

Parshat Shmot
December 21, 2013
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

I did two very entertaining things this week – I saw a Broadway Show, Pippin. I have been meaning to go for some time and figured I better go soon as I am not sure how long this revival will be around. The other thing I did was study this week's torah portion. And to my confusion – they seemed to have the opposite message and I felt the need to sort this out – and well – sadly (or happily) for you this is the medium I chose to do so .

The current production of Pippin has a lot going for it –it is one of those wonderful shows only Broadway can do – the magic and circus theme is very clever and very entertaining. On the down side, for those of us who remember the original production back in 1973, well no one will do it better than Ben Vereen.

For those of you who have not seen the play, Pippin and his father are loosely based on real historical figures – King Charlemagne and his son. The story is about the boy prince seeking his fulfillment. As the son of the king the world is his oyster and he tries various avenues to find fulfillment: the world of academics, the world of glory through battle, the world of the flesh – wine women and song – the world of politics as he kills his father and takes over the throne to rule the world. And none of these bring him satisfaction. In the end it is the love of a woman, and settling down to a modest life that seems to make him happy. In his concluding song he sings that “while settling down may be mundane and boring, if he’s never tied to anything, he’ll never be free.” And thus in giving up his search for extraordinary purpose for the simplest most ordinary life, he finds the fulfillment and happiness that he seeks.

Nice play – my problem was that the torah portion for this week seems to be about the exact opposite. This week we began reading the second of the five books of Moses - the Book of Shmot - the Book of Exodus. In today's parasha, we are introduced to Moses – and simple man, who by all accounts is happy with his simple life – until God comes along and tries to convince him that he is destined for an extraordinary life of purpose.

Pippin had to be convinced to give up his conviction that he was destined for greatness and learn to be happy with a simple life. Moses has to be convinced to give up his simple life and learn to be happy with greatness.

How confusing.

The torah captures this deals with one of the most famous episodes in all of the Bible - the story of the burning bush. We are told of the conditions of Israel's life under Egyptian slavery, we are introduced to Moses and told a little about his younger years. And quickly the torah focuses on God's call to Moshe in the wilderness - the story of the bush that burns but is not consumed. Out of the bush the voice of God calls to Moses and says: “Come...I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites from Egypt.”

Now, I would imagine that it is not easy to argue with God - but Moses does so. God challenges Moses and Moses politely refuses the challenge! And if you look carefully at the Torah reading for this morning you will see that Moses refuses not once, but he refuses at least

four times! Four times, he rejects the challenge, the task and the destiny that God seeks to place upon him.

Reaction #1 by Moses- his first reaction to God's call: "*Mi anochi ki alech el parah...*" "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" Pippin would never have reacted this way – he had no doubt that he was privileged and believed that greatness was his birthright. Not Moses – God has to convince him.

God though is a persistent fellow, and assures Moses that He will be with him in this endeavor - is that assurance enough? Apparently not as Moses demurs yet again: "...What shall I say to the Egyptians? Even should I go, and I am not at all sure that I should, what would I say to them? Who will I tell them has sent me, in whose name do I speak?"

God responds to Moses objections but he still is hesitant as he protests a third time: "*V'heyne lo yaaminu li...*" "But, what if they do not believe me...?" "*V'lo yishm'u b'koli*, "what if they won't follow me?"

God patiently responds to these protestations and then Moses hesitates for yet a FOURTH time! And the fourth time he says: "*lo ish dvarim anochi...*" "Please O' Lord, I have never been a man of words, wither in times past or now....I am slow of speech and slow of tongue!"

After this fourth objection God begins to lose his patience, as it were, and He puts an end to the discussion by stating rather emphatically (we are dealing with God after all - you don't want to push Him too far!) - But at last God says: "You will go, and I will be with you, and I will grant you the necessary power. Period end of sentence, end of discussion.

Now I find this exchange fascinating. And so apparently do many of our sages who studied this section over the ages. Some say that this hesitation of Moses, this rejection of his call to leadership, was a function of his humility and a good thing and they praised him for it. Other commentators saw this as a deficiency in Moses character and they criticized him for his lack of trust and faith in God.

God, we would argue, is by definition, a pretty good judge of character. If God chooses you; you are chosen - period. As the rest of Shmot unfurls we learn exactly what it was the God saw in Moses - we see that Moses was chosen because of his unique abilities, his charismatic leadership, his passion for justice, his moral excellence. He was singularly qualified. There was no other person of that generation who could undertake that mission of liberation for the people of Israel. None other could impart to that people God's teaching of justice, equality and human understanding. But, what I find most intriguing is not God's judgment but Moses inability to accept that judgment. We, who already know the rest of the story - so I don't think I am ruining it for anyone we know that God was right in his assessment of Moses. We know it, God knows it - it seems that the only one who does not know it is Moses himself - and that is what intrigues me. Moses can't say yes. We sense his fear, his awe, his sense of inadequacy. He feels himself unequal to God's task. God sees his possibilities, but Moses can only see his own shortcomings and his deficiencies and he believes that they are just too great. I do not believe that Moses reaction is an expression of false humility- I believe that he believes that he is truly unworthy of this sacred mission.

So there you have it – Moses destined for greatness – but hampered by his low estimation of his capabilities, and Pippin destined for ordinariness and hampered by his delusions of grandeur. Both seem to center on the issue of human potential and the doubts of the human mind that make it hard for us to reach our appropriate potential.

There is a wonderful midrash on the opening verse to the bible. We all know the verse, *Bereishit*...In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..." This wonderful rabbinic midrash reads the verse slightly changed: God created the heavens and the earth...in the beginning." *Breishit, bara adonay et hashamayim v'et haaretz* - God created these things in their beginnings that is to say God created the world only in its beginning stage of development. It is our task to perfect the world and along with it to perfect ourselves and our own God given potential.

Why did Moses reject the call of God? Remember what he said? *Mi anochi*... "Who am I? How can I take on this enormous task?" Moses underestimated his own talents and capacity. And as a result he sought to evade his own mission and fate. Like Pippin – Moses could not get a handle on himself – if Pippin thought too much of himself, Moses thought too little.

The challenge for each of us is to get this right. Moses had to learn not to be so humble – he had to find a little Pippin in himself – for on some level nothing great will ever be accomplished without the arrogance of believing in yourself. Abraham Maslow understood this when he wrote: "That in order to invent or to create, you must have the arrogance of creativeness." But, if you have only the arrogance without the humility, then you cannot lead. – So Moses became the perfect man because he was fundamentally a humble man who came to believe that great things were possible.

And Pippin too finds his balance – as he comes to learn humility and achieves happiness when he learns to give up some of his grandiose dreams. Moses was overly humble but thankfully God was there to teach him better. Pippin was overly confident and had the good fortune of meeting a woman who taught him humility. If Moses would have followed his humility we would all still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Moses had to temper his humility with the arrogance of his human potential and as a result he changed the world and all subsequent human history. Likewise, Pippin learned humility and found happiness and fulfillment for himself. Maslow writes that we must all be aware not only of the godlike possibilities within, but also of the human limitations that mark our existence. Moses had to learn of his godlike possibilities, Pippin had to learn of his human limitations - and we can learn from both of them.

I am reminded of an oft-quoted Hasidic admonition, that each person should have two pockets in his coat, and in each he should carry a slip of paper containing an ancient Hebrew quotation. In one pocket, the slip reads: "For my sake the world was created." In the other pocket, it says, "I am but dust and ashes." If you feel too lonely, too inadequate, too inferior, then reach into the one pocket and read: "For my sake the world was created." This is the pocket that Moshe Rabeynu reached into and as a result he changed Jewish and human history. If your arrogance becomes too great, reach in the other pocket and be reminded that you are but dust and ashes. This is the pocket that Pippin ultimately reached into and he transformed himself. There is yet one more Hasidic story - I have quoted it often - maybe too often - put it is so appropriate, I really must use it to conclude. It is the story of a saintly man named Zusya. As the end of his life drew near, he turned to his students and said: "As I think about the judgment

of the world to come, there are some questions I am prepared to answer but there is one that fills me with fear and trembling. When I reach the gates of heaven and when I am summoned to give a final accounting for my life I am not afraid of many of the questions I will be asked. If God asks me, Zusya why were you not more like Moses, I will know what to respond. I will simply reply, I did not have the greatness of Moses. And if I am asked why was I not more like Akiva, I will reply, I didn't have the brilliance of Akiva. But there is one question that I fear - I am most afraid that God will ask me, Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya? Why did you not achieve the best that you could have been? And then what shall I answer?"

Each of us is born with God-given talents and human limitations. None of us should use either of them as an excuse or a stumbling block to prevent us from becoming what we can be. We must all struggle to find the balance that will enable us to be all that we can be. Moses succeeded and so did Pippin. What about us? Our play hasn't been made yet. May your answer reflect the greatness with which God has endowed you and the humility to achieve it.