

Shemot – 5783

It has taken me a long time to realize that the thing about symbolism is one can be completely free to interpret something differently than the way other people do. But symbols have to be viewed with the context they appear, too. I remember how revelatory it was to read how rivers can be symbols for life journeys and boats journeys through life. The overpowering symbol we are confronted with in today's parsha is, of course, the burning bush. Some of the sages see this as a symbol for the Jewish People suffering as slaves in Egypt but not consumed by that suffering and not losing their identity as the Children of HaShem.

I am struck by the not coincidental use of symbolism in the beginning of the Book of Exodus, in Hebrew referred to as Shemot, immediately after we have read about the death of Jacob in last week's parsha. Why might you ask? When we think of Jacob as young children, the first story that always comes to mind is the stairway to heaven, Jacob's ladder. It becomes even more purposefully placed here when we remember that Jacob dreamed about the ladder on his way from the home of his father as he escaped Esau's rage for robbing him of his birthright. In a way, we can see Moses in the same situation. We have just learned that he escaped from Egypt to Midian running from the expected rage of his adopted homeland and family because he killed an Egyptian.

The rage that forced Jacob to run from his family and the rage that forced Moses to flee Egypt led equally to an encounter with the divine in which HaShem promises to stand beside both men and allay them of their fear of the unknown. Jacob was not directly given a task by HaShem while Moses was. Jacob only dreamed of the ladder while Moses is said to have seen

the bush in broad daylight. However, we could make the case for the fact that both are pointing to the inexplicable, the unfathomable, on a journey with an unknown outcome. In both these passages, HaShem promises to accompany the pilgrim as he moves forward along the way ahead.

The sages suggest that, as a result of the encounter in the dream of Jacob's ladder, Jacob makes a promise to Hashem, and this is the first instance of such beseeching and promising in the Torah. The sages argue about what voice Moses heard when HaShem called him from the Burning Bush, and some argue it was the voice at first of his father. That is why HaShem tells Moses that he is not the God of his father but the god of His forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob who he is encountering. This phraseology is the same as that with which we begin the Amidah in the Shacharit service..... We say silently at first Baruch Attah Adonai, Eloheinu Velohei Avotainu.... Elohai Avraham, Elohai Yitzchak veLohai Yaakov. By doing so we are connecting our voice to that of Jacob when he was afraid of what lay ahead after stealing the birthright and he was filled with remorse. But we are also connecting to the encounter of Moses at the burning bush when he was urged to accept the charge of HaShem to return to Egypt and seek Pharaoh's release of his people from their slavery.

WE all know how the journey of Jacob ends and read every year of the role HaShem played in that journey. We have just finished several parshiot in which events play themselves out in such a way that we have to wonder at the miraculous way in which Joseph's early dream of the stars and the moon bowing down to him actually came to pass and we are meant to understand that the mysterious way in which Joseph ended up being reunited with his family and saving them from a far worse fate had to have been as a result of the hidden hand of HaShem.

So too do we already know that, as a result of the encounter at the burning bush in the wilds of Midian, Moses returns with his brother, who HaShem ensured was beside him all the way, and finally sees his people, our people, released from bondage in Egypt. The message to us of course is that we have to accept the challenges life presents us knowing that HaShem is there in the background. WE believe HaShem to be omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. But he only interferes in the lives of man when man (and of course, woman, and one could say people but it's not as potent an expression) when we beseech him. We are provided with a way to do that by reciting the Amidah.

We are commanded to pray three times a day and each time we pray, we recite variations of the morning Amidah. I have long sought an opportunity to explain why we now stand through the Musaf amida. WE do so because we are beseeching the divine for intervention in our lives for the positive. When the Jewish people did not possess prayerbooks of their own, the Shaliach Tzibbur repeated the amida on behalf of the congregation. But that played itself out ONLY after we had prayed silently to the best of our own abilities first. The Silent Amida was followed by the repetition for the benefit of those who did not know or could not read the words themselves. However, we all have prayerbooks now and when we recite together, we are repeating the same procedure as the encounters of Jacob and Moses with the divine.

Prayer does not come easily to everyone and not upon demand, as in a specific part of the service. But unless we try to meet HaShem, each of us in our own way, we will not be able to fully appreciate that faith in the divine that motivated Jacob after his dream or Moses after his encounter in the desert. Tradition has imposed a strict choreography in how we approach

HaShem and how we are meant to stand when praying. Tradition is only part of the process though. We have to be seeking HaShem and seeking guidance and help as we each of us walk our paths through life. As Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel have both defined it, man, we, have to be seeking HaShem for HaShem to find us. Shabbat Shalom.