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Parashat Vaera  
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Don't Wait for Angels to Sing

So I am teaching Torah Love, which is what we call the bar / bat mitzvah class with kids and parents.

You know why we call it that?

Because I know they will have their beautiful b'nai mitzvah, but we want them to know *why*, we want them to love Torah.

So I am teaching them, happens to be last week's parasha, parashat shmot, and Moshe is at the burning bush/

And I ask the class what questions they have about the story. Moses, God, Pharaoh, freeing of the Israelites, lots of angles

And, one by one, each kid asks some version of, "Why was Moses chosen?"

"What makes Moses special?"

"What makes Moses, Moses?"

And so on.

And I have admit that I was worried, like why were all the kids so focused on what made Moshe extraordinary? Didn't they have a single question about God or the

burning bush or slavery or what it would take to free the Israelites?

Were we all now hopelessly doomed to think only about ourselves and our own qualities and what makes us special so we could all promote ourselves?

I went home a little defeated.

But then, the more I thought about it, the more I realized *the rabbis had the same question.*

The rabbis also wanted to know, "Why Moshe?"

Because, when you read the story, you can't help but think, whether you are Rashi in the 11<sup>th</sup> century or a 7<sup>th</sup> grader in Kitchen's Kitchen Torah love class:

What could God possibly see in this guy?

As in: He's wandering in the *midbar* / in the wilderness, with only the sheep, having imaginary conversations with all people whom he despises --

(You think you have parent issues, Moshe's step dad was PHARAOH)

-- Moshe is out there having imaginary conversations with his enemies, that they deserve his fury doesn't matter, because Moshe hasn't done anything except hate them.

Okay, we can give Moses at least some credit for leaving Pharaoh's palace, the place of security and wealth. And Moses was willing to cut ties with those around him who think slavery is just the way it has to be.

But still, he is all negation and no plan, he does not risk anything in himself in order to build something.

And so the rabbis search for the answers in his first divine encounter at the burning bush:

Why Moshe?

Maybe he has, as my father R. Lawrence Kushner has taught, the patience to see the slow miracle, that the bush was on fire but not consumed. If you have ever watched a fire burn in the fireplace you know it takes some time, shows persistence.

Or maybe, as my friend R. David Kasher taught by way of Exodus Rabbah, just by turning to look, Moshe demonstrated he can see an inkling of a something, he can see what is not yet there.

Or maybe, as I have taught, it is not only that Moshe stops, he asks *maduah* / why? "Why is it that the bush does not burn up?"

It is because he asks "Why," the question that opens the possibility that maybe, there is another way – this is why

he is chosen. Because Moshe is one of the only ones who understands that things don't have to be as they are.

But, actually, while these are lovely, I think we could also honestly and equally say that at this point in his life, Moshe is just ...not much overall.

He's kind of a mess, actually.  
We could say he is a recluse, still running from something that happened decades ago.

Let's put it this way: If Moses was indeed destined from the beginning, even if he had something innate, then so far he wasn't capable of demonstrating it with any particular aplomb.

In fact, in this less charitable reading, Moses is operating on such a basic level that God has to resort to Vegas style pyrotechnics to even get the conversation started.

Remember God doesn't have to make any miracles to get the attention of *anyone else who is important*. So far, God just sort of calls out to them and they talk back, ready. In fact, the midwives don't need any word from God at all.

Not to mention, as Sasha taught us, Moses says no so many times that God becomes furious in the face of

Moshe's repeated refusals and self-negation, his abdication of responsibility, God gets furious that Moshe can't begin to play the role, let alone own it.

Moshe seems at the very least, an unlikely partner.

Not to mention, as R. Dena Weiss taught (Machon Hadar weekly Torah on Shemot), Moshe is not the only one in this scene who is at a low point in his career. Up until now, God has only been playing in the local theaters, if you know what mean.

The story is about to be God's national tour with world changing consequences. So *all* conditions point to God's need to pick the most eager, able partner.

Which only makes the scene more confounding: If God is so desperate and Moshe is so recalcitrant, *why Moshe at all?* Why is it important that the hero be underwhelming at the start?

Because, it is just like Sasha said, Moshe is like most of us.

We, too are born in conditions we did not choose.

We, too are raised in places and countries and contexts where the values seem obviously, hopelessly, endlessly corrupt.

We, too, handle things inconsistently.

We, too, can feel like we are wandering in the wilderness, having accomplished almost nothing.

We, too, in response to the calls of suffering, can still catch ourselves saying, "Mi Anochi?" / "Who am I to try and fix it?" And, "What if they don't believe me?" We too, can hear ourselves staying, just like Moshe, "I just don't have the words. I don't even have the beginning of the beginning of what I might need to enter the fray."

We, too, can imagine ourselves saying,  
"Send someone else. Make it someone else. Please.  
Anyone else."

So the question for us this Shabbat, in this moment in our country's history, is not, *will we hear the call*, in this we have it easier than Moses, for in time there is no subtle burning bush, thanks to social media, the calls to step up and wake up and be agitated and alert, are now ricocheting around the globe it seems from each and every corner at a rapid fire pace, unlike the subtle burning bush, the calls now are unavoidable, they are like a hailstorm, and I dare say there is not one of us who has not heard at least a few.

No, the question is not about *hearing the call*,  
Our question is Moshe's question: Will we step forward?

Will we, intentionally or begrudgingly, our tradition doesn't much care, will we generate the modicum of necessary continual strength to step into the ring and stay?

Will the story of the Exodus, the facing down of oppressors and freeing of the oppressed, end with one insecure, uncomfortably relatable shepherd who says no again and again? Will it end with us?

Or can he, can we, *put whatever it is aside* and realize all our neuroticism and grand planning and ego gymnastics cannot take the place of one regular and serious commitment?

And for those of us who don't know what the action should be, I am here to tell you that besides all the Kitchen initiatives, we can help you and sorry not sorry but agonizing about the best way to act or fretting about choosing is just a higher level of procrastinating.

Talking about it just isn't enough.

You, I, we each have to find one way to act with regularity. Sincerity is appreciated, but if we wait until we are sincere we may never do it, so the tradition says, go ahead and do it, don't wait for angels to sing.

You see it is not only Moses who is standing and listening, we are standing.

And the calls are nonstop, the evidence is mounting, the Pharaoh is not getting any weaker by our absences, and God is losing patience.

So, really, the question is only if will we have the discipline to sacrifice our comfort or convenience or relationships or status or security in order to do what's needed with regularity in order to help bring about a world in which we want to live.

You see, after all this divine arguing and negotiating, it's funny, Moses never says, "Yes." Never says, "Okay, God, you win." Instead, Moses only starts the work of making arrangements: He asks his father in law for permission to go to Egypt, he gets on the road, he tells his brother what they are about to do, they begin.

Moses never says, "Yes," I think, because he never feels ready.

Rather, it is only once Moshe starts *acting* the part that can he grow into being sometimes, mostly ready.

R. Arnold Jacob Wolf, z"l wrote [paraphrasing Freud]: "*Only acts can dissipate ambivalence.*" (Arnold Jacob Wolf, *Unfinished Rabbi*, p. 87).



So in the end, Moses, against all his better instincts, never says "Yes," never says anything to end that conversation with God, but instead, puts on his sandals again and goes back to the palace where it all started, he goes to the very place he does not want to go and is certainly not welcome.

But something about the fact that he gets out of his head and out of the wilderness, something about the fact that in spite of all of it he goes, something about that act is so powerful it reverberates around the world and brings God and justice back into it once again.