



GRAPPLING WITH GOD: MOSES

July 21, 2019, Sixth Sunday of Pentecost

Exodus 3:7-17; 4:1-5

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“The battles the Greek heroes had to fight were against their enemies. The battles their Jewish counterparts had to fight were against themselves: their fears, their hesitations, their sense of unworthiness. In that sense, it seems to me the Torah speaks to all of us...”¹ These are the wise and illuminating words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. And they have much to teach us about our text this morning and perhaps about our prayer life.

Today is the second sermon in the series “Grappling with God,” which is exploring how several Biblical texts can inform how we pray. This morning we heard a portion of a conversation that goes on between God and Moses for nearly 40 verses. Five times God instructs Moses on how Moses will liberate his people from bondage and five times Moses dares to contradict God. Jewish *midrash* states that this argument went on for seven days.²

Moses’ story has always been complicated and conflicted. Born as a male child of Jewish slaves, he was marked for execution. Rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh, he was raised in the Egyptian royal family. As an adult he is witness to an Egyptian beating a Jewish slave and he kills the Egyptian. Fearing that Pharaoh would kill him, he runs away into exile. Moses finds a home in Midian where he marries and has the quiet life of a shepherd, until one day he “led his flock beyond the wilderness” and encounters the divine on the Mount Horeb, known as the mountain of God.

Scholars argue that Moses is intentional in going beyond the bounds of his quiet life, as if he were in search of something, perhaps in search of God. But when Moses encounters the divine, he does not seem all that enthusiastic about the result.



God grabs Moses' attention with some pyrotechnical shrubbery but that is nothing compared to the pronouncement to come. "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses is being tasked with liberating his kin from the most powerful empire in the world.

You can almost imagine his hand flying up to make the international symbol of the stop sign. Now, wait a minute, God, are you sure you know what you are doing? His first objection is about himself. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" This man, born an Israelite slave, raised as Egyptian nobility and now living in exile as a Midian shepherd, has no idea who he is.

God's response to Moses' identity crisis is interesting. There is no comment on who Moses is but rather he is told who will be with him, "I will be with you" and what Moses will do, "you shall worship God on this mountain."

Moses' second objection is a question about God's identity. "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" In response to this objection Moses receives another curious response, "I am who I am." Unfortunately the English translation of this line does not do it justice. One of the other ways it can be translated is "I am who I will be." God's identity is fashioned in the form of a promise for the future. Not only am I the God of your ancestors, but I will lead you into a new future.

Moses' third objection to God is his doubt in the people's willingness to follow. His fourth objection is his inability to effectively speak the message he has been given. And the fifth objection is one last begging attempt for God to choose someone, anyone, else. With each objection God promises to provide signs of power and the divine presence. It is a remarkable battle of wills. The author Avivah Zornberg writes this of Moses, "So convinced is he of his own and his people's inadequacy...that he simply contradicts God's version of the future."³



One has to wonder how we have gotten to this place. Moses risks his life and loses his noble standing because he lashes out at the oppression being suffered by his people and kills a man. And then after he builds himself a nice, tidy and safe life in Midian, he chooses to walk away from all of it. Moses journeys far afield, beyond the wilderness to the mountain of God, in search of something.

So what we have is a man who has already risked his life once in defense of his people. And has now journeyed beyond his new, safe life to a place where he is very likely to encounter God. Should he be surprised when God speaks to him and calls him to liberate his people? Could we not argue that that is exactly the call for which he was looking? Did he journey all that way in search of God only to say no to God?

I remind us of what Rabbi Sacks said about Jewish heroes, they “fight...against themselves: their fears, their hesitations, their sense of unworthiness.”⁴ Moses is just as much arguing with himself as he is arguing with God. Even though he has ran all the way to Midian to escape the plight of his people, his journey beyond the wilderness makes it obvious he has not left the reality of their suffering behind.

Clearly Moses is an intriguing and complex character, but what does his struggle with God have to teach us? Perhaps the primary answer is that being deeply faithful does not mean that one lives a life of simple clarity with prayers to God that are nothing but statements of unwavering faith. As we know, Moses’ deep faith would be critical in leading the Israelites to freedom. But that did not mean he did not wrestle with confusion, doubt and fear along the way. What he did not do is let that confusion, doubt and fear keep him from honest conversation with his God. He brought all of his mixed motivations; his passion to free his people and his desire to remain safely ensconced in his life in exile; his boldness to question God and his insecurity about his own talents; his trust that God could indeed defeat the empire of Pharaoh and his doubt that God could achieve such an unlikely triumph with his leadership. Moses lays it all out before God. To harken back to an old spaghetti western movie, the good, the bad and the ugly are all put on full display.



When we come before the creator and the ruler of the universe in prayer it is understandable that we might wish to be on our best behavior. We want to make sure our hair is combed and our teeth are brushed and all the words we use are appropriately pious. We bow our heads and offer prayers that are respectful. We offer words of thanksgiving and praise. We may ask for God to do things but we are also quite clear that we trust in all that God will choose to do. In essence we offer prayers that are faithful and heartfelt.

But these prayers do not always represent all of who we are. Our hair is not always combed, our teeth are not always brushed and sometimes our hearts are filled with more than just thanksgiving, praise and certainty. Sometimes we are filled with more doubt than faith; doubt in ourselves and even doubt in our God. Sometimes we are conflicted and confused about what to do or where to turn next. Sometimes we are frustrated with everyone and everything.

And in those times we can choose to journey out past the land of polite conversation. We can come before God with insecurities and complaints and questions. We can call out that we do not believe we are strong enough to handle what has been brought into our midst. We can raise our doubts about how God is at work in our lives. We can shake our fists in the air like a three year old and announce to God that none of it seems to be very fair. We can speak to God in ways in which we might not feel particularly proud. We can even go so far as to have a tantrum with God. When your young children are having a meltdown, when they are releasing all of their frustrations because the moment has just become too much for them, you do not judge them. You ride out the tantrum and love them.

The same is true for our relationship with God. We are allowed to show all of who we are before the divine. After all, it is not as if God does not know all of what is inside of us, from the best to the worst. But when we choose to honestly express everything we are thinking and feeling to God, we create the opportunity to grow closer to God.



When we are like Moses and we doubt in ourselves to move forward with what is before us, we can be reminded that our God will ever be by our side. When we question what the future holds, we can be reminded that our God has told us, “I am who I will be.” No matter what may come, God’s faithfulness for us will never waver. And no matter how much our faith wavers, our fears rise and our confusion mounts, God will keep returning to us, listening to every word we pray, and seeking to lead us beyond the doubts and fears that enslave us.

The final result of all of Moses’ objections, doubts and fears that he laid before God was that he accomplished what appeared to be impossible. He led his people to freedom. Now I do not know what you and I might be called do together in our lives, but clearly sharing all of who we are with God will lead us to deeper faithfulness – and possibly even to remarkable things.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1 Sacks, Jonathan, *Lessons In Leadership*, Maggid Books, USA, 2015, Introduction, p. xx.

2 Zornberg, Avivah, *The Beginning of Desire*, Doubleday, New York, 1995, p. 85.

3 Zornberg, p. 28.

4 Sacks, p. xx.