

Erev Vaera 5768

I think that parents, be they mothers or fathers, share certain things in common, by definition.

To begin with, there is the sense of protection and care that all harbor for their offspring. No matter the age of children, fathers and mothers continue to look out for the best interests of their kids and woe be it to anyone who gets in the way. Parents, it seems to me, also share constant worry. Again, no matter the context, maternal and paternal angst seems to be something that exists in perpetuity, certainly

amidst the Jewish people. Finally, all parents harbor an abiding loyalty and love towards their immediate descendants that can virtually never be diminished, regardless of circumstance, situation, or context. A kid may come to disregard a parent; but it is incredibly rare that the inverse might be relationally manifest.

And while care, worry, and loyalty are certainly qualities and characteristics that are so commonplace that such subject matter might frame any discussion between mothers and or fathers, it seems to me that there is yet one other

shared experience that exists in parallel quantity.

Specifically, I refer to the fact – and I have indeed experienced this personally - that most parents can't stand some singular TV show that their kids get hooked on for years. Maybe you went through that as well or know what I'm talking about. Maybe the show is Barney, maybe it's Wow, Wow Wubzy, maybe it's something else. I remember years ago, our youngest went through this phase where he enjoyed watching a show called The Power Rangers. In that annoying show, five young people who ran around in colorful pajamas

would engage in some miraculous metamorphosis becoming enormous in scope and power in order, of course, to fight the bad guys. Moreover, as this radical change transpired, and the characters became gigantic, there was accompanying noises, music, lights, and visuals not unlike those that one might experience amidst an acute migraine headache. And believe you me, after either hearing or seeing these noises and images emanating from the television set day after day for a couple of years straight, any parent would have preferred a craniotomy as opposed to witnessing these little

weasels become transformed into the grandest of fighting and battling machines. And indeed, I couldn't help but reflect upon that very annoying show and its bizarre content, as I came across a section in this week's Torah reading.

In our *parsha, Vaera*, we read of the onset of the conflict not merely between good and evil; but in a very corporeal context, between Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and his nemesis, Moses, the representative of the enslaved and enfeebled Israelite clan. After experiencing a direct manner of Divine revelation, Moses understands

his sacred mission; that his job is to go the

Pharaoh and echo God's demand:

“Let My People Go”.

To boot, Moses and Aaron are given a bag of tricks if you will such that Pharaoh should be convinced that they truly are representatives of the One Authentic God of the universe. And so it is that we read (7:10):

So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as the Lord had commanded: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent.

And while surely this segment is well noted for its special effects – and truly preserved for posterity in Cecil B. DeMille's great cinematic

classic, there is a little detail that is somewhat lost amidst the flair of the scene. You see, before the incredible miracle that unfolds so wondrously, the Torah oh so casually states:

So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh...

And while that point is all well and good, did anyone ever stop to wonder exactly how it is that two slaves just wandered into the palace of the most powerful man on the earth? What did they

do, knock on the door and say, “Hey, we have a five o’clock appointment with the King?” Could they have cajoled their way before the imperial throne by selling Kosher Girl Scout cookies for the incipient organization called The Distressed Maidens of Israel? Or perchance might they have stated to the maitre d at the palace banquet hall that they were really good friends with Yul Brenner and hence demanded immediate access to Pharaoh? And while any of these explanations is surely a possibility, there is another idea to consider.

In his commentary on the Torah, the famous 12th century sage, Rabbi Shimon of Frankfurt on Main, author of the *Yalkut Shimoni*, is drawn to this very question. And so it is that the *Yalkut* brings to bear a famous legend that addresses exactly how it is that Moses and Aaron were so readily able to enter the palace. He writes:

As Moses and Aaron approached the palace, people saw that they were morphed into being virtual celestial beings. Their height grew to that of the tallest cedar tree, their eyes radiated as the rays of the sun, their countenance glowed as the shining stars.

Witnessing the approach of these transformed beings, the guards at the palatial portal were more than willing to escort them in rather than pondering a colossal confrontation.

And while the legend is of interest, my friends,
in answering an otherwise virtually ignored
question obscured within the action of the
exciting narrative, it does more than merely that.

You see, this story, this *midrash* is not merely
about the animation of Moses and Aaron at a
particular place and time in Israelite history, yet
rather, allow me to suggest, represents an
authentic view regarding the potentiality of the
human condition, albeit through a fanciful
prism. In offering a picture of these virtual
Jewish Power Rangers, the Torah, as reflected
through this legend, is offering something

compelling about who we are, and more importantly, about who we can be as people, in both the individual and collective realm.

As Moses and Aaron morph, we are being reminded that we as human beings are surely capable of transforming ourselves, even in profound and significant ways. Indeed, such a notion is poignantly weaved into the incipient tapestry of the Jewish narrative as found in the sacred writ. It is the first Jews, the patriarch Avram who becomes Avraham; and the matriarch Sari who becomes Sarah. These are

not merely changes of name, but deep transformations of being. They don't merely acquire new monikers, rather, they truly become new people; illustrating that spiritual life and personal grandeur is all about change. As our initial ancestors, they offer a paradigm about the potentiality for significant change and, if you will, the challenge for each and every one of us to see if we too are capable thereof in our own lives and relationships.

Secondly, while the legend points to virtual infinite grandeur, it is clear from the legend that

it is momentary, and not perpetual in nature.

After all, if Moses and Aaron remained as tall as cedar trees, you would have to figure that entranceway to the palace was about seventy feet high! But the hidden lesson here, it seems to me, is that human growth, grandeur, and greatness can indeed take place in a moment.

And just because great heights – be they spiritual, intellectual, or emotional in nature – haven't been achieved yet in life, it doesn't mean that such cannot be appropriated at some point; perhaps some point soon. Indeed, the point here may be that we should have

confidence in anyone and everyone who comes into our midst in life because at some moment, perhaps when we least expect it, human beings, created in the image of God, are capable of grandeur and greatness. The idea is etched into the core of our tradition (*Avot* 4:3):

Ben Azzai taught: Do not disdain any person; do not underrate anything. For there is no person

who does not have his hour; and there is no thing without its place under the sun.

Finally, let us appreciate well that the authors of the *midrash* really understood human dynamics and human relationships. They authored this legend as they did not merely to offer something about these specific leaders; yet rather to remind us that, indeed, there are times in life when people do look up to us – if not literally, than figuratively. What the legend captures is an interesting truth – namely, that there may be a disparity between how we see ourselves versus

how we are viewed by others. Indeed, that tension is constantly inherent in all human relationships and balancing those two divergent perspectives represents a constant chore. Yet, even when we least expect it, we would do well to know that there are those who do look up to us – be they children, friends, or others.

Sometimes, such respect may come from sources of which we are completely unaware.

And indeed it is appreciating this aspect of human relationships that prompted a great sage long ago to teach:

“Don’t view yourself as an evil person”.

He understood that personal esteem might be hard to maintain, but maintain it we must. After all, there are people out there who do look up to you and to the person next to you.

So in the end, I personally enjoyed this famous *midrash* which comes to answer this hidden question within the Biblical text about how Moses and Aaron actually got in the palace in

the first place. And while none of us may be either a Moses, and Aaron, or even an annoying little Power Ranger (thank God), the legend applies to us all. At once, the text reminds us that we as human beings can change; and we can change radically, should we so desire. The potentiality that resides within each of us for positive transformation represents an ongoing challenge to existential ennui and relational stagnation. Similarly, it teaches that any human being is capable of grandeur and acts of profound influence at any given moment. As such, we must appreciate and value every person

in our lives; knowing well that even if someone hasn't quite shined yet, tomorrow may usher in such special moments. And finally, the legend reminds us that there are people who look up to us; and as such, we each carry an influence, perhaps even beyond our wildest imagination. It is these realities that dare us to feel good about the future and to always view others and ourselves with the greatest respect.

Shabbat Shalom

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