

“The Evolution of Revolution: Who steps forward?”  
Rabbi Dara Frimmer

Adonai said to Avram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. (Genesis 12:1-2)

It is a powerful charge from God to man: Step forward into the unknown and I will make you, Avram, the father of a great nation. I will bless you, Avram. I will make your name great, Avram. You shall be a blessing...Avram.

Our tradition seems to favor the story of the Hero, the Rebel, the Leader. Less often we see the veneration of the Masses, the Group, the People. The reputation of stiff-necked, stubborn, sullen Israelites wandering through the wilderness with only bitter words between their teeth drives us back into the arms of waiting Hero. The builders of Babel, Yosef's brothers, Korach's entourage....no, our tradition loves the One: the Champion; the Chess Master; the Conqueror.

In this week's Torah portion, we find a misplaced vignette: a war between nine kings and one, lone Hero. Effortlessly, Avram rescues his captive nephew Lot, gallantly refuses his share of war treasure, and seals a political pact with the priest-king Melchizedek. *Misplaced vignette or superb narrative twist?* “The one who displayed fear and evasiveness in Egypt now shows himself to be decisive and courageous in the Promised Land. The man of peace knows how to exhibit skill and heroism in battle.” (Nahum Sarna, JPS Commentary to Genesis) We love the Hero.

We love the Hero and we want to be the Hero. Yet, we spend most of our lives doubting our ability to act - to step forward. We tend to underestimate the power we have. But our tradition believes in us: believes in our capacity to change; to transform ourselves; to transform the world "as it is" to the world "as it should be." We are called a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. It is not just the Hero who is chosen. Our tradition chooses us, as well.

And it's the *choosing* that troubles the rabbis: Why Avram? At least Noach was characterized as blameless in his generation; but of our chosen one, Avram, we know nothing. It troubles me, too. Why Avram? Why did God choose just One, when many might have filled the role?

Tradition teaches that as we reached the Red Sea, Moshe lifted his staff, the waters parted and we passed through on dry land. But there's another version of the story: a version told by the rabbis in a midrash, a commentary on the miraculous events of Exodus.

The Torah teaches: *And the Children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground* (Exodus 14:22). The rabbis reply: How is this possible? If they went into the sea, then why does it say upon the dry ground? And if they went upon the dry ground, then why does it say into the midst of the sea? This is to teach that the sea was divided only after Israel had stepped into it and the waters had reached their noses, only then did it become dry land. (Midrash Rabbah - Exodus 21:10)

It was not Moshe's staff that split the waters. It was the people moving forward together. Our ancestors, unified in purpose and vision, they stepped forward together and the waters parted. No one thought it was possible and still they took a step forward. Together.

Many years have passed since our ancestors stood at the Sea. And we find ourselves facing a new tide of seemingly insurmountable obstacles -- poverty, war, the erosion of our environment, threats to security across the globe -- ongoing, overwhelming crises that many of us are working hard to address. We stand at the Sea and we wonder how we will cross.

If I raise my staff like Moshe, no waters will part. If I raise my staff, nothing is going to happen. However, if we join together, with our passion for justice, and our commitment to see change in our lives and in our world - if we take action together -- 50 of us, 500 of us, 2000 of us -- if we step forward and demand to see changes made, the waters will begin to part.

Look at our history, our heritage, our family album: We are a people that steps forward. Avram journeyed forth into an unknown land. Years later, B'nei Yisrael, the inheritors of this great tradition, walked into the Sea. We love the Hero, but we are more powerful as a Group.

Consider the evolution of revolution: How have leadership styles changed over time? What role does Hero play? What role have we assigned the Group? How effective are we at empowering large groups of people to bring about their own redemption?