

**D'var Sh'mot - presented by Janice May**  
**at the Solel Sisterhood Service on January 9, 2010**

Parashah Sh'mot sets the stage for the exodus, explaining the context of our enslavement and telling the story of Moses, who will lead us out of Egypt. The people in this sedra are “doers” – a group of women and men who not only hope for a better future but act accordingly.

The beginning chapters are very familiar - in the Haggadah we also recount the bitter lives of our ancestors in Egypt and we imagine the suffering resulting from the decree to kill every Hebrew boy. The drama culminates in a confrontation between God and Moses when Moses experiences what essentially amounts to a crisis of confidence. Many of us can relate to Moses at this moment – we too have wondered how to respond when we are called upon to assume a leadership role but know in our own hearts that we want to run, as fast as we can, in the opposite direction.

Women figure very prominently throughout Sh'mot and without exception, these women are wise, confident, compassionate and righteous. They act courageously and in doing so; lay the foundation for our rescue from Egypt and our ongoing obligation and tradition of working for the freedom of all people.

Because Sisterhood is participating in this morning's service, I think it particularly appropriate to acknowledge these individual and communal acts. It is women's fertility that both gives life and ultimately becomes the target for Pharaoh's growing fear. The two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah defy Pharaoh's decree to kill all Hebrew baby boys. They risk their lives to facilitate life.

The desperate call of a mother casting her beloved baby boy into the Nile in order to save him is answered by Pharaoh's daughter. She reaches across religion, class and race to conspire with this unknown mother and Miriam, who patiently waits by the shore watching over her brother. This conspiracy results in Moses being raised in the Egyptian court while knowing the ways of his own people and their suffering. And finally we meet Zipporah who both shelters Moses with her kindness and later mollifies God's wrath by circumcising her first born son. As the Midrash contends, it appears Israel was indeed redeemed because of the righteous of its women.

In the following chapters, Moses first experiences God's presence through a burning bush as he is called upon to lead the people out of Egypt. And then Moses, like many of us, resists. Citing his unworthiness, his ignorance of God's name, his speech impediment, and ultimately Israel's likely disbelief in him, he implores God to replace him. He seems to be saying “God surely anybody but me, to lead this exodus!”

And since that moment, coming to terms with the nature of leadership has preoccupied humankind.

The modern field of leadership studies has at various times been engrossed in identifying the personal characteristics of “natural born leaders”, analyzing which style of leadership is most effective, and more recently how to adjust one’s leadership style to specific situations. As Moses intuitively knew, the current thinking agrees that truly “inspirational leadership” is characterized by a clear vision, the ability to instill passion for the cause and clearly articulate the concerns of the group.

Like Moses, we know what it feels like to be a reluctant leader – imploring others to see our limitations rather than our potential. But we also know we depend on effective leaders to mobilize our collective action to confront social issues: freeing those enslaved by poverty, war, hatred and injustice in our own community and worldwide. And we need each person to contribute in their unique way to lead themselves or others.

So how do we move from this crisis of confidence in our own leadership ability? How do we move from passivity to action from reluctance to leadership?

While it may be seen as a complex psychological process – in essence moving into action requires just two things: an initial leap of faith combined with hope that we can make a difference.

In his inaugural address, President Obama reminded us that as long as there is breath, there is hope. For a great leader this is an obvious truth - but for others, hope remains elusive.

Michael Marmor, in this past summer’s issue of Reform Judaism, wrote that “hope is a thread, however elusive, that links us to a possible future. It demands that we take hold of it: otherwise it is just a loose thread”. He goes on to say that in Jewish culture and tradition, hope is perceived as both a central and indispensable aspect of life. Hope is embedded in faith – and faith is grounded in the belief that external forces beyond me are available to me.

Marmor compares the profound difference between this concept of hope and of optimism. Optimism means to believe that everything is heading towards a happy ending. Now while some of us do have an optimistic disposition, and we generally feel that things will work out well, others do not. As Marmor succinctly puts it “some of us wake up in the morning with a WOW, while others wake up with an OY!

It is often difficult to maintain an optimistic outlook in our world. Most news casts and a survey of the lives of those around us make it increasingly difficult to maintain this feeling that in fact everything is working out well.

So while optimism may be a matter of personality and/or disposition, and at times elusive, hope is different because it is a matter of faith.

We have lived, heard or read accounts from the Holocaust which taught us that while we can live for periods without food, water or comfort, we cannot survive even one day without hope.

To hope is to narrow the gap between what is and what could be: between the current reality and the desired future state. For Moses and our people it was the gap between enslavement and freedom. More recently, the late Bob Marley implored us to emancipate ourselves from the mental slavery of self doubt and anxiety as he reminds us that none but ourselves can free our minds.

When we make a decision to grasp the elusive thread that binds us to our desired future we act and we lead without reluctance. We stop just "minding the gap" and start "narrowing the gap" with our words and our actions. We bring others along with us as we, grounded in faith, continue to grasp the threads of hope. Eventually the threads become woven into a bridge. Sometimes we build a bridge of personal change, when we provide stability for children in transition or comfort to those who are grieving. And sometimes we grasp those threads of hope and weave them into a bridge of social change.

A generation ago a group of committed individuals took a leap of faith and hoped that they could build an inclusive and vital Jewish community west of Toronto. And with their committed leadership and those who followed, Solel has flourished. This community has subsequently narrowed the gap for many in our neighbourhood and beyond.

Like Moses, we can choose to move beyond our reluctant leadership, and lead with faith, hope and gratitude. God showed some emotion when Moses didn't heed God's call. Eventually Moses grasped the thread of hope and grounded in faith, became the most powerful hero in biblical history. In our own way, as unobtrusively as we choose, we can too. This past week, each member of Solel received an invitation to our special membership meeting. Our community needs you, and maybe we all just need to collectively hope, and act accordingly.