Facing Pharaoh

| Waskow, Arthur

An interpretation of Exodus 10:1 ff. "Multiply courage by compassion and what emerges is nonviolent resistance: I will not obey my enemy but neither will I kill him."

Facing Pharaoh

By Arthur Waskow

When God sends Moses to face Pharaoh (Exodus 10:1), the Torah text reads: *"Bo el Pharaoh."* Most English translations render this command as "Go to Pharaoh." But *bo* means "come," not "go." How can God be saying "Come to Pharaoh" unless God is already there, within the Egyptian potentate?

"... I have hardened his [Pharaoh's] heart," God's call to Mose continues in most translations. But the Hebrew root *kvd* can mean heavy or glorious or honorable or radiant. So this phrase can as readily be read: "I, God, have put My radiance in his, Pharaoh's, heart." In other words: Come to Me – the Me who lives hidden inside Pharaoh. Don't be afraid. What looks like *his* radiance, *his* glory, is really *My* radiance, *My* glory.

From seeing God hidden within Pharaoh, Moses can learn both courage and compassion. Multiply courage by compassion and what emerges is nonviolent resistance: I will not obey my enemy but neither will I kill him. Twice Moses and Aaron face Pharaoh saying, "Thus says YHWH..." (5:1 and 10:3). In their first encounter, Pharaoh responds, "Who is YHWH?"

Who indeed?

YHWH is the God who spoke that name to Moses from out of the burning bush. The Ineffable Name is unpronounceable not because we are forbidden to articulate it but because there is no way to "pronounce" it except by breathing: Yyyhhhwwwhhh. It is a name that reaches across all barriers of language. It is not Hebrew or Egyptian or Sumerian or Latin or Greek or Sanskrit or Arabic, but it is present beneath them all. It is the most universal of names: the Breath of Life – what the tradition calls the Breath/Soul of All Living Beings, the Divine Breath/Spirit/Wind.

Moses and Aaron might have stayed focused on that universal name, but they added an explanation of it as "YHWH, the God of the Hebrews" (10:3). Why, precisely when they were trying to get an Egyptian king to pay heed, did they entangle an ethnic claim with a universalist assertion? Perhaps they were entering into word play with Pharaoh.

Perhaps "God of the Hebrews [*Ivrim*]" was more than an ethnocentric boast. For *Ivrim* meant "those who cross over" – nomads, wanderers, rootless cosmopolitans. It seems to have been used by the settled, responsible peoples of the Middle East as a contemptuous label for people who wouldn't stay put where they belonged.

Copyright JCRelations

Perhaps Moses and Aaron were warning Pharaoh that the Breath of Life – which blows where it wishes and cannot be captured or pinned down – is the God of those who cannot be pinned down to one place, one life path, one narrow space. Moses insists that the boundary-crossers must leave Egypt in order to celebrate a festival for the Breath of Life (10:9). Today this claim of having to leave in order to "observe YHVH's festival" is often read as an attempt to mislead Pharaoh. But if we imagine Moses groping his way toward a broader, stronger form of resistance, and if we ask ourselves what it would mean today for Jews to take on the task of nonviolent resistance against the Pharaohs of our generation, perhaps we can see how the Jewish festivals can embody that resistance.

When Soviet Jews began dancing in the streets of Moscow on Simhat Torah, facing what seemed a totalitarian regime, their act was utterly different from dancing with the Torah in the hidden streets of the ghetto. Their dances began to crack the rigidity of Pharaoh, and they called forth allies.

When American Jews celebrated Freedom Seders that demanded an end to the Vietnam War and feminist Seders that affirmed new freedom for women within and beyond the boundaries of Jewish life, they cracked ancient rigidities that required Jews and women to stay "in their place." They became *Ivrim* – boundary-crossers. And when they celebrated Tu Bishvat by facing down corporations that were draining the Everglades and destroying ancient redwood forests, they invoked those kabbalists who knew that divine abundance must be renewed on earth, as well as in heaven. And they had allies.

When Israeli Jews built *sukkot shalom* (huts of peace) to move toward peace with the Palestinians, they too were facing the Pharaonic rigidity of governments that were stuck in a narrow place. They too had allies.

In all these ways, we see explorations of what it might mean for the Jewish people to cross old boundaries by moving to a new place in its history.

What now? Imagine reclaiming our own festivals as Moses did, facing Pharaohs with a nonviolent challenge. And imagine, instead of believing that we must act alone to shape a holy space – as we have for most of our history – making allies of other spiritual communities that are ready to become boundary-crossers to face today's Pharaohs together on behalf of the Breath of Life.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow is author of *Godwrestling — Round 2.* Jewish Lights of Woodstock, VT, 1997, and director of The Shalom Center (http://www.shalomctr.org), an international network with offices in Philadelphia.

Copyright JCRelations