

**A Year of Encompassing Torah**



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**Parashat Shemot**

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing  
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi  
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth  
and **the thoughts of my heart**  
find favor before You, G-d,  
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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**Parashat Shemot  
Rabbi Steven J. Rubenstein**

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Each year I have given a gift to every family in my congregation as a way to celebrate the Jewish New Year focused on a certain theme. I remember the first time that I had attempted such an undertaking. I found a donor who helped underwrite the cost of presenting people with a disposable camera. Throughout the holiday I spoke about capturing the God moments in our lives.

I spoke about those precious moments in my own life where I saw evidence of the Presence of God. Last year I had the opportunity to expound on some of my own photographs to my chaplaincy group for an assignment that asked us to present our theology to one another. What a surprise it was to me when one of the other three members of my class presented his own photographs.

As part of the gift I asked people to share with me the photographs that they took, and the stories that went along with them. Although I did not receive any photographs, I delight when someone approaches me and begins, "You know those cameras you gave us a couple of years ago..." You know that a lovely story is sure to follow. Even though more than five years have passed, it seems like just a couple to many who remember the impact of that project. I am sure that the new technology of digital photography has increased our capacity to capture many more of these moments to remember and ponder over.

The following year I introduced the congregation to Harry Potter and the Mirror of Erised (which is "desire" spelled backwards). Every family

received a compact mirror that had the following quote on the cover: "*What we see in others is another way of looking at ourselves...*" The challenge for that year was looking at ourselves -- and others -- to find the image of God that is hidden in who we are and to determine what does Jewish look like.

As the secular new year approaches I am wanting to take another look in that special mirror that I handed out, or any other mirror that might be readily available. This is in keeping with this year's theme for my congregation to find a spiritual direction for ourselves, whichever way we may wander in our lives. I was reading the final chapters of Rev. Robert Fulghum's latest book, "*What On Earth Have I Done?*" Depending on which word you accentuate will determine how you might integrate many of the affirmations that he presents to us. In this one particular story, Robert Fulghum tells his reading audience about a man he met at a convention that took place on the island of Crete.

Alexander Papaderos was his name, and he built a place where peaceful conversation could take place on an island that had suffered grand atrocities at the hands of the German soldiers who occupied Crete during World War II.

At the conclusion of two weeks of lectures at this island retreat center, Alexander Papaderos stood up from his place at the back of the room and proceeded to the front where he asked the participants, "Are there any questions?" Several moments of silence ensued. Finally, Robert Fulghum raised his hand and asked a question of his own in return, "Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?"

It is a question that many of us think about asking a speaker in order to trip him or her up. However, for this particular individual, it was a question that was to be taken seriously. He reached into his back pocket and withdrew from the leather billfold a mirror the size of a quarter. Its edges had been smoothed by time. Dr. Papaderos then began to reflect on its significance.

He shared with the participants that he acquired the mirror when he was a young child. A mirror from a German motorcycle had been broken near his village in the remote mountains of Crete. Curious, he tried to put all of the pieces together. When he couldn't, he kept this one

piece and with a stone, smoothed its edges. He began to play with this mirror piece. One of the things that he discovered is that he could reflect the light from the sun into the dark places where the sun would never shine -- "In deep crevices and dark closets and behind walls... in the most inaccessible places I could find."

What started out as a child's game became what *he* considered a metaphor for *his* life's work. When he took out his mirror in times of idleness, he came to realize that he was neither the light nor the source of the light. Rather, "the light of truth, understanding, and knowledge" is what he reflected into the dark places that occupied his life. What he learned is that when he used his mirror to reflect the sun's light he was able to diminish some of that darkness that was obscuring the hearts of some of the people whom he met during his journey through life.

Now I have one more story to add to my gift to others as I discover the meaning behind my own existence and my work in the community not only as rabbi, but also as chaplain. If I can use myself as a mirror to others, helping them to see the image of God in themselves at a point in their life when they appear to be most vulnerable, then just maybe I have succeeded in redirecting the light that emanates from the Divine Presence, the one that guides each one of us in our spiritual journeys.

This week we read from a new book of the Torah, We begin "Sefer Shemot," which in Hebrew means "names." We begin by recounting all of the people who came down to Egypt during the famine, and remained there long after the danger was over. Several generations later, their lives become imperiled by a Pharaoh who did not know of Joseph and his efforts to save an entire nation from starvation.

I focus our attention on the appearance of Moses, who is exiled from Egypt following his discovery of his own roots as an Israelite, setting into motion his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. In the midst of his discovery of a bush that was not being consumed by the fire that burned within it, a voice spoke to him, telling him what tasks await his return to Egypt and to the people he left suffering there.

God says to Moses, "*I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded*

*their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings.' "* (Shmot/Ex 3:7)

Looking at the Hebrew of this verse we discover that *"I have marked well"* is composed of the doubling of the word "to see" – *"ra'oh ra'iti."* Perhaps a more accurate way to translate what the verse is teaching us is *"I have surely seen... their affliction...I know of their sufferings."*

Opening up one's eyes requires more than just shedding light on the matter. It is also a function of opening one's heart to really know what is happening when another person is frightened or in despair, lacking hope. In order to help Moses achieve a similar ability to have compassion, before he approached the burning bush Moses was instructed to remove his shoes so that he could feel the earth beneath him, each pebble and stone and how it hurts to walk when the feet are unprotected.

What Moses teaches us is how each one of us can become more humble in our interactions with one another, how to be more fully open to the reality of another's suffering. By opening up ourselves, by using ourselves as a mirror to reflect God's light into the dark parts of another's life is just one small gesture we can make to bring hope into the world of another person.

One does not need to be a chaplain to truly understand the power that each of us possesses, to tap into the emotional and spiritual needs of those who suffer. To walk in God's ways, to follow a spiritual path, is no more difficult than grabbing a mirror and reflecting the light that already exists in this world and focusing it on the areas that need it most.

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**Sermon for Saturday  
Parashat Shemot 5768**

**I Feel the Earth Move Under My Feet**

Last Passover I made the suggestion in my bulletin article that we try on a new ritual at our seders. I recommended that we all remove our shoes before reading from the haggadah. In the Torah we are told when Moses approached the burning bush, a voice called out to him instructing him to remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. By removing our shoes at the seder table, we not only remember Moses and his role in the redemption of the Israelites, we acknowledge our own willingness to feel the ground beneath our feet in recognition of it, too, being holy.

Approximately six months prior to Passover, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we read in the synagogue the story of Abraham and Isaac who went on a three day journey to a place that God would show to them. Although the text raises many questions regarding the blind faith of Abraham, one of the questions that is often overshadowed by the ending of the story is what happens along the way. How does Abraham know that "this is the place" that God has intended for him to take Isaac? In three days' time I am sure that the two of them and the servants and the donkeys bearing the load of their camping gear passed many sites that could have been just perfect. Yet, there is no record of any other place along the way as having that same feeling as the mountain that Abraham saw from a distance on the third day of their outing. What marked this place as "holy" – distinct, special, sacred!?!

The Torah itself does not tell us directly. The lack of information in the Bible leaves us guessing. What we are told is that Abraham and Isaac go up alone, leaving the servants with the donkey below. Midrash, biblical stories written centuries after the Torah was in existence, help us to fill in some of the missing details. When Abraham approached what is later named as Mount Moriah, he senses that this mountain is indeed different from the others that they passed along the way. In his excitement, he asks his traveling companions if they saw what he saw on the mountain – from a distance. Perhaps it was a cloud that had descended on the top or some other tell-tale sign of its sacred properties! When they answered, "no," when Isaac answered "yes," Abraham knew that they would need to remain behind because of their lack of vision and insight.

As Author, Sandy Sasso suggests in her book on midrashim, "God's Echo,":

"The midrash is not just about what happened in Genesis; it is about what was happening in the lives of the generation of the rabbis who wrote this narrative. Overburdened by demands of everyday life, outside pressures, and fears, the people focused primarily on survival. There were no doubt trials and ordeals when God seemed absent. The rabbis sought to help them see beyond the daily grind, the drudgery of routine; to find the transcendent in the commonplace."

The story raises similar issues in our own lives. Are we just as capable as Abraham to see the sacred as being separate from the mundane? "Do we pass places and ignore their significance? Do we move from moment to moment, easily distracted, never fully present?" Most importantly, if we do live in such a way that we are always in a hurry to get somewhere, what is it that we miss seeing along the way?

In this week's Torah reading we are offered another opportunity to see the difference between the sacred and the mundane – as witnessed by Moses when a sheep wanders away from the herd that he was shepherding. He comes across a thorn bush that was on fire. Being in the wilderness, it is something that was not uncommon for him to see. What distinguished this thorn bush from the many others that he had seen before was the fact that it was not being consumed by the flames. In order for him to recognize that fact required from Moses the time to notice that something different, special was happening before him. Once he recognized the holiness of what he was observing, did the voice of God call out to him to remove his shoes because he was standing on holy ground.

In another midrash, Rabbi Joshua ben Karchah is asked by a heathen, "Why did God speak to Moses from a lowly thorn bush when He could have chosen a mighty carob or sycamore tree?" Rather than minimizing his question, the sage offered the heathen the response that the selection of the thorn bush comes to show us that there is no space that is free of the divine presence, not even a commonplace thorn bush.

What distinguishes Rabbi Joshua ben Karchah in this midrash is that he does not dismiss the question of the heathen as mere mockery. Rather, it becomes an opportunity for him to teach him and us something about God's nature. According to Rabbi Sasso:

"God does not choose a fruit tree or a shade tree as the place of revelation, but a small bush, one with thorns, precisely because it is likely to be passed over, avoided. God's presence is everywhere, even in the places where we are least likely to look. There are no signposts along the way that say "watch out for holy spots" or "slow down for divine revelation" or "be prepared to stop for sacred presence"... We often don't notice the sacred because we, unlike Moses (and Abraham) don't turn aside to see..."

The lesson Rabbi Joshua tries to teach us is that none of us need to be a Moses to be able to see the sacred in the mundane – if we only knew how to open our eyes to the Divine Presence in our own lives. All that we need to do is to stop long enough and pay attention, and God is there. As our ancestor Jacob said, following a dream of his own on the night when he was fleeing for safety after stealing his brother Esau's blessing from their father, "God was in this place and I, I did not know." He was too busy attending to the fear that was in his heart to attend to the safety of knowing that God was with him in his troubles. One interpreter claims that the ladder that he dreamt about, the one upon which angels ascended and then descended was a rescue ladder, and Jacob failed to ascend it when given the opportunity to do so. The moment passed. It was too late by the time that he awoke. And the likelihood of him having a similar dream becomes remote.

I look at my own life and I wonder how many opportunities I have squandered to attach myself to the sacred – out of fear, out of doubt, out of being too busy to see the signs. In my rush to get from one place to the next in the most expedient manner, how much did I miss along the way, not only with my eyes but also with my other senses? Most of all how many moments have passed by without my recognizing that I, too, am standing on holy ground and I need to take off my shoes to truly appreciate the impact

of the moment, and feel the pebbles from the dirt.

The choice is ours – to stay on the ground sleeping or to ascend the ladder and see the ground beneath our feet from a divine perspective; or to stand below a mountain in the shadow of its height, or to lift our eyes and see the holiness that surrounds its summit; or to miss the beauty and the symmetry that is a part of the lowly thorn bush and the voice that speaks to us from within its branches by our unwillingness to notice its presence for other things in our surroundings.

May our naked feet guide us not only along the right paths in this world. May they also inform our feelings as we differentiate between the sands of the sea from the mud and clay, and the rocks that hide in the dirt. May our eyes linger long enough to see the holiness in each of these things as we strive towards our goal of making meaning from our struggles, knowing that God is with us with each step that we take upon holy ground.

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**Parashat Sh'mot**  
**By Linda Shriner-Cahn**

In memory of my father, whose yahrzeit is the 24th of Tevet.

In this week's Torah portion, Sh'mot, we once more are given all of the names of the sons of Israel, linking this second book of the Torah to the first. Their names are brimming with meaning.

Sh'mot means "names." Names are critical in understanding who we are and how we relate to the world. It is Adam who names the animals, giving him a sense of dominion over his surroundings. The process of naming something is empowering. For a brief moment we are granted insight into the power of a name. When we name our children we invest the future of that child into their name.

Every week as we make Kiddush (the blessing of sanctification of the Shabbat, recited over a cup of wine) on Friday night we recount the

separation of the seventh day from the rest of the week and its inherent holiness (Genesis 2:2-3). We essentially rename the day and infuse it with holiness.

To know the name gives us insight, or so we believe. Our names proclaim our identity to the world, so what do we make of this Torah portion - where names are at its core? So much occurs within this portion that it is difficult to know where to focus our attention. Possibly that is just the point.

Although the portion is filled with dramatic moments, the pivotal moment occurs at the burning bush. The bush was burning and unscathed (Exodus 3:3) as Moses takes note of this marvel. He turns aside, he seems to "change direction," as Rashi observes. Ibn Ezra says it is more than a physical change in direction or turning, but to "leave one's place and go in another direction," implying that the moment goes beyond the material, signaling an emotional or spiritual change in direction. As we read the text, just like Moses, we stop and take note of this unusual sight, not quite fully aware that if he did not pause to look, neither would we, granting us an opportunity to change direction as well, allowing us to take in where we are and where we are going.

Here, too, we learn of the importance of names. The power and complexity of this moment is further intensified as God reveals another of God's names: Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh - but what does it mean? This is the name that is just beyond our grasp. Even as we think we understand, another interpretation reveals itself. It is the root of the never to be uttered name of the Eternal. This moment gives Moses the power to go forward, but what does it reveal to us. What is this name?

We are taught that every translation is an interpretation carrying with it a particular point of view. Is its meaning "I am that I am," a name that at first glance is impenetrable and monolithic, or is it something more elusive, even more mysterious, indicative of our ever-evolving relationship with the Source of all Being. Another translation is "I will be what I will be," thereby creating the sense of the elusive quality of the Divine, an interpretation that offers little comfort to those of us who are in immediate need of solace.

Everett Fox translates it, "I will be-there howsoever I will be-there." This translation/ interpretation could resonate more deeply as it puts the onus upon us to recognize and acknowledge God's presence in the world. We, like Moses, are being asked to turn aside, to pay attention, and, if we do, possibly we will be able to recognize God's presence in the world.

Ultimately this name, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh," is a prism through which we can understand God's presence in the world and in our lives . It is a name that accepts us where we stand in relation to the Divine, and yet allows us to grapple with the enormity of God's presence in the world. The work of reaching out to the Divine is ours. Recognizing God's presence in our lives, may we be granted the ability to turn aside and to see.

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