Parshat Sh’mot. January 8, 2021

By Sara Karon

I’m pleased to give the d’var Torah this Kabbalat Shabbat in honor of the anniversary of my bat mitzvah, many years ago. Someone asked me the other day if I would give the same d’var that I gave then. I will not, for two reasons – the most compelling of which is that I did not give a d’var at that time. It was not something that was part of the b’nai mitzvah experience at my synagogue growing up, nor was it part of many of the synagogues at which I had friends. It was something that was done in the reform congregations, and my friends and I in the conservative movement were horrified by the thought of having to do that. The second reason that this is not what I would have said at my bat mitzvah is that what I’m about to share with you are thoughts that I’ve only had in recent years.

I want to talk about Moses, who is introduced to us in this parshah. What I remember being taught about Moses as I was in Talmud Torah is the following:

Moses was born at a time when Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all Jewish baby boys. The midwives didn’t carry out these orders, and so Moses and other Jewish baby boys lived. At some time, Moses’ mother and sister took him to the river, floated him in a basket of reeds, and waited for him to be adopted. Pharaoh’s daughter came to the river, saw him, took him home, and raised him in Pharaoh’s palace.

At some time, we are told in the Talmud, Moses was set a test, to see if he posed a threat to the Pharaoh. He was set on the floor, with the Pharaoh’s crown to one side and a fire to the other. If he reached for the crown, he would be deemed a threat to Pharaoh. As he began to reach for that shiny object, an angel of God came and pushed his hand to the fire. He burned his hand, put it in his mouth to cool it, and in so doing burned his lips and tongue. He stuttered ever after, so that when he encountered God at the burning bush and was instructed to go to Pharaoh, he said he couldn’t, because he was “slow of lip and slow of tongue.” God said his brother Aaron would help him.

Between that childhood episode, and the encounter at the bush, though, we know a bit more about Moses. He killed an Egyptian taskmaster that he saw abusing a worker, and was forced to flee. He went to Midian where he became a shepherd. At one time, he was helped a family of sisters water their flock at a well, when they otherwise were being harassed with some men. When they got home and told their father that they had been helped at the well by a stranger, he asked why they had not invited the stranger home; that would have been expected. So, they went back, brought him home, and he ultimately married one of the daughters.

There are other things I learned about Moses’ life, during and after the liberation from Egypt, but these are the stories of his formative years. I’m guessing that what I learned seems familiar to most of you.

A few years ago, I was in shul, the Torah was being read, it was parshah Sh’mot. I don’t recall what tanach I was using, but as I read along, we came to the encounter at the burning bush. “u’chvad peh u’chvad lashon” was chanted, and I read the translation. But, instead of the familiar “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue”, I read “I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue”. And, in that moment of reading that unfamiliar translation, I had a powerful visual image, and I said to myself, “Oh my word! Moses had Down Syndrome!”

I’ve applied that understanding of Moses to the other parts of the story of his life, and find that it makes a lot of sense, and deepens my understanding of the story and experiences. Begin with the ordered killing of Jewish baby boys. While the midwives did not kill them, and told Pharaoh that they were born too quickly for them to kill, that’s an incomplete explanation. Certainly, Pharaoh could have sent others into Jewish homes to search out and kill newborn boys. So, what prevented that? What makes sense to me is that nothing prevented that. Instead, the boys were taken out of the homes before they could be found and killed. It makes sense to me that Moses’ family was not the only one with the thought to float him in the river and see what happened. I can imagine that this became standard practice, and was known to the Israelites and local Egyptians. I can imagine it being a practice, with the local Egyptian women coming to the river, rescuing and adopting the floating babies. They might do that if they had lost a child in childbirth, or miscarried, or simply because they thought it was the right thing to do. Such an intermixing of the two groups also would give some explanation to the fact that Moses led “a mixed multitude” out of Egypt. Egyptians who had raised an Israelite in their home would have a connection to the Israelites and might choose to leave with them.

What does Moses having Down Syndrome add to this understanding? Two things. First, Moses is described as being several months old before he was taken to the river. I don’t expect that was true of the other children. I expect that they were taken very quickly after birth, to avoid discovery and death. But, as a child with a visible disability, Moses may have been assumed to be less of a threat, and so overlooked by the Egyptians who were searching households for hidden babies. His disability may have been perceived to put him at risk of early death, without them needing to murder him. After several months, though, as he grew and gained strength, his life may have come into greater jeopardy, necessitating taking him to the river.

The second piece is his adoption by Pharaoh’s daughter. I imagine her knowing of the practice of having babies placed in the river for adoption. I imagine her wanting to adopt a child, but knowing she could not do so as a child brought into the castle would be perceived as a threat. Ah, but a child with a disability – that would be acceptable. Her father would not perceive such a child as a threat.

So, in the ways that people with disabilities are often perceived as less consequential, Moses came to live in the Pharaoh’s palace.

As a child of the house of Pharaoh, Moses’ killing of a taskmaster should not have been such a problem. He had the backing of the royalty, and could kill whom he wished --- except. . . Except that doing so now raised the possibility that maybe he was a threat to the Pharaoh. And so, it was not the killing that led to his need to flee, but rather that Pharaoh would now perceive him as a threat.

And, what of helping the family at the well? Why did they not bring him home? Again, the spectrum of ableism raises its head. He was not invited home because he was perceived as odd, or different, or less than, at least by some of the women. But, we are taught, when he was brought home, he was respected by their father – his eventual father in law – and married one of the women. A win for people with disabilities!

When Moses tells God that he is heavy of lip and heavy of tongue, God counters, reminding Moses that he created people with all types of disabilities, saying “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” The implication here is that all are God’s creation; none are less than. And then, God tells Moses that Moses’ brother Aaron will help – he will facilitate communication. That is what anyone with any type of disability needs --- facilitation, be it from a person, a building, or a piece of equipment – to help undertake tasks that cannot be done readily without such support. But, before any such facilitation, comes the attitude and belief of welcome and value – of being a creation of God.

Thinking of Moses as having Down Syndrome helped me to understand this parshah in ways that make sense to me, that give me a different and what feels to me like a more realistic insight into Moses’ experiences. But, does this matter to us? Why should this matter?

It’s many years since the exodus from Egypt, but some things have not changed. People with disabilities still may be thought of as less capable, still may not be invited to the table. As I think about Moses as a person with Down Syndrome, and Pharaoh’s expectation that such a person would not pose a threat, I come to the conclusion that the underestimation of a person with a disability worked in our favor, in this case. But, underestimating a person with a disability was a bad mistake for Pharaoh to make, and for any of us.

I also think of the lessons of the Torah that all that is needed is to facilitate participation – in Moses’ case, providing assistance with speech, and other ways. In our own synagogue, we have created some ways of increasing the ability to participate. When we remodeled our building a few years ago, we added push buttons to automate the opening of exterior doors. Our mikveh – which I think is the most beautiful place in the building; if you haven’t seen it, you should – includes a lift that will lower and raise people into and out of the mikveh, if they are unable to walk the steps into it. The table on which we read Torah in the main sanctuary has a pull out shelf, which enables someone who is using a wheelchair to get close enough to read the Torah. It also can be used by someone who is too short to comfortably read off of the main table top, although there also is an option to use a platform to step up higher for those who prefer that. We have hearing loops available for use in the main sanctuary people who are hard of hearing. I mention these things because not everyone is aware of them, and so they may not be used. We have created that tools, but not always they knowledge of their availability. We should do so. Making them known is a part of creating welcome.

As we think about the lessons of our current time of socially distanced gatherings, we also may go forward thinking about how to expand access to our congregation for those who are unable to join us physically, for whatever reasons. We should consider a range of accessibility options, and also think carefully about how the options we choose can facilitate inclusive participation and not participation from a distance. Moses offers a great example. As he led us from a limited known existence in Egypt into an unknown of greater promise of freedom, may this understanding of him as person with Down Syndrome continue to lead us to greater promise.