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The Still, Small Voice
Yom Kippur 5775
October 4, 2014

This past Shabbat we read Parshat Ha'azinu, which contains a song of warning that Moses recites for the people he loved, cared for, and shepherded through the wilderness for forty years. As he concludes, God tells him to ascend Mt. Nebo, and view the land that was promised to Abraham's descendants. In a matter of days, the Israelites will possess it. But Moses, who endured trials and tribulations leading this people to its border will not enter the land with them. Instead, he will die alone, on top of that mountain; his final resting place known only to God.

From the perspective of the reader, it's a troubling way for this story to end. A conclusion marked not by triumph and celebration, but with mystery and uncertainty. Perhaps we should expect no less for Moses. After all, from the very beginning, his life follows a path unlike any other.

Moses was destined for greatness even before he had a name; plucked from obscurity by Batya, a daughter of Pharaoh, who lifted him out of the Nile and was determined to raise him to be a prince. But as he grew and explored the world, Moses' sense of righteous indignation upset his mother's best laid plans.

We all know the story, that Moses, witnessing a taskmaster beat an Israelite slave, struck, and killed him. And we take it as fact, that a man with blood-stained hands was no longer fit to maintain his royal status; that when Pharaoh heard what Moses had done, he sought to kill him, forcing Moses to flee his birthplace; turning a prince into a wanderer. But something seems to be missing. This story just doesn't add up.

Was it really the case that an act of violence, even murder, by a member of a royal family, not only disqualified Moses from ruling, but necessitated a hasty flight to save his life? Perhaps. But far more likely, Pharaoh's response to Moses' act was motivated, not by the death of a taskmaster, but by its underlying cause.

When Moses struck him down, the taskmaster had broken no law. He was merely doing his job, enforcing Pharaoh's decree, ensuring that the men under his charge did their work. They were slaves after all, commanded to do Pharaoh's bidding, with no rights of their own. More than murder, Moses' intervention was an act of sedition against the unquestioned norms of society; an attack against the foundations of Egypt.

Slaves were a vital part of the Egyptian economy. How do you think all those pyramids were built? Slaves were also considered property, subject to the whim of their master. An individual who looked at a slave and saw the dignity of human life could not be permitted to rule, or even remain present as a symbol; he would be the ruin of Egypt. This is why Pharaoh wanted him dead. And this is why Moses needed to flee.

Those years he spent in the wilderness, when he married, became a shepherd, and had two sons – those

were quiet times. Life settled down; his routine became unconscious. The rebelliousness of his youth must have seemed like someone else's life. But every now and then, when a storm blew in, he could swear he heard cries in the wind. And he was never sure if they were memories from days gone by, or the voices of those who were suffering still.

Though his days were filled, they were not always peaceful. More and more frequently Moses heard a call and struggled to ignore it. And no matter how hard he tried to put it out, the flame that was kindled in his heart would not be extinguished. Moses knew what was right. He knew that he should return, but for more than 40 years he delayed, struggling with the consequences that decision would create.

Change requires effort and entails risk. It is much easier to live unconsciously, to travel the same path day after day, year after year, to silence that still, small voice, than it is to accept the responsibility and consequences of listening to the call of one's conscience. We all hear that call, every so often, but how often are we willing to respond to it?

A month ago I had the opportunity to hear a talk by Mosab Hassan Yousef at a Rabbinic Symposium in Washington DC sponsored by AIPAC. Mosab happens to be the featured speaker at our AIPAC program this December. I sat in a room, along with about 400 other rabbis, and we were all blown away. He mesmerized the room.

Mosab is a unique individual who carries himself with strength and humility. As the eldest son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a revered teacher and founding father of Hamas, Mosab was raised with an expectation that he too would be a leader of his people. He grew up in the early '90's, during the first Intifada, as Palestinians were rebelling against Israeli military rule. In addition to the sights and sounds of the uprising, Mosab saw its impact in the small cemetery around the corner from his home, as it filled with the graves of his classmates and friends.

Like anyone living in this environment, Mosab developed a hatred towards Israel, fueled by the ideology of Hamas and the repression and violence of Israel's occupation. Reading his account of these years in his book Son of Hamas, one cannot help but feel the pain and misery that Israel's occupation has had on generations of Palestinians. It's one thing to understand and defend Israel's obligation to protect its people from terrorism. It's quite another, not to acknowledge the heavy toll this takes on a population forced to live under military rule.

Growing up in this environment, like others of his generation, Mosab recognized the path laid out for him. He would join the resistance and become a martyr. He purchased a gun, intending to shoot as many soldiers as he was able. But before he could carry out his plan, Mosab was arrested, beaten, tortured, and sent to an Israeli prison camp. The prison camp was divided into four quadrants, with prisoners from the various Palestinian factions segregated into tents where they would live with others from their movement. Fatah members lived in one area, Hamas in another.

It was here, in this camp, that Mosab had an awakening. Instead of finding an environment where Palestinians lived according to the principles of Islam espoused by his father, where men who were fighting for the same cause treated each other like brothers, he witnessed a micro-society that was organized by acts of cruelty and abuse, where power was seized through brutality and maintained by punishing the weak and afflicting the outcast.

After witnessing numerous episodes of senseless violence and hate, Mosab experienced enduring doubt, which challenged his deep-seated beliefs about the nature of Palestinian society. He writes:

I asked myself what Palestinians would do if Israel disappeared – if everything not only went back to the way it was before 1948 but if all the Jewish people abandoned the Holy Land and were scattered again. And for the first time, I knew the answer.

We would still fight. Over nothing. Over a girl without a head scarf. Over who was toughest and most important. Over who would make the rules and who would get the best seat.

It was the end of 1999. I was twenty-one years old. My life had begun to change, and the more I earned, the more confused I became.

“God, the Creator, show me the truth,” I prayed day after day. “I’m confused. I’m lost. And I don’t know which way to go.” (pg. 124)

Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of a founder of Hamas, a future leader of his people, saw a society beset by hypocrisy and hate, corruption and violence. He had a choice. He could close his eyes to what he saw, push aside his disgust, comfort himself with the knowledge that men, far more experienced than he, with good reputations, leaders of his people, that surely they had a reason for allowing this situation to exist. Or, he could have taken solace in the knowledge that, regardless of the conditions that the rest of the Palestinian people would face, he and his family would still do well.

But Mosab saw, not only the senseless violence inflicted on his society, he also saw the innocent Israelis who were being murdered and maimed by this culture of death and hate. Should he ignore the voice that rang in his heart, in order to maintain his place among his people and bring honor to his family? Could he ignore the damage it caused to his soul? Or must he heed that call, make a radical change and forge a new path, with all the risks and challenges it entailed?

As you can probably guess, like Moses, Mosab, is a hero who listened to his heart and embraced that inner call to be true to himself, to do what he knew was right, despite the costs. Mosab became an undercover agent for Israel’s Shin Bet. He explained his decision by saying: “I needed to do what I could to save people. There was no greater work I could be doing...How can you be wrong saving innocent lives?”

Friends, it is a true blessing that most of us will never face a situation as profound as the one confronted by Mosab. But that doesn’t mean that we aren’t acquainted with the same emotional conflicts. The pull of a conscience telling us to change our course, versus the comfort and familiarity of maintaining a way of life which, despite its flaws, we’ve become accustomed to. The fact is, at every age and stage of life, there’s an inner voice calling out to us, reminding us that we were created in the image of God, urging us to live up to our highest selves, to be the people we are capable of becoming.

In Grade School that voice told us to play nicely, to be fair. In Middle School it urged us not to bully; to ignore the noise of the popular crowd and be proud of who we are and where we come from. In High School it urged us to make good decisions, not to get so caught up with experiencing every pleasure today, that we’d do something we’d regret for the rest of our lives. In College that voice urged us not to take advantage of others, to be grateful for our blessings, and to share our gifts. For those who are married, it calls us to be honest and true, to keep our commitments. For those with children, it challenges us to be loving but also firm, to make sure that children leave our homes with the skills they need to be able to take care of themselves.

When we look in the mirror it screams out for us to love ourselves; crying that beauty is more than skin deep. When we see the next, best, greatest thing advertised on TV, it tells us to be satisfied with our lot. When we get caught up in fantasies, it reminds us to keep our promises, that real life is messy, and that

things don't always taste as good as they look.

When we've had a little too much to drink, it calls out: don't be stupid. When we can't stop spending more than we should it shouts: Get help. If we realize that our sexuality is not what we thought it was, it demands: Be honest, be brave, have the strength to be true to yourself, have the courage to let those who love you, love *you*.

Mosab took on a mission. He chose truth over falsehood, life over death. He chose to leave behind hypocrisy and hate, and give honor to the image of God which resides in each of us. He chose a messy, complicated life, over a simple path where he lied to himself. He is a great man, a man who listened to that inner voice; a man who, despite the costs, is able to be at peace with himself, at peace with his lot.

Moses too, listened to the voice. He gave up a life of comfort and security to fulfill a mission only he could achieve, to bring freedom and justice to the enslaved. This mission became his life and led to the birth of our people. He may not have reached the promised land, but by being true to his calling, he found peace within, and the grace of knowing that he walked with God.

You and I, we also have missions, perhaps not as exalted as Mosab or as elevated as Moses, but every bit as vital – to hear the voice that calls out in us, to face the challenges it presents to our established routines, to fulfill the potential that too often lies dormant in each of our souls.

We have one shot at life. This is it. We can live unconsciously, follow the crowd, close our eyes to the hypocrisy in our lives, or we open our heart and listen, hear that still, small voice and fulfill the sacred mission that was intended for us.

On this day of atonement, may you not only hear the voice that calls out from within – may this be the day you begin to listen. Amen.