Parshah va’eira jan 2020

6:3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob …

4And also, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned.

5And also, I heard the moans of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians are holding in bondage, and I remembered My covenant.

6Therefore, say to the children of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will take you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you from their labor, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

7And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

There are three ways to think about time, and three ways to think about being jews.

First, the past, we are jews because of our ancestors. The parshah establishes this, and reiterates what we have all heard since we were children: Adonai Avraham, Adonai, Isaac, Adonai ya’akov. How much of this remains with us, and how much of this will remain in the future? In the invisible lines of sim shalom, we’ve added sarah, rebeccah, and leah and rivcha. And god is never in the masculine. We might say Adonai, as if the Hebrew masked the gender. But how can any of this matter in an age where god, god’s name, and god’s figure is no longer a shared concept? I find it uncomfortable to even refer to god, as if to a person, whenever it is not simply a question of textual analysis. How could my ancestral link, which in my case goes back a big three generations, find satisfaction in god’s claim on the Israelites that he, god, adonai, yad hey vav hey, el Shaddai, ehyeh asher ehyeh, or Elohim, or the one whom we envision in all these encounters from those of Abraham on to moses, was personally tied to us?

Worse, much worse than that. In Bret Stephens nyt column of a few weeks ago, he advanced the claim that the jews were the smartest people on earth. Now, this is ironic since where jews had once been on top in the Bronx high school of science—the only place that mattered—now it is Asians. So much so, former affirmative action advocates have now become anti-liberal by seeking to put a quota on Asians. Quotas were once intended to keep us out. Now we seem to keep them out, since they are beating us to the finish line. We forgot what never again means, especially for minorities.

But that skirts the still larger issue, raised by the future, and not just the past. God goes on to reiterate the next part of the covenant that the land of Canaan, now possessed by many others whose names end with -ites, will become ours. 4”And also, I established My covenant with them [us]to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned.

We couldn’t have that land unless we left Egypt, and unless we took it from those who were there. The question of why this repossession of our freedom would result in the dispossession of others drives us, again, to never again, since our getting into Harvard or Yale would mean for each of us who got in, another one of them would not; our getting Canaan would mean they who were there would be chased out. And even if it had been ours before, still, when Adam left Eden, somehow, after Eve, other women appeared for him; before Abraham died, other women became mothers of his children. There is no land without people already there, and for every claim to being the original inhabitants, there is always another for someone who came before. Unless we are special. This is the third issue in these preliminaries to the great fight between moses and pharaoh.

6:7 “And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.” Although my parents were non-practicing jews, like most people we knew, they were quite certainly jews in every way that it meant to be jewish in nyc. They grew up jewish, with parents who immigrated from Russia, Austria-Poland and Romania; they lived through the depression; they lived through the times of the holocaust. My piano teacher, my cousin’s husband, had numbers on their arms. You don’t need to ask what it means to be jewish when it is just there automatically, when the fears and risks of affirming our religion carried with it an unbearable burden, should I tell this or that person that I am jewish? And exactly complementarily to this, as my father reminded us all the time, we were the best, the smartest, most cultured, most accomplished people. It was obvious. We had Einstein and Heifitz. Which meant, when god said, “I will take you to me as a people, and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God,” god, as a “He,” was speaking to us. And with that message, the following words, and this whole parshah, this whole sefer, this whole torah, came down to just one point: we were god’s people, since “I am the Lord your God, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”

Never again means, to jews like me, who grew up with all that I’ve told you about my family and its beliefs, through the years of the 20th century when my grandparents came, when my parents grew up, and now, with my lifetime, from 1943 to the present, that being jewish has really meant one thing. Not that that line about god who brought us out of Egypt was meant just for me, for us, or for those of us who died before, leaving us as survivors, but that it was for all the others who were survivors as well. That’s what our service last week with St. Stephens meant. They might not have known our language nor we their ways of tithing and passing the plate, or hugging in service, but we shared a line, read it together—god who brought you out from under the burdens of Egypt. Indeed in my house, we had the record of paul Robeson singing that line, and it was half negro and half jewish spiritual.

That takes us to the third way to think about time, and that is the time when Moses is speaking to pharaoh, using god’s words, to bring about the action of freeing the people from their burdens. Here the lines open us to a mystery for which all our claims about being jewish become incomprehensible. God tells moses:

7:3 But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

4But Pharaoh will not hearken to you, and I will lay My hand upon the Egyptians, and I will take My legions, My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt with great judgments.

5And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord when I stretch forth My hand over Egypt, and I will take the children of Israel out of their midst."

When that jewish boy got into the Bronx high school of science, and his sister, my cousin Ellen, into Music and Arts, when my parents had me study piano, to play schumann and bach, when my sister bound the books that went on display in the Yale Beinecke collection, it was with an idea about being a special people, and that was with no reference to egyptians knowing who is the lord and god stretching god’s hand over Egypt. Who were the b’nai Israel, who were moses and pharaoh, and who the ones who groaned under the the overseer’s curses and capo’s whips? Who were the Egyptians? Every answer to these questions has to be removed from who we are now, to make any sense to us when we say, never again.

This is the last piece of time in the story. Call it the time when Pharaoh’s heart was hardened by god. I will have to stop because of time, but this is what I want to stop with: that the time when pharaoh’s heart was hardened by god was like the time when the burning bush burned, without being consumed. Time out of time, time of the present that includes the past back to Abraham and forward to Canaan, that reaches to the question for us, not why did that oppressive ruler wish to see us suffer so, but why was that time given its definition by these words, 7:3 But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

4But Pharaoh will not hearken to you, and I will lay My hand upon the Egyptians, and I will take My legions, My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt with great judgments.