

SHEMOT

Exodus 3:1 (p328 Soncino)

It's the most famous story in the world. The story so far has been dramatic enough. The Jewish people, a comfortable ethnic minority, are under a new regime, turned into slaves, press-ganged into forced labour to build garrison cities and work in the fields. The midwives are told to kill the Hebrew baby boys, and they commit the first act of civil disobedience by refusing to obey. So Pharaoh made it a law enabling anyone to drown every Jewish baby boy – and it is at this moment that Moses is born. He survives by being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and grows up in Pharaoh's palace, giving him a unique insight into both sides of this conflict.

As an adult he kills an Egyptian he sees beating a Hebrew and he runs for his life to neighbouring Midian, where he meets the daughters of Yitro, the priest of Midian and marries his daughter Zipporah. They have a son, and Moses becomes a shepherd. Assimilated into Midian society, peaceful, settled, free. There's no reason why that shouldn't have been the end of the story for him. The Pharaoh who called for his execution dies but Moses has a new home now, a new family. Perhaps he doesn't even know that there's a new Pharaoh on the throne of Egypt.

Should be the end of the story but of course it's just the beginning. Something is changing in Egypt. The people are crying out. And

because they have had enough – God has taken note. Why did it take God so long to notice? Well when you are being oppressed, nothing is going to change unless you acknowledge your oppression and cry out – Jewish tradition is not about fairy stories or magic. If you want something to change you have to take the first step.

In today's reading, we hear one of the great spiritual encounters of the Bible. Moses is tending his father-in-law's sheep and he encounters a burning bush. Now a bush burning in the dry, hot desert, is not an unusual thing. Think how often there are bush fires in places like Australia or California. What is unusual is the fact that the bush does not burn up. Now if you pass a burning bush in the desert and don't stop, you might think, that's a burning bush, OK. It's only if you stop and look, if you step aside, that you will realise that there is something miraculous going on. And God only decides to speak to Moses once Moses has decided to turn aside from his sheep to look at the bush.

If we want to make change, we need to first stop the routine of our normal, comfortable lives and turn aside and look. We need to notice. Moses didn't need to notice that his people were still being oppressed. He could have carried on auto-pilot, tending the sheep, having babies, living as a Midianite, ignoring what was happening to his people, in the next door country. We could choose to ignore the fact that refugee children are sleeping rough in the winter in

Northern France because our Government won't let them be reunited with their families. We could do that and nothing will change. Or we can turn aside and look. In Pirkei Avot it says, in a place where there are no men, strive to be a man. It's about being a mensch. When all about you are carrying on with their lives, regardless of the suffering – any suffering – that is happening somewhere else, we have to stand up, turn aside, and watch the burning bush. God says I have taken notice of you my people. But if Moses hadn't turned aside, then that's all God could have done, take notice. It takes human action to challenge kings and lead a people out of slavery to the Promised Land.

When God tells Moses to go and free the Israelites, Moses asks – when they ask me what your name is what shall I say? And God says – Ehyeh asher ehyeh. I will be that which I will be. It's not really a name and in fact God is never referred to as ehyeh again in the Torah. It's a statement about the nature of God, who is a verb, rather than a noun, a process of being or becoming, rather than a thing or a person.

God's actual name as revealed in the rest of the story is Yud Heh Vav Heh, also a compound form of the verb "to be". It's God's proper name so you don't say it, you just say Adonai. So God is Being, all of being, all of existence. Everything contains something of God. The founder of the Chasidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, said that

God's name shouldn't be translated as God or Adonai, which means Lord, but Is-Was-Will Be. A bit of a mouthful which is why it didn't catch on I suppose. God's name is a verb made to act as if it were a noun.

I will be that which I will be. Ehyeh asher ehyeh. It's future tense, not past. We are not supposed to worship the past. Ehyeh, I will be, is God as future, of openness to all that is to be. It's about being open, it's about having compassion for whoever we're going to become. When the slaves ask Moses – what's God's name? Moses needs to tell them something that will give them hope and courage. So God says – Tell them, Ehyeh sent you. It's as though God says – I AM tomorrow.

It is always worth turning aside to look, to stop what we are doing, to pay attention to what is happening outside our own daily life and know that tomorrow can be better than today. That change is always possible. That more than anything else, is the message of the Exodus story.