



When You Discover You're Like No Other • Parshat Va'era

Imagine your world suddenly covered with frogs jumping on every surface: “Aaron held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt” (Ex. 6:10). It would be absolutely revolting. The God of this slave people was capable of much aggravation and destruction, the Egyptians finally realized. Nevertheless, Pharaoh, in this week’s Torah reading, sent his magicians the task of replicating this plague, ironically creating even more amphibian havoc: “But the magician-priests did the same with their spells, and brought frogs upon the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:2).

Although the replication worked, something else was not working. Pharaoh’s magicians clearly had no idea how to stop the problem they themselves created. In desperation, Pharaoh called Aaron and Moses: “Plead with God to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to God” (Ex. 8:4). Pharaoh was willing to make a concession if the plague stopped. Moses approached this request wisely. No longer would he cave into Pharaoh’s demands immediately. Moses wanted to raise the stakes by showing Pharaoh the degree to which the Israelites had the upper hand.

Moses asked Pharaoh exactly when to stop the plague: “And Moses said to Pharaoh, ‘You may have this triumph over me: *for what time shall I plead on behalf of you* and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, to remain only in the Nile?’” (Ex. 8:5). Unlike the magicians who could create a mess but not

extricate themselves from it, Moses’ God had such control that the very hour to stop the plague could be determined in advance.

Pharaoh strangely did not ask for the frogs to disappear immediately. “For tomorrow,” he replied. And [Moses] said, ‘As you say—that you may know that there is none like our God.’” Moses added a flourish that offered the reason for the plagues in the first place: to show Pharaoh who was really in control. It was not enough to name God. Pharaoh had to know God. He could even set his watch to God’s signs and wonders. Seforno sums it up neatly: “In order that you will recognize the difference between what your sorcerers are able to do and what God is capable of doing.”

There is no one like God – *ain od milvado*. That is made clear in this week’s sedra, *Va’era*.

I only truly understood the significance of this statement when I visited Egypt myself at the tender age of nineteen. Walking through the Temple of Karnak near Luxor and the acres of ancient ruins that were a testament to the power of polytheism was the first time I glimpsed what the ancient Israelites were up against. The statues towered over me. I pondered how difficult it must have been to erect all these altars and prayer spaces and how hard it was to believe in an alternate spiritual reality. Was it my people, I wondered with each step, who were forced to construct these buildings to honor visible gods all the while holding on to an invisible God that Pharaoh failed to acknowledge?

The statement of God's singularity and uniqueness appears elsewhere in *Tanakh*. In Jeremiah, we read, "There is none like You, O Lord; You are great, and great is Your name in might" (10:6). In the first book of Samuel, Hannah intones a prayer upon delivering Samuel to Shiloh: "There is no one holy like the Lord; indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God" (2:2). In difficult times and in times of great joy, our people has held steadfastly to a belief in monotheism even when we suffered for it, even when no one around us believed in one God.

I believe that this iconoclasm – the capacity to challenge cherished beliefs and reigning institutional norms – rubbed off on the Jewish people as well. Believing something no one else believes and challenging existing ways of thinking and being can also help mold the way we generate new ideas, invent new medicines, and chart new pathways in science and the arts. Could belief in a God who is like no other extend to a belief in personal human singularity as well? There is no other God. God is unique. There is no one else like me. I am unique.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Radical Then, Radical Now*, reminds us of this singularity: "We are not insignificant, nor are we alone. We are here because someone willed us into being, who wanted us to be, who knows our innermost thoughts, who values us in our uniqueness, whose breath we breathe and in whose arms we rest; someone in and through whom we are connected to all that is." Uniqueness can be uncomfortable rather than reassuring. We do what others do to belong. It takes courage to imitate God by being who we were uniquely meant to be.

Gregory Berns, a professor of neurology at Emory, wrote his book *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently* to demonstrate the brain's plasticity and ability to challenge ideas long accepted. The iconoclast is the ultimate leader because the iconoclast allows himself or herself to think and act differently. "We take for granted that our perceptions of the world are real, but they

are really specters of our imagination, nothing more than biological and electrical rumblings that we believe to be real." Berns argues that the iconoclast's brain works on another register in three central and defining ways:

Perception: the iconoclast sees differently than others

Fear response: the iconoclast can tame stress responses to better control fear, and

Social Intelligence: the iconoclast connects differently with others.

Berns also reminds us that when we create something novel we are also destroying what once existed. Fear can quickly deaden the willingness to do something new. We fear ambiguity and staying in spaces that are uncertain so we rush to convention and routine. We fear failure; if we do things the way they've always been done, we will minimize disappointment. We fear looking stupid or incompetent so we take no chances.

Moses, the iconoclast of Exodus, saw freedom where others saw slavery. He was able to control his fear response time and again under Pharaoh's threats, and he was able to connect his message of salvation and justice to the people he led. Moses was initially cowered by fears of his own inadequacy. He repeatedly rejected a job he never signed up for. But then, in Pharaoh's own chambers, Moses stood up and declared, "There is none like our God." And in this empowering and dangerous moment, perhaps Moses discovered his own singular voice, leaving us with the gift and invitation to discover our own.

When have you challenged prevailing norms and discovered your uniqueness?