

Parashat Sh'mot, 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

From the very beginning of the Torah a tension is set forth, a thread begins to unfold that defines human existence. Creation itself becomes the paradigm, the emergence of purpose and meaning out of nothingness. Even before there are people, there is modeled an inexorable journey toward hope. Encompassing the realities of life and the vicissitudes of history, it is the journey from chaos to harmony, from destructiveness to wholeness, from oppression to freedom, from God's spirit all alone to the flowering of the human spirit. It is all contained in the second line of the Torah, *v'ha'aretz hay'ta tohu va'vohu v'choshech al p'nei t'hom/And the earth was tangled and confused, and darkness was over the face of the deep, v'ru'ach Elokim m'rachefet al p'nei ha'mayyim/and a breath of God hovered over the face of the waters.*

In the two parts of this verse that sing the birth pangs of creation, the rabbis rooted the entire drama of human history, the tension that plays out, as they see it, from exile to redemption. Peering through the lens of one people's story, the rabbis see in the first part of the verse, in the earth all tangled and confused, Israel's experience of exile and oppression: *tohu/tangled – this is the Babylonian exile, and vohu/confused – this is the Persian exile, and choshech/darkness – this is the Greek exile, al p'nei t'hom/over the face of the deep – this is the Roman exile... and the Egyptian exile encompasses them all.* In the second part of the verse, in the gentle stirrings of creation, God's breath upon the water, the rabbis see the ultimate redemption in universal terms, the time of swords turned to plowshares. God's breath is to be the breath of the Messiah and is described as the fluttering of a dove above her nest/*k'yonah ha'm'rachefet al ha'ken*, an image of peace from the very beginning.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'mot*, the beginning of the second book of the Torah, we encounter the journey in real time, the playing out of human history through the experience of Israel. All of what has come before as backdrop, setting the stage for the inevitable, exile and slavery now begin. The portion begins in the present tense, *These are the names of the children of Israel who are coming to Egypt/ha'ba'im Mitzrayma*. Not meant to be read as history, the Torah in all of its parts is about us, in the present tense. That we are to feel the exile as our own, the Slonimer Rebbe says, *each and every word of the holy Torah is meant to teach us paths of life, that we might ask, what does this teach us?* As at Pesach we are to see ourselves as having come out of Egypt, and at Shavuot as having stood at Sinai, we are to see ourselves as the oppressed slaves, striving to overcome.

Each of us is entrusted with the sacred task to bring redemption. Each of us is the liberator, each in our own way, according to our own gifts. Called to his mission

in this portion, to the task to which he is uniquely suited, Moses pleads with God to find someone else. Struggling to evade the destiny that is his, Moses says, *mi anochi/who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the children of Israel out from Egypt?* Through the telling of the rabbis, God responds with exasperation, *im eyn atah go'alam eyn acher go'alam/if you do not redeem them, there is no one else who will redeem them.*

These words to Moses are meant for each of us, a call to each one to step forward and take our place in the unfolding of history. We are each as midwives called to birth the promise of creation from the very beginning. In the unfolding from chaos to harmony, exile to redemption, the entire Torah is the telling of a journey from slavery to freedom. All of the details that are given are given along the way of the journey. Now enslaved, it is for each one of us to lead the way out and let the journey to freedom begin. If we do not do our part, there is no one else.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor