

Va'era 1/13/18

When I volunteered to give this d'rash, John asked me to link it to the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. In some ways, that's easy, almost hard to avoid, given that the Exodus story is in many ways the template through which we see political movements, especially the civil rights movement. Everything from traditional spirituals to Michael Walzer's *Exodus as Revolution* to the titles of Taylor Branch's multi-volume work on King and civil rights make the connection.

But reading today's portion with the holiday in mind made some verses jump out at me because they highlight aspects of political movements that we may ignore or pass over (sorry) or over-simplify when we tell political stories today. The Torah, with its ancient sensibilities, can help us look anew at political change.

I'm going to try to look quickly at five aspects of the portion that struck me and that I think can lead us to think more deeply about the quandaries inherent in political change.

The first comes almost at the outset of the parsha (*Exodus* 6:5) and raises what is perhaps the most fundamental and mystifying question about political change – why does it happen at one time and not another? When is the right time to start a successful political movement? When are the times ripe for revolution?

The portion explicitly raises the question and implicitly acknowledges its unanswerability. Out of nowhere, G_d says that G_d has heard the groaning of the Israelites and remembered the covenant. The JPS translation highlights this even more by having G_d say, "I have *now* heard the moaning...". The Israelites have been slaves for centuries by this point. Why "now"? What's happened for the cries to become audible to G_d and to trigger recall of the promise? The Torah doesn't say, and it quickly moves on to the action.

It's interesting that the portion raises the question of timing but can't answer it. That strikes me as very realistic.

The example I often use to point out the significance and difficulty of this conundrum comes from the environmental movement. It's often said that the Cuyahoga River catching on fire in 1969 led to the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972. And that's true as far as it goes. What's usually left out, though, is that the Cuyahoga River had caught fire repeatedly over the 20th Century. It was filled with industrial pollutants and if it got hot enough, it caught fire. So the real impetus for the Clean Water Act wasn't the fire; it was the fundamental change in attitude toward the river catching on fire. People had to think – as they hadn't before – that the fire was a bad thing, that something should be done about it, and that that was true even if it entailed costs. That's a foundational change in the zeitgeist that happened for many reasons, few of them environmental, enabling the fire to prompt political action.

The Torah's way of describing a change in the zeitgeist is to say that G_d suddenly heard the Israelites. But personifying (or deifying) the change doesn't make it any clearer why it happened then, why that was when the freeing of the Israelites could occur.

The next line that struck me is one I don't think I'd ever noticed before. In bucking up Moses to take on his role, G_d says (*Exodus 7:1*), "See I place you in the role of G_d to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet." This is stunning to me. The Torah saying that a human – supposedly humble Moses, no less – is going to play G_d – indeed is being instructed to do so.

To me, this highlights two things about political movements. First, the kind of leadership needed is truly extra-ordinary. Leaders are put in, and have to accept what is inherently a G_d-like role to succeed. You are going to be judging and dictating to people inside and outside the movement.

But it's also a warning. Placing humans in G_d-like roles is inherently problematic. The very traits needed for success can also lead to tyranny. Political movements carry the seeds of their own demise.

The parsha actually shows us that Moses changes in taking on this role of G_d to Pharaoh – in another passage I hadn't particularly noticed before (*Exodus 8:5*). After the frogs have filled the land of Egypt, Pharaoh pleads to Moses to end the plague. Moses responds, "You may have this triumph over me" and then asks Pharaoh to pick the time for the plague to end. There's no indication that G_d suggested this mode of response, and it's hard to imagine Moses saying this during the first plagues, when his words and actions feel more tentative. No, Moses has gotten kind of used to his new role by the time of the frogs, and he is feeling his strength and power. In this exchange, he is toying with Pharaoh; he's being a little cocky and sarcastic. He's feeling more confident in his role, and it's starting to show.

The fourth aspect that I want to point out is one that's talked about more, but has a particular resonance through the lens of the MLK holiday. From the first verses of this parsha (and also elsewhere in *Exodus*) it's made explicit that the point of the exodus story is the story. The plagues and the entire story are occurring because that's how G_d will demonstrate G_d's power and win Israel's perpetual allegiance, and the tale is meant to hold us in thrall through the eons. This sometimes strikes us as a little creepy – both because of its contemporary "meta" sensibility and because it seems that a lot of harm is being done in service to a story.

But whatever the ethical issues, the Torah is being true to human, historical experience. I heard a story on NPR last night about civil rights tourism – Americans going to see the sites of civil rights events. We commemorate the MLK holiday by recalling the stories. And more than that, the civil rights leaders understood that drama was needed to propel the movement forward and etch it in memory. And drama sometimes meant consciously choosing to put people in harm's way – marching in Selma, say, because it was likely to spark a confrontation.

Oddly, in some respects, the Torah makes us more attuned to the ethical dilemmas and more able to recognize the conscious efforts to use drama to shape the story than we are when we hear about movements closer to our own day. But the same awareness of the story being an end in itself perhaps animates all lasting movements for political change.

The last aspect of the parsha that struck me was that it almost entirely concerns what we would now call elite history, or history from the top. The Israelites are acknowledged in the parsha – it's their groaning that G_d hears, and we're told that their spirits are crushed. And they will, of course, in the end, take part in the exodus from Egypt. But for most of this week's parsha, they are entirely absent.

This also seems realistic. These days, we like to emphasize the masses in our stories of movements, but leadership is also vital. It's not that the Torah thinks the people don't matter or have no role, but at this point, it's entirely the negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh that are going to be the fulcrum of change. A story of political change that leaves out this aspect is not the full story.

But that begs another question: What are the Israelites thinking as all this is occurring? The Torah documents what's happening among the leaders (G_d, Moses, Pharaoh) at a level of detail that, in the case of an actual historical event, would be an historian's dream. We have the discussions of strategy and tactics, the internal disputes, the hidden moments of self-doubt and a transcript of the interactions between the leaders. We get some sense of how the Egyptian court and even the Egyptian people are reacting. But we have no idea whatsoever how the Israelites are processing these astonishments.

I once heard the historian David McCullough give a lecture where he said, "Nothing happens in the past." It's all in the present when it's happening, which means it's often baffling and seemingly lacking in direction. The absence of the Israelites from the story can remind us of this. Or as Philip Roth has put it, "The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic."

So, for you, how does today's portion spark insights into political movements that we might otherwise miss or be inclined to evade? Do the verses and aspects I've cited seem helpful in thinking through our more recent history and our current quandaries?