yisrael Od Navi K’Moshe, there never arose another Prophet like Moses so I’m not trying anymore. Speaking of Moses.....

In this morning’s reading we meet Moses and right from the start we realize there is something special about him.

“וַתִּרְא אֶת־אֱתֹנֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא” and when he was born his mother looked at him and saw how beautiful he was.” (Exodus 2:2). I know we

all think our children are beautiful and we all think our children are the best but Rashi, borrowing the language from the tractate of Sotah, says he was exceptional, by an outside standard, not the subjective vantage of a parent -- he was extra-ordinary.

כשנולד נתמלא הבית כולו אורה Rashi reports, “when he was born he simply filled the house with light.” You can imagine the difficult times the people and specifically Moses’ family was experiencing. Royal edicts were against them and slavery was unbearable, so the birth of a child was a moment of joy even if it was followed immediately by concern. Moses brought light to the dark corner that was their world. Moses sees a small child with no skills yet the child is born with a capacity that became his featured characteristic.

Moses is a difficult personality. He is slow to speak. So much so that in order to express himself he is often forced to act out with his hands because he is unable to find the right words. We see this when he kills the Egyptian taskmaster who s beating another

person. (2:12) When he tries to talk it out with two Hebrews who are arguing, (13) again he finds himself inept. Then three verses later (16-17) he again finds himself embroiled in a conflict where he must find a solution.

Moses is not a diplomat like Abraham, negotiating treaties with kings. Moses isn't a man of great faith like Isaac laying down on the altar, he is not cunning like a Jacob, he is not a great warrior like a David or even a military strategist like a Joshua, or wise like a Solomon. Moses is not a great orator, but he is empathetic. In fact, the more we search to find out what made Moses uniquely qualified to bring the Jews *meshibud l'gelulah*, from slavery to freedom, *me'afeilah l'orah*, and from darkness to light, we cannot identify any single characteristic save what Rashi has already told us and that is he had a unique capacity to bring light to the darkness. So maybe that is all that is required. Moses is the paradigmatic person of care and concern. He stands toe to toe with God when God is about to wipe out the Jewish people and he says,

“Don’t do it.” In an unusually perceptive chapter in a remarkable book by Yohanan Muffs entitled *Love and Joy*, Muffs explains Moses’ capacity to stand in the breach is what set him apart. When Muffs says , “[Moses] is no longer the messenger of the court; he becomes the agent for the defendant, attempting to mitigate the severity of the decree,” We know what he means. Moses comes to aid of the less fortunate. He comes to stand for those who can’t stand for themselves. He is a giving, compassionate, concerned soul -- and in this trait he excels.

This is shown most powerfully in the Midrash (Exodus Rabbah 2:2) with a simple story.

When Moses was tending the flock of Jethro in the wilderness, a child escaped from him. He ran after the child until he reached a shady place. When the child reached the shady place, there appeared a pool of water and the child stopped to drink. When Moses approached the child, he said, “I did not

know that you ran away because of thirst;
you must be weary.” So he placed the child
on his shoulder and walked back to the
flock.

Moses just cares and that is enough. God selects Moses for the task of taking the Jewish people out of Egypt, not because he speaks well because we know he doesn't, but because he cares. This is what God wants of us. The Zohar and Midrash both explain that in every generation there is an offshoot of Moses.

שקול בדורו כמשה בדורו

The voice in your generation is the voice of Moses in his. (Zohar III 225b and Midrash Esther Rabbah 6:2) There is someone in every generation that is heir to the legacy of Moses. There is someone who cares enough to make a difference. This week we commemorated Martin Luther King Jr. and the impact he had on our society. This afternoon after davening we will learn with my father about Heschel who, when he walked alongside Martin

Luther King Jr., taught us that he was davening, praying with his feet. I would suggest an addendum to our sacred tradition and our holy examples and that is we each have within us a little Moses. We have the capacity to make a difference, all we have to do is care and then apply our unique talents to “tikkun olam” the repair of the world.

In a masterful work entitled *The Halakhik Man*, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains, “Halakhik man discerns in every divine pledge man’s obligation to bring about its fulfillment.” (100) Then he adds, “The peak of religious, ethical perfection to which Judaism aspires is man as creator.” (101) For Soloveitchik we were put on this earth to make our own unique contribution. We are here to participate not to stand idly by and we must do so by helping others.

We know the story of Moses well. We know Moses is reluctant, we recognize Moses’ hesitancy and we see it in ourselves. God

provides the miracle of the burning bush and Moses is barely moved. Ultimately, it takes the anger of God to motivate Moses and draw him out of his insecurity. We do not have that luxury. If we are to make a difference in the world, be it here with the homeless in Philadelphia or the genocide in Darfur, we must begin by caring. God created us as social beings and we cannot reject that for the comfort of living an isolated life. If your talent is artistic expression, or medical advancement or social conscience then use it. You know the bumper sticker “Think globally - act locally,” I say think nationally, even internationally but act personally.

A young man graduates from law school and after serving as a clerk to a judge he goes into the private sector. On the first day of his job a senior partner hands him a disability case, so he carefully constructs the case and emerges triumphant. Later on another disability case comes to the firm and having experienced success with the last one this case is directed toward him. Quickly he

recognizes that he has a talent in this type of litigation and eventually he leaves the practice to found his own firm that specializes in disability cases. Decades later he has been able to build a thriving practice. He has shaped legislation and helped formulate a cogent and responsible approach towards people with disabilities. This is a short version of a story a member of our shul told me this week. It illustrates the capacity we each have to make a difference utilizing our own unique inclinations and talents. So I thank Mike for having lunch with me this week and sharing his story and in turn I share it with you.

I believe the story of the Torah, specifically Moses, is there to motivate us. As K.J Gergan wrote “A story is not simply a story...it acts to create, sustain or alter worlds of social relationships. (The Saturated Self Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life, New York, Basic Books 1994 page 247) If our Torah is going to mean anything, if our system of halakha that

begs us to be engaged in our world is to mean anything, then we must assume our place and realize our destiny to do great things.

I think I am a carrier, but I don't think it is "of stuff." I think I am a carrier of our sacred tradition, our holy legacy, and I believe I bring that message to those in dark places and in difficult times. In this way I am giving expression to the Moses in me. What are you doing? How is your Moses being expressed? What would Moses Do? I want to hear about it so I can share your stories as well.

Shabbat Shalom.