

Two months ago, I treated myself to a gift a new book – not recently published, by new to me, by Judy Klistner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is enthusiastic about Bible study. In a chapter in she compares Melchizedek, the mysterious non-Israelite figure who shows up in Genesis 14 to mentor Avraham, to Yitro, Moshe's father and law, and his most important mentor, she discusses an episode in Moshe's coming of age with an insight I found so timely that I bookmarked it to discuss it with you all this week.

In this week's Parashah, this Israelites, who came down to Egypt during a time of famine and settled there as honored guests of Pharaoh, have become no longer a family but a nation – and a despised one. Pharaoh has enslaved them, and has ordered the baby boys to be killed.

Moshe, of course, guarded by not only his mother and sister, but the protective presence of the daughter of Pharaoh who adopts him, escapes this fate. Pharaoh's daughter assigns Moshe's own mother the task of nursing him, and in Chapter 2, verse 10, "When the child grew up, [his mother] brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."

Torah tells us nothing about his upbringing in Pharaoh's palace, because the next first finds Moshe clearly well into adolescence. This is his coming of age story, and with the drama of the enslavement of the Israelites earlier in the parashah, and the dram of the burning bush later, it is easy to miss it:

Exodus 2:11-15:

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. (12) He turned this way and that and, seeing no one man, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (13) When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" (14) He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! (15) When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but

Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

This is Moshe's foray into the world. In Torah study yesterday, Santino pointed out a similarity between Moshe's going out and encountering the suffering of the Israelite people, and the revelation in Buddhist tradition that led the Buddha, who grew up in comfort and privilege, to develop his philosophy.

Judy Klitsner points out the word *ish*, a Hebrew word meaning "person, or "man," – the equivalent to the colloquial Yiddish *mensch*, recurs multiple times in this passage. According to her reading, Moshe goes out into the world seeking decent people, seeking role models. First he looks to Egyptian society, and discovers its violence. She writes, "The Egyptian 'man' is a tyrant who delivers murderous blows – from the Hebrew root nun-chaf- heh – to innocent victims. In response to this disturbing display, Moses looks around and finds that 'there was no man.'"

She shares an interpretation from the Bible Commentary *Ha'amek Davar*, the phrase "there was no man, should be interpreted not just that no one was watching Moshe's actions, but that there were no authority figures or institutions who would hold the Egyptian accountable for violence against a lower caste person.

So Moshe takes matters into his own hands. And then he goes out again, the next day. "But" Klitsner writes, "Moses finds the Hebrews acting in much the same way as their oppressors. Like the Egyptian taskmaster who struck *n-k-h*, a Hebrew slave, one Hebrew slave now strikes, *n-kh-h*, another. Despite the similarity in their behavior, Moses speaks to the aggressor rather than striking him. Perhaps he expects more from the Hebrew because of the blood ties he shares with him, or perhaps he assumes that the Hebrews, as victims of oppression will more readily accept his reproach. In any case, Moses attempts to reason with his assailant by asking, "Why do you strike your fellow?" (2:13). But again his hopes are shattered as the Hebrew lashes out with the ironic invective: "Who made you an *ish* who is chief and ruler over us?" (v. 14). This taunt is the unfortunate response to Moses' sincere search for an *ish*. Not only is there no other *ish* to be found, but he is now ridiculed for his own efforts to act as one."

It bears repeating, the same Hebrew root is used to describe the verb of "striking" that the Egyptian was doing to the first Israelite, the verb that Moshe then did to

that Egyptian, and then the verb that Moshe found an Israelite doing to another Israelite.

Moshe, in his very action against the violence of the society that raised him, repeats that violence. Justly, perhaps. We may sympathize with his unilateral, vigilant action, in an unjust system. But we also, rightly, recoil as his mimicking the violence of that system. And even more the behavior of the two fighting Israelites shows that that to be oppressed does not necessarily equate to choosing a moral path. As Jewish Latina poet Aurora Levins Morales has written, “Trauma doesn't make people into better human beings. Most of the time, trauma just makes people terrified and easier to manipulate.”

I was speaking with Nadia Telsey a few weeks ago. Some of you know Nadia, a long-time member of TBI and activist in the community. She'll be doing a book reading here next weekend. We were speaking specifically about the stridency of the discourse around the Israeli Palestinian conflict, right before I went to speak at a forum on that topic. I asked Nadia what she thought I should say. She thought for a moment and said, “Tell them that the means are the ends in the making. How we get there is what we'll have when we arrive.”

The danger, in a moment of unbearable conflict, is that those of us who want to see the conflict end will become so convinced of our rightness that, like the Israelites, we will mirror the violence of the systems we oppose. I see this danger in the Israeli response to Hamas in Gaza, and the exponential impact on the Palestinian people. I see this danger, too, in the stridency of “ceasefire now” movement, and the ways that Jews in America are being targeted for the stands they have taken, or even for remaining silent.

What this parashah and Judy Klitsner's writing reminds me is that being on the receiving end of violence does not equate to a moral blank check. The violence of the Israelites against each other in Egypt may have come from a place of trauma rather than a place of supremacy, but it was the same violence. We must be so, so careful to avoid becoming that which we condemn.

Fortunately, Moshe does find a mentor who at least partially helps him guide the people to a better place – physically, spiritually and morally. May we, too, seek to be *mensch*s, and find other *mensch*s who will help hold us accountable to being our best selves.