

Hard Labor and the Crushing of the Human Spirit

Our parsha this week is Va-era, Exodus 6:1 -34

In this week's *parsha*, we encounter God telling Moses a new name, the unpronounceable name YHWH, telling Moses that the Israelites' cries have now been heard by God and the first seven plagues.

Rashi comments that this name of God implies that God is eternal because it contains the letters that make up the words "He was, He is, He will be". But there is another interpretation of this name of God that is central to this *parsha*. That is the association of YHWH with God's compassion. And it is compassion that calls out to us when we read that the Israelites "...would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by hard labor" (Exodus 6:8). Rashi read this more literally as, "Anyone who is under stress is short of wind and breath- and he is unable to breathe deeply". However, this also has a metaphoric ring to it- as in such phrases as "I am so busy, I can't catch my breath", or the feeling of oppressed people often being expressed as "I can't breathe".

This phrase about spirits being crushed, or stunted by forced hard labor is a situation that we wish was over. Here in the United States, we outlawed slavery 150 years ago. Yet "... more people are enslaved today than at any other point in history. According to the most conservative estimates of the International Labor Organization, nearly 21 million people are held in situations of forced labor today: 3 out of every 1,000 people in the world." Some of these people sell themselves or their children into slavery to pay off debt; some are part of human trafficking rings, some work for such ridiculously low wages and live in such deplorable conditions that they certainly have crushed spirits. (See more at: <http://www.truah.org/issuescampaigns/slavery-a-human-trafficking-50094.html#sthash.YtLpd5ty.dpuf>)

Even our own children in this high pressure society in which we live, often look like their spirits have been crushed by either the anxiety of "getting into a good school", or the anxiety of not living up to unrealistic expectations. There are unfortunately many ways to crush the human spirit. And so the text tells us something else. God hears the cries of the people.

But first they need to cry out! I believe that this is what we are hearing in some of the movements for social change today. When fast food, day care workers and elder care workers fight for a living wage of \$15.00 an hour, and when farmworkers organize for human working conditions, I believe that God hears their cries. These movements may feel like a plague to modern day pharaohs. And the plagues are troubling to many. I believe that they exist in this text to tell us that "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." (Frederick Douglas)

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes about the troubling aspect of God "hardening Pharaoh's heart", which is also part of this *parsha*. He says, "This is important, not ... to burnish God's reputation but to establish that it is unacceptable for one human being to reduce another human being to

slavery, that freedom is the will of God and not the choice of a despot". (*Etz Hayim*, p.351) But even God had Moses and Aaron .

So what can we do? We can find out where the food and products we consume come from, if the workers are paid a living wage and have decent human living conditions. If not, we can buy different products. We can support the movement for a living wage. We can invest only in companies that abide by the above standards. With the internet, this is not difficult information to obtain. And we can nurture our own children by appreciating that each is made *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God, and each has their own path to take, that does not have anything to do with making a lot of money, but rather with being a good person.

Questions for discussion:

1. Have you ever or do you now work under oppressive conditions?
2. If yes, what did you do or do you think you can do about it?
3. How do you understand the partnership between God and humans toward compassion?

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