

Shabbat Shalom.

As you've likely noticed, following the usual pattern of rabbis I try in my sermons to be especially attentive to what's going on in the country and world writ large – tying current events to our most ancient stories. Often, I focus on one pressing news item in particular. But this week, with so many painful pieces of news to address, I've been thinking about how the big picture of political *power* in our time – who has it, why they have it, and what it has wrought – echoes enduring themes in the Tanakh. Specifically, the ways in which an authoritarian current in our society continues to deepen in ways that make headlines, and seemingly make the entire world less stable.

As someone put it to me yesterday, we are living in times that feel almost biblical. And this week, reading the news AND the parsha, that certainly seems true. One of the opening verses of Parashat Shemot gives us the famous line: "A new king arose over Egypt who did know Joseph." We read of a pharaoh who afflicted the Hebrews with *sarei misim*, taskmasters, oppressing them with forced labor. And thus we open the tale we know well from Pesach.¹ Positioning the Israelites against an authoritarian ruler.

The rest of the Torah hinges on this drama between the people and the man who enslaved them. If there's any doubt about that, the phrase, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God," repeats in many different forms, in myriad verses and mitzvot.

With Parashat Shemot, we begin reading *Sefer Shemot*, the book of Exodus, which is, from start to finish: the story of the Israelites cohering as a nation, fleeing the burdens of tyranny as one people, becoming free only to live out their destiny, receiving commandments, performing them, and ultimately building a mishkan – a tabernacle – a portable dwelling place for God to join the people on their journey. That's the gist of what we're about to read over the next three months.

And that enduring national origin story begins with a narrative that begs us to consider the kings or powers in our own lives. No doubt, Jews have been at the whim of countless kings and rulers throughout our history. And as we know, we have reason to consider that anew these days.

For the past few months, with our Thursday class, I've been examining the book of Kings. The ninth or tenth book of the Bible, depending on how you count. One of the sections we don't often read cover to cover. And of course, you should join us if you happen to be available on your Thursday lunch hour. Or I just recommend reading it by

¹ Ex. 1:11

yourself. Because *Sefer M'lakhim*, Kings, is a text for our time. A meditation on monarchy and its discontents. Although you might not realize its critical view right off the bat.

The book starts with one great king, David, passing on leadership to his son, Solomon. And the first dozen chapters deal primarily with King Solomon, whom most of us remember for his famous wisdom, for that story about the two mothers, for his liaison with the Queen of Sheba, and maybe most important of all for building the First Temple in Jerusalem.

In these chapters, there are many motifs, but as the story ramps up, the word “zahav,” meaning, “gold,” appears over and over. And it starts to hit you, very slowly...that though the reign of King Solomon over one United Kingdom of Israel feels made for the movies, almost like Camelot, or the preamble of Candide, the glory and perfection of Solomon’s court is fueled (behind the scenes) by avarice and excess.

Zahav is one motif that points to this, but so is the word “oved.” Forms of that word meaning “slave,” also appear again and again in the narrative. And in a nod to this week’s parsha, these slaves in Solomon’s Israel...are Israelites themselves.

In first Kings chapter 5 verse 27, we read, *Va’yaal Hamelech Shlomo Mas mikol Yisrael*, and King Solomon imposed forced labor on all Israel, *vayhi haMas shloshim elef ish*. And the forced service added up to thirty thousand men. This is on top of 70,000 porters and 80,000 quarriers taken from the ranks of Israel.

As Solomon prepares to build the temple for which he is so well known, the text describes the Israelite workforce he enslaves, with stonecutters and porters and overseers, depicting the societal cost of empire-building. And notice that in that single verse, the word “mas,” meaning “forced labor” appears twice. It’s an unusual Hebrew word. It appears only three times in the entire Torah, and 23 times in the broader Tanakh, but in the Solomon narrative in Kings, it appears seven times. And yet another time vis-a-vis Solomon in the book of Chronicles.

But importantly...one of those three times the word *Mas* is used in the Torah, as I mentioned earlier, appears when Pharaoh sets taskmasters, *sarei Misim*, in the plural, over the Hebrews in parashat Shemot. Drawing a verbal connection between the King Solomon narrative and this week’s parsha.

Noting this very same connection, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, posits that we might learn a lesson in leadership from

comparing the glorious construction project of Solomon's Temple with the story of the simple tabernacle, the mishkan, in the wilderness at the end of Exodus. Both were attempts at housing the divine on earth. But, in his words, "the moral foundations of the two sanctuaries...starkly differed. Unlike the Tabernacle in the wilderness," where everyone whose heart moved them to contribute was invited to participate voluntarily in the shared project, Solomon's "Temple rose on a bedrock strewn with coercion, deprivation, and impoverishment."²

Precisely because of this shift toward authoritarianism, Schorch teaches, "As soon as Solomon died, [his son] Rehoboam reaped what his father had sown." He attempted to enslave the people again and it caused a civil war splitting the kingdom of Israel in two. The excesses of despotic leadership finally went a step too far. No wonder then, that that very first temple, was later destroyed on account of the *sinat chinam*...the baseless hatred of the people toward one another without leadership willing to bring them together.

Solomon might've been wise in a whole host of ways, but as a leader, his self-interest hamstrung his ability to lead effectively. And if we imagine Pharaoh as the ur-tyrant, the original king who abused his power, against whom our whole identity as a nation was founded, Solomon demonstrates yet another time that the problem of kings, for Jews, is the ways in which – unchecked by other forces – they wind up behaving like Pharaoh.

The Prophet Samuel warned us about this – two kings before Solomon, in the episode of King Saul. There, he tells us that any king "will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and riders...he will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers...and you shall become his slaves."³

The people called out for a strong leader, but Samuel reminds them that strongmen are never the men they seem to be.

And precisely for this reason, in this week's parsha, the Torah gives us a very different example of how a leader should behave, in the form of our most famous leader – Moses.

As we know, Moses in this moment, is humble, maybe even shy. As he encounters God at the burning bush, he says "mi anochi," who am I that I should lead this people? But that was exactly what made him right for the job.

² <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/why-a-temple/>

³ I Samuel 8

God instructed him, *sal na'alecha me'al raglecha*, “take off your shoes from your feet,” before approaching the bush. And in this short instruction, we find another contrast between Moses and any of the many kings of ancient legend. The 16th century sage Rabbi Shlomo Luntschitz explains that when he takes off his shoes, it is so that he can feel the sharp objects and stones beneath him. In his words, “a leader must feel every obstacle and every impediment on the road. He must feel the pain of his people and realize what is bothering them.” A leader must, like Moses, embody the pain and understand the experience of the people they are leading.⁴

As we carry on throughout this secular year, reading the news, wary as always about the excesses of power in our time, as Jews have done since Pharaoh...it is precisely this that we should seek out: not bluster or adventurism, but the ability to walk through the very same jagged rocks set before the rest of society. Where our current leaders fall short, using us, or playing some of us against others, may we attempt to correct their course with everything at our disposal. As we pursue new leadership over the course of this year, may we seek out people who are more like Moses in this way, than Solomon, or Pharaoh.

And as we live in the world as it is, even before a change in leadership, may we ourselves act as Moses in this parsha: feeling the troubled earth, and removing as many stumbling blocks as possible. So that even if the world at large continues to feel uneasy, our closest surroundings might become a little safer, and easier, and more just for all of us.

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⁴ *Olelot Ephraim* in Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, *Torah Gems*, p.26,