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“My Rod and My Staff”

The Rabbinic tractate of the Mishnah known as Pirkey Avot, The Teachings of the Founding Fathers, records a mythic, almost mystical vision near the end of the collection. It tells us that *asarah d'varim niv'r'u b'erev shabbat beyn hash'mashot* – “Ten items were created on the eve of the first Sabbath at twilight.”

It enumerates items that in and of themselves are not miraculous: a ram, a well, a staff, a pair of tongs, and so forth. Not miraculous, but when they appear at just the right moment in the Biblical narratives, they function in a miraculous way.

Abraham sees the ram at precisely the moment he is about to slaughter Isaac. Miriam's well provides water just in time to quench the dying thirst of the rebellious children of Israel. A crevice opens in the earth as Korach and his followers commence their insurrection. A rainbow appears in the sky as Noach emerges from the ark to begin life on earth anew. The letters of the aleph-bet become available on the day they are needed for the inscription of the two Tablets of the Covenant.

The moral of the story might be that the tools for redemption are pre-loaded into Creation. Or, that “God gives us everything we need” (if you prefer that language). And that our willingness to open our eyes and recognize those tools for their intended purpose, their *lish'mah*, is the key; the difference between slogging through life and answering the call of destiny.

One of these tools is the *matteh Moshe*, or Moses's staff. It is the instrument by which he first performs childish tricks before the Pharaoh to get his attention, followed by his dramatic demonstrations of leadership that bring about the true origin story of our people.

The genre known as midrash – the Rabbis' unique literary medium for shaping the ethos of Jewish tradition and purpose – trains its uncanny imagination on this prosaic object, this shepherd's walking stick, thereby challenging us to rethink what it means to be part of a tradition; what it means to pass on that tradition; and what it might mean to educate oneself to the extent that one can even *begin*

to comprehend the responsibility that our tradition - our *unique* tradition - imposes on our lives from birth to death.

Here is the midrash:

V'et hamatteh hazeh tikach b'yadecha - "And you shall take in your hand this rod" (that's the quote from Exodus 4:17, the scene at the burning bush). The rod that was created at twilight on creation's sixth day was handed to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve handed it to Enoch (Chanoch), Enoch to Shem, Shem to Abraham and Sarah, Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebecca, Isaac and Rebecca to Jacob and Leah.

Jacob took it down to Egypt and handed it to his son Joseph. When Joseph died, all his household effects were moved and deposited in Pharaoh's palace.

Now Jethro (Yitro) was one of Pharaoh's magicians, his *khartumim*. When Jethro saw the rod and the letters on it, he coveted it in his heart and took it, brought it to his home in Midian, and planted it in the garden by his house. No person could come near it until Moses arrived in the land of Midian, entered the garden of Jethro's house, saw the rod, made out the letters on it, stretched forth his hand, and took it.

When Jethro saw this, he said: This man is destined to redeem Israel from Egypt. That is why he gave his daughter Tziporah to Moses as his wife.

And there is a follow-up midrash from a different collection:

Vayelekh Moshe - "And Moses went" (that's the quote from Exodus 4:18 telling us that Moses proceeded to return to Egypt to carry out God's assignment). Where did he go? To get his wife and children. Jethro asked him, "Where do you propose to take them?" Moses: "To Egypt." Jethro: "Those who are in Egypt wish to escape, and you would take your family there?" Moses: "Soon the children of Israel will go out and stand at Sinai to hear from the mouth of the Holy One, 'I am the Eternal your God' (Exodus 20:2). Should not *my* children, like the others in Israel, hear this?"

Jethro replied to Moses, *lech l'shalom* - "Go in peace" (Exodus 4:18). i.e., Go in peace, enter Egypt in peace, and come back in peace." (In Yiddish we would say, *gey gezunt un kum gezunt*.)

There's a lot to unpack here, far too much for a Yom Kippur evening sermon. I will unpack just enough to demonstrate why I wanted you to hear this tale on the holy night that our people take the most seriously, i.e., on the night our people take *themselves* the most seriously *as Jews*, in all the ways we mean "Jews."

We immediately recognize this to be a "formula" legend, like Arthur, Merlin and Excalibur, or if you prefer, Luke Skywalker, Obi-wan Kenobi and the "light sabre." It's a tale of destiny. The unsuspecting hero, tutored by a wise sage, is given an uncanny opportunity to take hold of an ancient and powerful object, an object that has deep and impenetrable meaning, and that connects him to a noble tradition that cannot continue unless he himself accepts its terms and uses it to lead his flock into history.

Moses would be that person for the Jewish people. And if I had asked you what object serves this role for Moses in the Jewish saga, you would have guessed the two tablets of the covenant, or perhaps the Torah itself, or at least the box known as the *Aron Ha-Eydut*, the holy ark of testimony that leads the way through the wilderness.

But no, it is a simple shepherd's stick. Simple, except for the fact that it is more ancient than time, and that it is inscribed with a message that is immediately legible to someone from within its tradition, and opaque to anyone else.

Let's ask a few questions about this story.

First question: How is it possible that Yitro, who is among the elite wizards of the great Pharaoh according to this midrash, and who will become the advisor in chief to Moses at a time when Moses would otherwise drop dead from administrative exhaustion, how is it that he cannot read the hieroglyphs on the staff?

And how is it that Moses, who unlike his sister Miriam and brother Aaron did not attend Talmud Torah, is nonetheless able to read the letters?

What do they say? Perhaps the mystical four-letter name of the Divine, the Yod and Hey and Vav and Hey that are probably a neologism of "was, is, will be." Perhaps the Sh'ma. Perhaps the word Yisrael, meaning "God wrestler." Or

hashivenu adonai elecha v'nashuva, "let us come home, and we will willingly come home," the constant refrain of these Yom Kippur services.

Whatever it says, Moses at least recognizes the letters as would a child in the early grades of a proper Hebrew school, and he knows the letters belong to him, or rather, that he belongs to them.

Question: How does Moses recognize that not only is it within his power to pick up the staff and interpret its ancient message, but that it is his duty to do so, and to turn the experience into a lifelong commitment? How does he know to step forward and put out his hand?

And how does Yitro know what it means when he sees this young stranger taking the staff and making it his own? How does he immediately know to exclaim, "This man is destined to redeem Israel from Egypt?" And why is he so drawn to this lad and his people's apparent *raison d'être* that he wants his own daughter and grandchildren to be part of it?

Next question (and here is where I am about to get uncomfortably personal): If you or I were in Moses's place, would we have been able to read the staff? Would we have picked it up at all, even if we could read it fluently, and especially if we could only barely sound out the message?

Question: Would we have gone to the effort of bringing our family - our children - back to the dangers of Egypt in order to allow them to experience the miracle of the Exodus along with their people, and therefore to be able to see themselves as being included in their people's destiny? *Our* people's destiny?

Would we have taken that huge risk? And if we were Yitro, would we so readily have accepted Moses's answer and wished him God speed? With our grandchildren in tow?

Question: This staff is only known as *matte moshe*, "Moses's staff," because he is the person who can make the best use of it *in his generation*. But how does he seem to know that it is not "his?" That it belongs to the entire Jewish tradition, in fact to the entire *human* tradition from which the Jewish people emerged, and of which we are an inextricable part?

One last question: Why does Moses not pass the staff on to Joshua? Isn't it the very symbol of *l'dor vador*, "from generation to generation?" It disappears from the narrative of the Torah as soon as Moses ascends Mount Nebo and enters his

burial crypt. The staff seems to be functional - even critical - only so long as his people remain in exile - in *Midbar*.

Once they finally enter the land of Canaan/Israel, they themselves will become the staff, as it were, responsible for expanding the narrow message of the staff into the broad reality of fashioning a civilization based on law, love, justice, compassion, and truth; a civilization that will itself pass on its tradition by means of education, commemoration, dedication, self-sacrifice, risk-taking, and life-long spiritual practice.

Aha! That's what I wanted to tell you in the first place, and that's why I made you listen to this haunting story! I wanted to ask you to put yourselves in Moses's place; not Moses the leader of the entire Jewish people, but Moses the passerby without whose simple, confident action there would be no Jewish people, no Jewish message, no Jewish ethos, no Jewish contribution to the story of humankind.

Would that matter? Would anyone care? Would *you or I* care? Do you or I care? Do we care enough to learn how to read the staff? Or the book in our hands? To learn where it came from? To risk rejection by trying to get our descendants to read it and take it seriously?

Moses goes back to Egypt, raises his staff, calls out for freedom, and is told by his own people to take a hike. He keeps at it. He believes in it. He works toward it. He dedicates his life to it. He trains others to take up the task. He gets constant pushback. He knows it is not easy to take ownership of a message that runs counter to the ways of most of the world. Yet he persists, because he knows it is a *lekach tov*, a profoundly good and decent doctrine. And he knows it takes literacy, knowledge, and chutzpah to comprehend that doctrine and put it into practice.

Dear friends, we could spend our entire Yom Kippur speaking about antisemitism. Antisemitism from the hateful right, and antisemitism from the intolerant left. That is indeed what a thousand rabbis are speaking to their flock about this evening.

But I want you and me to respond to antisemitism from the center of our Jewish knowledge, our Jewish passion, and our Jewish commitment. I do not want us to

be more strongly committed to our Judaism because of antisemitism. Rather, I want us to respond boldly to antisemitism because we are strongly committed to our Judaism.

Our Judaism comes first, and it comes in a combination of mind, heart, and hands; *torah, avodah, and chesed*. Before we can worry about why people love us or hate us, we have to worry about who we are, and whether or not we love ourselves! Whether or not we know who our “selves” are!

And likewise with all the other challenges to Jewish identity, as well as to the insurmountable problems of the world that we Jews can and should be joining with others to tackle. We tackle them best by being our own best Jewish selves.

I saw it in Poland. Jews *as Jews* saving Ukrainian lives, hand in hand with the peoples and faiths of the world, on that same accursed ground where the peoples and faiths of the world slaughtered us eighty years ago because of who we are and stubbornly continue to be.

In tonight’s fable, Moses is in faraway Midian because he has run away from his people and their story. But the first chance he gets, he puts forth his hand, he accepts his unique assignment, and he goes “home.”

Hashivenu v’nashuva, "lead us home and we will willingly come home." He loves his people, even when they don’t always love him back. He teaches them a message of moral integrity. He writes it down for them, and he teaches them how to read it, and how to teach their children to read it, and on and on.

Then, come what may, through the vicissitudes of history, through landed-ness and exile, through commonwealth and destruction, to commonwealth rebuilt and destruction yet again, and now to commonwealth once more, the message of the staff prevails, at least for those who take the trouble and the risk to learn to read it and embrace it.

Hashivenu v’nashuva, "lead us home and we will willingly come home." Home to this people of law, love, justice, compassion, and truth; home to this people of education, commemoration, dedication, self-sacrifice, risk-taking, and life-long spiritual practice.

Hashivenu v’nashuva, "lead us home and we will willingly come home."

Chadesh yameinu k'kedem, "renew us as in ancient days," and let our ancient message be ever new in our minds, in our hearts, and in our hands - in this, *our* time.