

Teenagers on the Move: Get out of the Way!
ParashatVay'erei
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Even though Thanksgiving is over and done with and the turkey we all ate is a distant, but warm, memory, I want to tell you a little slice of history – no pun intended – that comes from the Thanksgiving story that you might find interesting.

It seems that on the way over from Europe, the Pilgrims all signed the Mayflower Compact – where they agreed to abide by whatever their leaders set up as government. Our history books often deem it to be a most enlightened government but history itself proved it to be a disaster.

You see, upon arriving, the elders who wrote the Compact decreed that everyone would be assigned a job based on their experience. All that they produced would go into the colony's warehouses. Specialty work would also be assigned by one's experience.

Supplies would be drawn from the warehouse based on everyone's needs.
Sound familiar.

Under this system slackers always appear and multiply. Within 6 months over half the Colony was dead.

The government they set up was clearly not working and so the elders did a “one-eighty.” They devised a scheme where all the land was divided equally and everyone given free rein over it. All that was required was 10% had to be given to the Colony for administrative purposes. Other than that – and going to church on Sunday – you are all on your own. You make your own decisions. Good Luck.

That Fall, the colony actually exported excess crops and items to Europe – for a profit!

It was one of those “Teachable Moments” as they have come to be known by. And what is true in American history is also true in Jewish history.

You see, in our Torah portion God gives a new name for Himself to Moses when he commands Moses to go to the Pharaoh and set the people free. He says to Moses, ***I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name YHWH.*** (Exo 6:3 TNK)

Commentators were quick to pick up on this sentence. After all, they wondered, why did God tell Moses that He appeared to them with a different name. They teach us that the different name of God reflects a different aspect of God’s “Godness.”

Though they are not certain, and either are we, about what El Shaddai means, they offer a suggestion. El is easy. That means God. But what is Shaddai? Some suggest that it has the same root as “breast” – shadayyim. The idea here is

that this is the comforting God, the nursing God, the protective God. And so when God appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, He appeared to them and was perceived by them as a God who took care of them and who looked after them with minimal demands in a very one sided relationship. That, they say, changed with Moses.

When God introduces Himself to Moses as 'YHVH' – Adonai, the name changes because the relationship changes. **This is the teachable moment in Jewish history. God is telling Moses that the warm and fuzzy experience of God was only part of the Divine.** The rest comes from dialogue and interaction. It was a remarkable act of faith on God's part but needed to happen if there was to be a Torah and a commitment by His people to each other and to Him.

Moses is no longer just a messenger to God he is the conduit through which God speaks to the Children of Israel and through which the Children of Israel speak to God. And like any child who grows up and enters adolescence, these children are not content to be led without having a say. The Children of Israel no longer want to be treated as children, either by God or by Moses. As you can imagine, this leads to some interesting challenges.

There are times when Moses is fed up with his flock and there are times when the flock is fed up with Moses. There are times when God is tired of His people and people are tired of God. Tempers flare. Anger burns. And, as is true in most homes with teenagers, doors get slammed, people say things they shouldn't, a bit of time goes by and cooler heads prevail and the relationship

continues to deepen, mature and, ultimately, become one of mutual respect.

What is true in our own homes is also true in the life of the Children of Israel who are now the Teenagers of Israel. When God tells Moses that He is being known to Moses and to Israel by this name, He is really telling him that the relationship is about to change.

But why would God change the relationship? Simple. You see when the Jews left Egypt they would be going to Sinai where the contract made demands on both parties and where each Jew would be responsible for something. But it was a contract that gave the society and the individual a great deal of latitude in practice. Indeed, almost none of our customs we did this evening at service – the lighting of Shabbat candles, the demarcation of which Torah portion to read, the layout of the prayer service or even the structure of a simple blessing – none of that comes from the Torah directly. All that is an evolution of spirit that we as Jews began at Sinai.

It is that evolution of spirit that is both liberating and frustrating. The Torah tells us that Moses was a bit skeptical of being able to free the Jews, he tells God are

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It is usually translated as “downtrodden” and “beaten up” but it could also mean that they are ‘lacking in spirit’ – that they do not have the fundamental knowledge to have the spiritual experiences that a living faith demands. When God tells Moses that the relationship is now maturing, despite the potential for frustration

and misunderstanding, God is telling Moses that he is merely a teacher, not a dictator and that the Jews themselves will turn their lacking spirit into a vibrant spirit. There will be frustration but it will be the frustration of the Children of Israel who need constant protection to the Teenagers of Israel who want to live a life of covenant with God and each other but with stuff that comes from their own souls and not just handed down to them from Sinai.

When we come to realize that our children have come to that moment in their lives, it is a scary revelation and a real nail-biter. God and Moses felt the same way but had to tell each other to stay out of the way and let them grow. Together they will find a way and together they will build something that will endure.

The key, we learn, was to let them create and discover a Judaism that could exist outside the desert. To do that, they all had to get out of each other's way. Radio commentator Earl Nightingale once told the story of an angry father shouting, Why don't you grow up? at his 12-year-old son. The boy struggled to control his tears, but finally blurted out amid the sobs, That's what I'm trying to do!

Since those seminal moments when God told Moses a new name and the Children of Israel became the Teenagers of Israel, our people have been growing and growing up. Lots of mistakes have been made along the way and the end of the journey is never reached. There is never a 'perfect Judaism' because it is so personal and the relationship with God and His people and God and each single

person is always changing and always growing. As people and as individual Jews we started at Sinai but can never make it to the Promised Land, a place without doubt, questions, and frustration. The relationship we have with God demands a constant dialogue. But we grow knowing that that we are part of a bigger journey and that each of us is adding to the Torah of the Jewish people precisely because we have the freedom to do so, a freedom given by God to Moses to us.

The other day in my introduction to Judaism class, I taught the concept of midrash. This is very different than teaching midrash, itself. You see, the concept of midrash is the concept that our dialogue with God is a midrash and that when we engage Torah with our own souls, we are creating new midrash and a new expression of Judaism. It is valid even if it is only one small addition to the edifice we call Torah. Without the freedom to experience it, we would still be stuck in the desert, a place where God and Moses did not want us to stay.

The act of stepping back and giving each other the space to pray, to sing, to worship, and to create midrash is not just Reform Judaism, it is the very essence of Judaism itself. It is an act of withdrawal and letting each other grow. When a scribe comes to the end of a Torah scroll, she traces the final letters, but the community fills them in. This is a tremendous act of *tzimtzum*, of stepping back to make room for others, of letting go of what is most precious and entrusting it to someone else. Moses and God did this when they said to us all “time to grow.”

Every time we pray with sincerity, every time we engage our texts with enthusiasm and every time we grow Jewishly we are adding to our relationship with Adonai – the God who gave us the freedom to create. God and Moses got out of our way and set us on a path of faith that is discovered and created, not hand-delivered and packaged for us. As such, it is more precious than any gift because it is authentic. And because it is authentic, it is truly sacred. It is that sacredness that we seek and on this Shabbat give thanks to God and to Moses for the freedom to seek it.

Shabbat Shalom.