

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Va'area

Ok, I have had it. I cannot stomach this stuff any more. The great Pat Robertson has done it again. He backed the late Jerry Falwell on September 11, 2001, when Falwell asserted that God removed the protective veil from the United States allowing us to be attacked because of ... of all things, the United States Supreme Court (and a whole bunch of liberals to boot). He now claims that the earthquake that just hit Haiti was due to a pact with the devil that Haitians made in order to get rid of French rule many years ago. As Rabbi, I stand firm. If this is how God acts, then I want no part of religion. These are the behaviors of a two year old throwing a temper tantrum, not a God who loves and creates the miracles we celebrate in our lives. I also refuse to buy into the notion that a loving God will use our suffering as "teaching moments" for humanity. That we can use other peoples' suffering to prove our own special value seems itself to be a deal with the devil. People who suffer ... suffer, and it is our job to help them heal. God was not in this earthquake, but we will see God's response in the tremendous aid already coming to the rescue. People like Pat Robertson do more to tear apart our world than heal it.

It is most poignant that this story should be before us this week. In last week's Torah portion, Moses went to Pharaoh and plead for the release of Israel. Annoyed with Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh did not only not let Israel go free, but he made the task they were forced to complete even more difficult. More Israelites would be punished for fewer would be able to accomplish the assigned tasks under the burden of the new oppressive rules. Angry with God for this suffering, Moses takes God to task. Last week's portion ends with Moses' tirade against God for not only making this disaster happen, but for having made him the messenger.

The portion this week begins in an interesting way. "I revealed myself to Abraham as El Shaddai, but to you, I have made my true self known as YHVH." Nearly every commentator I have seen argues that God all but rebukes Moses for his lack of faith. God effectively says, in their estimation, "I know what I am doing and have Pharaoh right where I want him!" I wonder if we are reading the same text sometimes. Starting with the belief that the God of the Bible is not God (for limiting God to this text would be blasphemy - making God finite and not infinite), I have to think about the El Shaddai concept. Why would Abraham not get to know God's true essence? Face it, God has really no history with people in the Bible until Abraham. If a voice in the wind called to him it might not have mattered. If YHVH as defined as a form of being "God says to Moses "I exist."), would Abraham have listened? No, I think God introduces God's self as the mighty God to get Abraham's attention, no differently than we tend to over do it, a little, when we try to get someone special's attention. Moses, having a history, knows God as God is.

I think God begins this portion by saying to Moses, "Look, you know me better than anyone else, even Abraham. I am not the God of might and power - I am the God that is. What we have done will harden Pharaoh's heart; he will be angry. We have challenged the school yard bully who will only get angrier before he gets better. I know this. We are going to have to fight together to make him understand that he cannot abuse these people." Quite simply, God says to Moses, "I need your help Moses, for making this work will take our partnership."

Thousands of pages have been written questioning the notion that God could have just changed Pharaoh's mind (as an omnipotent being) and made him let us go, but did not. Thousands more exist arguing how an omnipresent God could have let us become enslaved to begin with. If God really does encourage horrors or even just let horrors happen, of what value is faith? Can we really be satisfied believing that our suffering is ok "since God willed it?" Perhaps it is time for us to have the conversation with God that the Bible tells us that Moses had. Perhaps we need to hear God remind us that God "is", not "is this" or "is that." I see the authors of the Bible constantly reminding us that perhaps it is our own idolatry that believes that God controls everything and chooses only one people or one faith. The Bible reminds us that we are God's partners. Nothing happens where we do not act. Throughout the prophetic texts, we are told that failure of faith roots not in our failure at ritual belief, rather, it is in our failure to

heed God's command to take care of and show respect for each other and the world around us. We keep talking about God's ego and God's need to be obeyed, but in the end, the prophets tell us to stop doing empty ritual and turn our hearts to each other. This is a tough journey Moses has embarked upon. The rest of this Torah story will see us in difficult situations. For these stories to have value; for the Exodus to have lasting meaning, we have to first understand that Pharaoh's like Pat Robertson still exist, religious bullies who somehow think they are better and bigger than God. It must be our sacred task to teach what the prophets tell us God really wants – we need to free each other from the madness and help each other heal. Shabbat Shalom.