

## Parsha Bo

If you write the code for a program designed to find the first odd number that is the sum of two positive even numbers, a computer will take this algorithm starting at two plus two, reject the answer (four) and look for another set of numbers that will supply the correct answer. It will continue adding even numbers together over and over, never finding an odd number that is the sum of two even numbers. It will iterate numbers forever, and will never realize what you and I can see so quickly. We can intuit that sum of two positive even numbers will never add up to an odd number. Why can we see this, but a computer that is so facile at calculation cannot figure this out. It is because we, as humans, can step outside of a problem, and view it from another perspective, outside the rule system, whereas a computer programmed with a simple algorithm cannot. This is an example of Godel's first incompleteness theorem.

Harry Frankfurt wrote a famous article in 1971, "Freedom of Will and the Concept of a Person" in which he asserts that a human being is only a person if he or she can exercise "second order volition." Whereas lower animal species have first order desires, like the desire to eat, to drink, to sleep, to procreate, etc., only humans fret over those desires, can weigh countervailing or conflicting desires, and place a value judgement on which to pursue. That is, as people, we are not only able to want, we are able to self-consciously decide what it is we *want* to want. The choosing between conflicting desires, for instance balance the craving for pizza and beer at a superbowl party and the wish to keep a new year's resolution to lose ten pounds, is a second order volition. Frankfurt draws a sharp distinction between freedom of *action*, in which we can *do* what we want and *go* where we want, and freedom of *will*, where even when we are deprived of freedom of action, we can still have the freedom to decide what it is we want. This freedom of will, this ability to have a second order volition, is what makes us a person. But we already knew all of this from Torah.

How does this relate to Parashat Bo? Between this week's and last week's parshiot, we are told by, my count, that God hardens Pharaoh's heart ten times, and that Pharaoh hardens his own heart another three times. We are even told directly in the text three reasons why Hashem hardens Pharaoh's heart: first, so that God can display his signs of awesomeness; second, so that the story of these signs can be repeated to future generations; and third, so that the story of these signs can act as a proof that God is real, all powerful, and can reach down into human history as a participant.

In other words, Hashem “programs” Pharaoh’s response to Moshe’s request to let the Jewish People go. Pharaoh becomes like the computer in Godel’s example demonstrating the incompleteness theorem. Each time he is asked, Pharaoh, seeing the problem from only one perspective within a closed system, comes up with the same and wrong answer; we can easily see from an outsider’s perspective that his cause is fruitless. As a result of removing Pharaoh’s ability to decide between options, God has made Pharaoh less than human. Or as Frankfort might have put it, God has withdrawn Pharaoh’s freedom of will, and hence his status as a person. In both last week’s and this week’s parsha, God removes Pharaoh’s second order volition and thus his personhood. I believe this is done for a fourth reason, not stated in the text. This construct provides a contrast in leadership styles between Pharaoh and Moshe, and an example for the world to model.

This parsha goes on to tell the story of Passover, so familiar to us from the seder, but this parsha actually has me thinking about another holiday. On Yom Kippur, we are commanded to refrain from eating and drinking, from carnal pleasures, from bathing and from leather, as well as from driving, lighting a fire, and from working. We are told that to honor God on our day of atonement, in order to merit God’s forgiveness for our persistent sinning, we are to halt our enslavement to first order desires, our compulsions, our instincts, our habits, and the way we tend to behave during the rest of the year. It is in this moment, when we stop following our algorithm (eat, work, sleep, repeat) we see how it is possible to view the world with an outsider’s perspective. Instantly, after we discover that it’s possible not to eat or drink for 26 hours, despite the grumbling in our stomachs, we recognize that we have the power to choose what it is we want to want, that is when we begin to exercise second order volition and is when we truly become people. Since it is possible to fast for a day, emulating the angels who do not need to eat, we learn that it is possible to exercise our will to do other things to emulate God, and not lower animals. We can protect the widow, the orphan and the stranger. We can love our fellow man as our selves. We can pursue justice and mercy and not only pursue our own benefit.

Who are our heroes? Who inspires us? Is it the rich and powerful, the famous and popular, or those who make the hard choice to live outside of the algorithm of first order desire? Think for a second about those people who you admire most. I think of the lives of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, all people inspired by the Exodus narrative. I also think about Malala, Natan Sharansky, and closer to home, people in our own congregation like Mark Swatez, who works every day to bring comfort to the poor through his work at the Ark. These are people who live outside of

themselves. What makes them great is their ability to transcend their own particular struggle, think outside the box, and focus on the needs of others, in addition and sometimes, instead of their own. I cherish the story of Nelson Mandela imprisoned on Robbin Island for 26 years. While in prison, he learned the Afrikaans language, and about the Afrikaaner's culture by reading their literature. He befriended his captors recognizing them as fellow human, he learned to understand their perspective and their plight, and not demonizing his oppressors as the enemy. In the end, he got them to do the same with him, and to understand the plight of Black South Africans. He approached those with hardened hearts with love and softened them. In Pirke Avot, Ben Zoma asks "Azahu gibor?" Who is strong? One who masters his evil impulse. He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty. He who rules over his spirit is better than he who conquers a city.

I treasure the Exodus narrative. This story has inspired countless generations of Jews facing oppression. We have our hero in Moses, a Hebrew raised in the Egyptian palace, an outsider who saw oppression but was not complacent, who was selfless and had courage, despite his many flaws, to confront power directly and demand justice for his oppressed people. I am honored that our Jewish hero of national liberation has been the inspiration to so many others who have suffered under oppression as harsh as the Israelites in Egypt. Moses provides an alternative model of leadership, an example of how to be human in a dangerous and imperfect world by putting the fight for justice for the oppressed above one's own personal security.

It is impossible for me to talk about heroes and role models without telling you about my good friend David Steiner, who would have been 52 last Thursday, but instead was tragically killed in December. David was a true tzaddik, and even possibly one of the Lamed Vavniks upon whom the world depends. David made a documentary at a South Side Charter School, Barbara A. Sizemore Academy, that was slated to be closed by the City. But it isn't completely correct to say *he* made the film. Instead, he befriended a group of seventh and eighth graders from desperately poor families living in a dangerous and hopeless environment, and helped them tell their story about the importance of their school, an Afro-centric haven in Englewood where the children were treated with love and respect, and learned about their African roots and culture as a way build pride and self-confidence. The empowerment of the children through the making of the film was so powerful, it convinced the City to allow the school to remain open. The film won awards at Black film festivals around the country. David was then invited to screen the film at the Nile Film Festival in Uganda. Believe me, the significance a Jewish leader being

asked to returning to the Nile to teach about empowerment and liberation, was not lost on David. He took this opportunity to bring two of the kids from Englewood with him to experience the real Africa.

While studying in rabbinical school in Israel five years ago, his son, Itamar, befriended two Sudanese refugees while in public school in Tel Aviv, forming a strong bond over baseball. After independence was granted to South Sudan, the two children and their families were expelled from Israel and told to return to their country. David, back in Evanston, learned about this, and raised the funds to save one of the families from being deported to a country in the midst of a civil war, and paid to send the children to a private school in Kampala, Uganda. Never one to miss an opportunity to pursue justice, David decided to make a second film while on his trip to the Nile; this one about the plight of the Sudanese refugees expelled from Israel. He enlisted support from Israeli filmmakers to join him in his effort. He decided to bring his son on the trip to be reunited with his friends.

As long as they were in Uganda for Hanukkah, he decided to take his son, the kids from Englewood, the Sudanese Christian family, and his Israeli filmmaker colleagues to visit the Jews of Abayudaya, a lost tribe thirsting for connection with world Jewry, to sing Hanukah songs in Hebrew to them on Christmas Eve. They were on their way to Mbale when their bus was hit by a car and David was instantly killed.

Sometimes when I hear about the suffering and oppression of others, I am embarrassed to say that I tune out, or worse, I try to think of the ways that the suffering of those people is their own fault, and is not my problem. My heart has been hardened; it makes me less of a human. It has become hardened by fear, by narrowmindedness, by laziness, by fatigue, by the influence of the media, and by the people around me. I convince myself that those people should be helping themselves; my people are better. But David's life stands as constant challenge to this smug complacency. His legacy is that one person can make a difference; a single individual can build bridges between communities that seem tragically and hopelessly separated. Sometimes I feel that the only way to protect myself and my family from the problems of our City is to retreat to safety. If the schools are bad, and the crime is rising, the solution is move to the suburbs, to a safer neighborhood and better schools; but what does that do to our brethren who remain behind, unable to escape?

The narrative of Exodus, our history and foundational myth, is here to tell us to stop being complacent, drop your cynicism, stop using the excuse of a hardened heart, and step outside the box,

use our God-given human ability to see things from a new perspective, from a compassionate place, and recognize that if one group is oppressed, it hurts all of us, and be like David and bring people together with love. When we fight for justice, we won't always win our battles, but we will have lived like real people, and inspired others to have the courage to follow our example.

Another of my heroes is Sam Feinsmith. He used the occasion of his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday to raise money for Orot's Compassion Project that provides Jewish mindfulness instruction to leaders in social service organizations, including the Ark, that help the needy in our community. I understand that he fell short of his fundraising goal by two thousand dollars needed to move his work forward. It hurts me deeply that someone in our community wants to bring compassion to those in need and doesn't have adequate resources to do it. For those of you who are moved in these times to do something human, something compassionate, something brave, one thing you can do right now is talk to Sam after shul about his work with the Center for Jewish Mindfulness and after shabbat, please write a check to Orot to them help reach their goal. Exercise your second order volition and be a mensch.

Shabbat Shalom.