



Parashat Vaera

Confronting Injustice: A Jewish Model for Trans Advocacy

by Y. Gavriel A. Levi Ansara on Friday January 04, 2008

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Exodus 6:2 - 9:35

Parashat Vaera offers deep insight into the insecurity and hesitation many of us experience when challenged to respond to injustice, providing a concrete example of the power of advocacy and the importance of being an ally. The *parasha* commences with Moses, a man who would become a great spiritual leader, as G-d directs him to relay to the Israelites four promises of redemption from their physical and spiritual oppression in Egypt. The Torah tells us, “*Vayedaber Moses ken el-b’nei Yisrael velo sham’u el-Moses mikotser ruach ume’avodah kashah* / Moses related this (G-d’s promises of redemption) to the Israelites, but because of their “short spirit” and hard labor they would not listen to him.” (Exodus 6:9). While “short spirit” is often translated as “shortness of breath,” it can also mean disappointment or broken spirits. At this juncture in history, the Jewish people were so inured to their daily suffering and mistreatment that they had lost their agency, the will to fight for their rights.

After Moses’s first attempt to relay G-d’s promise of redemption to the Jewish people goes unheeded, Hashem commands him to speak to Pharaoh to ask him to grant the Jewish people their freedom. Moses retorts that the Jewish people did not listen to him, so why would Pharaoh? After all, Pharaoh is far too powerful and ruthless to pay attention to someone whose own people have ignored him. Moses adds the following clarification: “*va’ani aral sfatayim* / and I have uncircumcised lips,” alluding not only to his lisp, a speech disability that he had since childhood, but also to his trepidation and lack of oratory self-confidence.

At this point, G-d commands both Moses and his brother, Aaron, to go to Pharaoh with the aforementioned message. The Torah follows this request with an impressive litany of Moses’s and Aaron’s provenance, concluding that *this* was the Aaron and Moses to whom Hashem directed his command regarding Pharaoh. In a moment of doubt that seems shocking given Moses’s devotion to Hashem, Moses balks a second time, despite G-d’s robust reassurances. “*Vayomer Moses lifney Adonay hen ani aral sfatayim ve’eych yishma elay Par’oh* / But Moses declares before Hashem, ‘I have “uncircumcised lips.” How shall Pharaoh heed me?’” (Exodus 6:30)



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In response, Hashem tells Moses, “*re’eh netaticha Elohim le-Far’oh ve’Aharon achicha yihyeh nevi’echa* / See, I have made you a master over Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your spokesman.” (Exodus 7:1) In Aaron, we find an archetypal advocate, a figure who uses his verbal skill to demand justice, speaking on another’s behalf. “*Atah tedaber et kol-asher atsaveka ve’Aharon achicha yedaber el-Par’oh veshilach et-beney-Yisra’el me’artso* / You must announce all that I order you to, and your brother Aaron will relate it to Pharaoh. He will then let the Israelites leave his land.” (Exodus 7:2) The presence of Aaron, his advocate, provides Moses with the support he needs to confront Pharaoh and begin the divine process of liberating the Jewish people from Egypt.

This *parasha* contains the first seven of the ten plagues that herald G-d’s later redemption of the Jewish people from their captivity. Yet this entire series of events is catalyzed by Aaron’s fulfillment of the advocate role, without which Moses’s confrontation with and ultimate triumph over Pharaoh’s human rights abuses could not have occurred.

In May, 2001, my home state of Rhode Island passed legislation that prohibits discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations (specifically including bathrooms) on the basis of “gender identity or expression,” a phrase defined broadly to include people of trans, gender variant, or intersex experience, identity, or perceived experience or identity. Despite this legislation, people contact [Lifelines Rhode Island](#), a trans advocacy organization, almost daily with accounts of discrimination and abuse. One case involved repeated mistreatment of a man of trans experience (designated female at birth) who had disabilities that made it difficult for him to advocate for himself. He shared Moses’s fear at challenging his oppressors. I helped him to relay his words to the state commission charged with investigating human rights abuse when he experienced the “sealed lips” reminiscent of Moses. During this process, I was surprised and unsettled to discover that our claim constituted the second case ever brought before the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights (RICHR) for discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression. I had falsely assumed that the ubiquitous violations about which I had been hearing had been reported more than once in almost seven years.

Discrimination against trans and gender variant people is perpetuated by store clerks who deny access to bathrooms consistent with the gender identities of their customers, leading many trans and gender variant people to develop bladder problems or social phobia; by the doctors who refuse to provide basic medical care for trans and intersex patients; by the agencies that deny housing and employment to people whose genders differ from their birth assignments; and by those of us who assume that it is someone else’s responsibility to challenge this injustice, when the Jewish covenant with G-d demands that we fulfill that ethical obligation.

I meet many trans people with broken spirits. Most are not natural activists, but are simply human beings trying to survive. Most do not attend rallies or protests, fearing the loss of jobs, spouses and personal safety that would result. Weary from the barrage of insults and



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disrespect that they encounter daily, many have become like the Israelites in Egypt, too accustomed to their lot to muster the energy required for campaigns and strategies. It is my responsibility as an activist – and ours, as a people – to serve as advocates for these unaddressed grievances, to ensure that the experiences to which these voices bear witness are not silenced. As heirs to Aaron’s legacy, we inherit the sacred charge of using our speech to empower others and condemn injustice, in Jewish communities and in the world at large. Parashat Vaera reminds us of our spiritual obligation to empower others by speaking out and confronting those individuals and institutions in our communities who refuse to heed the message of equality.

Shabbat Shalom.



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