

Exodus Interrupted

Read Exodus 6:1—7:7 slowly, carefully, and preferably with a friend. The narrative describes God preparing Moses for the great event of liberation from Egypt. The dialogue between God and Moses is intense. But you will notice that it is suddenly interrupted in 6:14 by a genealogy, after which their dialogue resumes.

What is the point of this interruption?

Certainly, family trees are common in the Bible, but why now? And why does it not provide a full list of Jacob's descendants (for after naming the households of Reuben, Simeon, Levi it stops)?

Is this simply an editorial accident in the text? Remember that in *Light of Torah* we work with traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture, and so we apply ourselves prayerfully and imaginatively to excavating God's word in search of spiritual meanings buried within the text. What did you find?

In the midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions), the voice of Rabbi Ya'akov focuses on 6:13 and the meaning of "He commanded them" (or "he gave them orders", NRSV). The order to be given to Pharaoh is clear. But what was the order for the Israelites? The text doesn't say, but the midrash concludes that God was calling for the involvement of the Israelite leaders and it is for this reason that the text begins naming the heads of tribes.

Following this midrashic lead, we can imagine Moses and Aaron going from house to house, calling for partners in the liberation to follow. Despairing of a response from the tribe of Reuben, they move on to the tribe of Simeon. Unsuccessful there, they seek support from their own tribe, the Levites. At this point the genealogy stops, suggesting—say some Torah commentators—that Moses and Aaron recognize their aloneness in this mission. For "they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit" (6:9). The truth dawns: it is just the two of them...and God.

At this point Moses' dialogue with the Lord continues; but note the shift compared to that which preceded the genealogy. This time Moses is not sent to speak to the Israelites, he is simply told to confront Pharaoh with precisely the words that God places in his mouth. God's proactive role is more pronounced and Moses' role as God's prophet is emphasized. This is not going to be a humanly orchestrated uprising. This is going to be a divine showdown where God acts decisively, gratuitously, for the sake of his chosen people. The drama builds, and God is leading the way...

Where do you find yourself in this sacred story? Can you relate it to an experience of call-and-response in your own life's journey?

Bibliography: Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People* (New Jersey, 2008); Sarna, ed., *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1991); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 1999). Scripture: JPS.

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