

Parashat Va'era, 5774 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

Gathered joyfully at the Seder table, the moods of the Haggada, as of life, are reflected in the varied melodic modes of voices rising together. As we come to the *V'hi She'anda* passage the words rise with heaviness, the tune laden with memories of oppression and suffering. The essence of the short passage is in its solemn reminder, *in every generation there have been those who have stood against us to wipe us out/she'b'chol dor va'dor omdim alenu l'chalotenu*. There is an unmistakable parallel and a critical tension established as the Haggadah rises to what I see as its crescendo in the words, *b'chol dor va'dor chayav adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mi'mitzrayim/in every generation a person is obligated to see themselves as if having personally come out from Egypt*. The tension between these two passages of collective memory as it is transmitted through the generations is so great that if we stay in the mood and mode of the first, *V'hi She'anda*, we shall never get to the second, *B'chol Dor Va'dor*. Stuck in the *V'hi She'anda* mode, we shall indeed never leave Egypt, remaining enslaved to our memories of oppression and victimhood.

As a people who have suffered greatly at the hands of others, this is a critical tension as it emerges from two linguistically parallel passages in the Haggadah. I am not one to minimize the experience of suffering and oppression we have known. We are obligated to remember, *Zachor!* More than to remember our suffering as an end in itself, however, the Torah emphasizes the lessons we are to draw from our suffering. Responding to brutality with humanity, the Torah exhorts us thirty-six times to remember that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, reminding that we know the soul of the stranger and should therefore not oppress the stranger in the way that was done to us. We have a greater purpose than victimhood, memories of oppression meant to inspire toward a flowering of freedom for all. Throwing off the shackles of victimhood, the great challenge is in the way of our response. Too many of our people remain the victim, never leaving the narrow place of slavery when rising up with bared fist, love of our own easily giving way to hatred of the other.

As from much of *Sefer Sh'mot/the Book of Names/Exodus*, the Haggadah draws deeply from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Va'era*. Of so many passages easily identified for their place in the Haggadah, there is one verse that does not appear in the Haggadah and which seems inconsequential even in the Torah, but whose spirit as we come to understand it infuses both the Torah and the Haggadah. In the way of its traditional reading, this cryptic verse speaks to that critical tension between victimhood and transcendence. Having just been told to go and tell Pharaoh to send out the slaves from his land, God commands Moses and Aaron concerning the children of Israel. It is a very strange construction;

va'y'tzavem el b'nei Yisra'el/and God commanded them to the children of Israel. It is understood as a command both to Moses and Aaron and to the people they are about to lead. The commentators ask of what each is commanded. Worried for the wellbeing of the people, through a midrashic telling God tells the two leaders so poignantly, My children are obstinate, they are prone to anger, they are troublesome, such is the portion you would receive upon yourselves/ken ti'hi'yu m'kablin alechem, though they will curse you and will stone you with stones. God expects the leaders of the people to transcend the less than honorable behavior of the people they lead, to let their worst behavior bring out the best in themselves. As though not already given a great enough challenge, God then tells Moses and Aaron that they are to honor Pharaoh in their manner of speaking to him, even as God exacts justice, which is not for them to do, rather, he'yu no'hagin bo kavod/you are to conduct yourselves with honor.

From within one verse, a commandment to Moses and Aaron, to Pharaoh, and finally to the children of Israel, as well. Taken as a commandment to the children of Israel, there is no direct object, no indication of what is commanded. Coming just after the directive to Pharaoh to free the slaves, the Jerusalem Talmud offers a fascinating insight. As Pharaoh is commanded to free the slaves, so too are we. The beautifully sensitive nineteenth century commentator known as the Torah T'mimah teaches so simply, *therefore the Children of Israel are also commanded concerning the freeing of slaves, that is to say, the same thing that is commanded to Pharaoh is also commanded to the children of Israel.* Not rooted in time, it is a powerful warning and commandment to all the generations of Israel, as we were oppressed we are not to become the oppressor.

As in Torah, as in the Haggadah, as in ourselves, the tension plays out to remember in every generation what was done to us and also to remember in every generation that we are to come out from the narrow place of enslavement. In the way of our response to others, as a people and as individuals, remembering for the sake of overcoming, we find the way to freedom.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor