

Shabbat Sh'mot

“The Domino Effect”

drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards
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"It was a joy, but the thing about it is: I didn't feel it should have been this hard. I *knew* it shouldn't have been this hard." Anyone else hear this comment on NPR this morning? It was part of a Story Corps story – that wonderful project in which people all over the country are invited to record short stories from their lives. The “I *knew* it shouldn't have been this hard,” comes from Theresa Burroughs, age 77. The comment is the end of the story she tells of being a black woman trying to register to vote in Tuscaloosa Alabama in the late 1940s. “I went there for two years. The white men,” Burroughs says, “they would not let us register to vote. They would be playing dominoes. I didn't even know how to play dominoes, but do you know I learned standing there watching them [while they ignored us]? She went twice a week for two years, accompanied by J.J. Simmons, a minister who would not let her back down.

Finally the white men relented, saying, “Because we are tired of looking at your black faces.” Burroughs registered to vote, and has not missed an election in 60 years. [npr.org] Every year, the beginning of our annual reading of the book of Exodus coincides with our nation's observance of Martin Luther King Day and the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. This year – this week – we mark the 100th birthday of Dr. Heschel, who has made three or four generations already of Jews think about Shabbat as “a palace in time,” and to think about social activism as a way to pray. Susannah Heschel, daughter of Rabbi Heschel and also a prominent contemporary Jewish scholar, wrote that this photo – [hold up] – which includes Rabbi Heschel and Rev. King walking in the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965 “has become an icon of American Jewish life, and of Black-Jewish relations.” [www.peaceworkmagazine.org/node/393]

But the iconography became even more powerful by the remark Rabbi Heschel made some time later:

"When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying." “Moses, Moses,” God calls out from the burning bush in this week's torah portion, *Sh'mot*. “*Hineni*. Replies Moses. “I am here.” And God says, “Don't come closer. Take off your shoes from your feet, *Ha-lom shal n'ah-leh-kha mei-al rag-leh-kha*, because the place on which you're standing is holy ground. *ki ha-makom asher atah o-meid ah-lav, ad-mat kodesh hu* This is the opposite of what happens a few chapters later when God instructs the Israelites to prepare for their escape from Egypt by eating their first Passover offering fully clothed, “your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand.” [Exodus 12:11]

Someone at Torah study last night said she'd run away and never look back if a burning bush spoke to her. When something extraordinary – awesome – happens, how do we know whether to run toward it or run away? And what about when it doesn't seem extraordinary --- standing still and watching some men play dominoes, for example. Or refusing to move to the back of the bus? How do we know what's the right thing to do if we don't hear God's voice or don't know that what we're

hearing is God's voice?

My brother, the other Rabbi Edwards, in his wonderful Torah Query commentary this week on-line at Jewishmosaic.org http://www.jewishmosaic.org/torah/show_torah/58 asks us to consider the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, about whom we read in this week's portion, noting that the process of redemption of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt "does not begin with divine intervention, but with the first recorded act of non-violent civil disobedience. . . . Shifrah and Puah. . . are the mothers of redemption. Their refusal of Pharaoh's murderous order to kill the newborn males of the Israelites is the first crack in the wall of oppression. They don't have to have a plan, they don't have to figure out what will happen next. Their refusal — which is, of course, a great affirmation — makes possible the next act of resistance, and the next.

Larry also quotes from the Jewish scholar known as The *Sefat Emet*, the Gerer Rebbe Yehuda Leib Alter, who wrote that Moses' self-description as a "man of uncircumcised lips" means that Israel refused to listen to him, saying "The prophet prophesies by the power of those who listen." "This is a radical statement," says my brother. "The prophet is not simply one to whom God speaks; nor is the prophet one who simply speaks the word of God. The prophet hears in such a way that s/he is compelled to speak, and speaks in such a way that the message can take effect in the hearers. The prophet depends upon God, of course, but also upon a community being ready and all ears."

It's not just about our feet, then, as it turns out, not just about learning whether to walk or run or stand still, it's also about learning how to listen and what to listen for. The Hebrew word we usually translate as "feet" or "leg," *regel*, note some commentators,⁽¹⁾ can also mean "habit," adding to God's instruction to Moses about going barefoot the implication that Moses must leave behind old habits in order to set off in a new direction, take a new path, one that God will show him.

These are not easy tasks — trying to figure out whether to stand or run, insist or desist, change or remain the same. No easy tasks trying to figure out which voices to listen to, or whether they are speaking to you, or what they are saying. "It shouldn't have to be so hard," but often it is. And when it feels hard, it's good to remember that some who came before us: the Shifras and Puahs, the Dr. Kings and Rabbi Heschels and Theresa Burroughs and Rev. Simmons and Rosa Parks must have had their share of doubts too, none too sure if all the pieces were in place when they pushed against that first domino in the long, long row — none too sure until after the fact that the walls of oppression or injustice or inequality would indeed come tumbling down. As we enter this new year and this new book of Exodus (new each time we read it), may we follow in the footsteps of those who came before, learning when to stand and when to walk, when to build walls and when to tear them down. And remembering most of all that not one of them had to do it all alone. . . . Let us all stand together as we sing a song leading toward peace.

Peace Will Come

Od yavo shalom aleinu,

od yavo shalom aleinu,

od yavo shalom aleinu, v'al kulam.

Salaam, aleinu v'al kol haolam, salaam, salaam.
Salaam, aleinu v'al kol haolam, salaam, salaam.
Od yavo shalom aleinu,
od yavo shalom aleinu,
od yavo shalom aleinu, v'al kulam.
Peace will come to us, peace will yet come to us,
Peace will come to us, and everyone.
Salaam, peace for us and for all the world, peace, peace.

(Words and music by Sheva)

As Anne Brener, notes in her remarkable article in this week's LA Jewish Journal (January 12, 2007)
p. 46, 3rd paragraph from the end.