

D'rasha for Rosh ha-Shana Morning I 2007

Eva Freund

As a young man Moses stuttered, then he found his voice.

The multitudes have been standing for a very long period of time on the plains of Moab. They have been listening to Moses recount their history together. They have been presented with his vision for their future. We do not know if it was rainy season or the season of hot winds. We **do** know that Moses has to prepare the people to cross over the river without him. Preparing them involves creating a national identity, creating an infrastructure, and providing a framework for living.

By re-telling the history of their life in Egypt and their life during the more than forty years of wandering he is fostering their sense of unity. By placing emphasis on the gifts God has given them he is fostering their sense of being God's people. His earlier development of a multi-level system of civil leaders created an infrastructure. His annunciation of the laws and the covenant fosters their framework for living. Moses has been their leader, their judge, their teacher and their parent.

This is the setting of today's Torah parsha.

Instead of God having a monologue with Moses, as occurred at Sinai, Moses is having a monologue with the people. In his monologue, Moses, by identifying all those assembled before him by their role in the community, is demonstrating that each one of them, including the women, is needed in order to have a *community*. Moses entreats them to enter into a covenant with Adonoi and to take an oath of fealty.

This first portion of the monologue ends with Moses stating that this covenant is being offered "not to you alone ... and (also) with the one who is not here today."

Traditionally, this has been interpreted to refer to those who have not yet been born.

Moses insists that the commandment he gives them, now, is not too burdensome. This commandment is -- *to love Adonoi, to walk in the way of Adonoi, and to keep the commandments, laws and regulations of Adonoi.*

The monologue culminates with Moses calling the heavens and the earth as witnesses to the covenant. Finally, he exhorts them to “choose life.” Perhaps he is urging them to choose to follow the commandment in order to have a quality life.

In doing so Moses urges them to look around ... to look at each other ... and to feel a shared commitment to an existing covenant. He invites them to relinquish the roles and the social segregation those roles represent ... and to understand that they are much more than a community of convenience ... that they are connected to each other as well as being connected to each of us here today. Just as we are connected with each other, we are connected to every Jew who ever was and ever will be.

Knowing that they were part of a communal family required that there be a shared experience and a personal commitment. This shared experience became their reality. Thus -- *knowing* something was not just the process of observing and analyzing. *Knowing* was actually having the experience.

Moses *knew* that these people would not always keep the covenant. He had the experience of returning from Mt. Sinai with the first set of tablets and finding that the men had made a golden calf to worship. He expected that the worship of false gods would be their primary violation. As the years passed the people would find different ways to violate the covenant. Sometimes they selectively decided to ignore one or more of the commandments. At other times they followed the commandments in one part of their lives but not other parts.

With the passing of the generations the simple commandment uttered by Moses -- *to love Adonoi and to walk in the way of Adonoi* became submerged to the many religious requirements that evolved from the religious authorities. The intent of the original

commandment became lost to many. And, instead of living a life based on faith the people struggled to live by the many laws governing worship that they had been given. They did so in their misguided attempt to find faith.

In doing so they committed two sins. The first sin was the sin of “**missing the mark**” – of not living up to the intent of that commandment. For this sin they could atone by sacrifice. Their second sin was “**choosing to ignore the commandment**”. There was no sacrifice that would atone for the sin of choice.

However, it was the sin of **hypocrisy** that drove Isaiah into the streets and alleys of Jerusalem. Isaiah confronted those who prayed with grand words and made a great spectacle of their worship of God. He confronted those who wore their religion like a badge of pride. He confronted those who fasted during the daylight hours and made much ado about their suffering as they proudly proclaimed their own piety. Fasting for them became a badge of righteousness rather than a means for expressing sorrow and repentance.

It was the sin of **hypocrisy** -- that led the people to fast while their hearts were immersed in wickedness – distracted by anger and bitterness toward each other.

These hypocrites wore the religious garb. They spoke the religious language and they followed the religious practices as dictated by the authorities. However, their actions were solely for show; and because they were only for show Adonoi would not and could not accept their atonement.

Isaiah, as the representative of God, neither approved of these people nor these activities. Many listened to his words because he had credibility. Throughout the years Isaiah had access to and influence with the senior members of the royal house. Yet he continued to be the very outspoken voice of the common people.

Isaiah was angered by the way the common people were treated by those in power. He demanded that the hungry be fed, the naked be clothed, and the homeless be given shelter.

These were not the only things that were targets for his wrath. He spoke of the sinners who sought to gain from their oppression of others; of the hands that held bribes; the ears that failed to hear the running of blood; and the eyes that were shut against evil (Isaiah 33:14-15).

These words were not unlike the directive in Zechariah (8:16-17) – speak the truth with your neighbor and execute truth and peace within your gates...do not devise evil in your hearts against your neighbors and do not love the false oath.

And in Ecclesiastes (5:7) we read that we are not to “marvel” when we see the oppression of the poor. Nor are we to “marvel” when we see the violent prevention of justice and righteousness in the State. For these are the things that God hates.

In every generation and in every country there has been a violent prevention of justice and righteousness. In the mid part of the 20th century there were religious authorities of several faiths who cooperated with Nazi Germany in its implementation of the “final solution.” But where were the voices rising up *against* Nazi Germany?

During that same period of time there were Jews in America who urged the American government not to get involved in *that* war. There were upper class Jews in this country who lobbied the US Government to turn away the several ships carrying Jewish refugees because they did not want Europe’s riff-raff to spoil this great land. [Documentation, Holocaust Museum] But where were the voices rising up *in support* of the Jewish riff-raff who later died in the Holocaust?

It was only 50 years ago, in this country, that it was acceptable to refuse to hire Jews. It was only 50 years ago that it was illegal for a white person to marry someone of the

Chinese (on the west coast) or Negro race (most states). But where were the voices rising up in protest these injustices

Today, in this country, religious leaders use their pulpits to preach a legalistic version of values while their own behavior is antithetical to these same biblical values. I say to you that religious leaders commit the sin of **hypocrisy** when they claim that same-sex marriage will destroy family values while they themselves engage in adulterous affairs; that religious leaders commit the sin of **hypocrisy** when when they claim that same-sex marriage will destroy the institution of marriage while they ignore their own families; and that religious leaders commit the sin of **hypocrisy** when they claim that we cannot possibly be good parents while they molest children.

Today, in this country, we bear witness to the **hypocrisy** of legislatures and courts that believe it is acceptable to have a society where Queer people do not have equal civil rights.

Today, we bear witness to the **hypocrisy** of those who believe it is acceptable for members of our military to kill, rape, and torture; however, it is not acceptable for our military to speak of loving someone of the same sex.

Today, we bear witness to the hubris of those who believe that equal rights are special rights.

Today, there are those who hold elected federal and state office but do not represent us. **They** are the ones who believe we do not need protection from hate crimes. **They** are the ones who believe that we do not need protection from all forms of discrimination. **They** are the ones who do not recognize our relationships for purposes of citizenship. **They** are the ones who believe that we should not be foster, adoptive, or even natural parents. **They** are the ones who are made uncomfortable by our very existence.

We do not need to educate them to understand who we really are. **We** do not need to show them that we really do have worth. What we **need** to do is to **replace** them with those who understand that **God requires** us “only to do justly to love mercy, and to walk humbly with (our) God [Michah 6:8].

Moses found **his** voice on the journey through the wilderness. But have we found our voice? And when we do find it – we need to remove the hypocrites from office by supporting their opponents not only with our money but also with our time, our feet, and our voices. It will take the collective energy of all of us and all the communities to which we belong to accomplish our goal of placing in office those who believe in the intent of biblical law.

We are not the first group, nor will we be the last to be told that what we demand is against God’s law. Those struggling to secure the vote for women, those struggling to secure equal rights for blacks, and those advocating equal pay for equal work were maligned in the same way.

They prevailed because they were willing to engage in **collective action**. Those women and those blacks understood that if they did not stand up for themselves... if they did not speak truth to those in power... then they had no right to expect anyone else to do it for them.

Today, God will help us find our voices so we need not be afraid to speak truth to power.

Have a righteous fast today and then speak truth to power every day.

©Eva Freund, September 13,2007

