

The second book of the Bible is called Exodus, a Greek word which is a cousin to which word, "Exit," which means "going out."

In Hebrew we call this book of the Bible "Shemot," which is the Hebrew word for "names." And indeed, the book begins with a long list Jacobs' sons, but there's much more going on than just genealogy.

This is the part of the Torah where we meet Moses. We hear his story and get to know him both as a person and as a leader. We learn about the new Pharaoh and how he didn't know Joseph or anything about what Joseph had done for the Egyptian people. And we find out that things in Egypt have changed. The Jews are now slaves and their male children, their little boy babies, have been drowned in the Nile River. That is, all except for one.

It is Moses who is saved -- by his big sister Miriam who weaves a basket, puts her little baby brother in it, and floats it down the river. Pharaoh's daughter, who is taking a nice long bath in the river, sees the basket, rescues the baby, names him Moses (an Arabic name that means "from the water") and raises him as her own.

There is a wonderful book that has been around for some years now. It is an inspirational book called Suddenly Jewish, and it's about Jews who were raised as Gentiles, just like Moses was, and how they discover their Jewish roots.

The book is organized into vignettes about how these people found out about their Jewish heritage and how they reacted when they knew. I've met and taught a lot of people in similar situations, specifically many Italians and Italian Americans who found out that traditions they observed and rituals they practiced were imbedded in Jewish tradition. And through our Cultural Center in Calabria they found their way back to Judaism.

These men and women and all those profiled in Suddenly Jewish, had one thing in common. They had that feeling -- that little nudge deep down in their heart and soul -- that sense of Yiddishkeit. They were drawn, as they often said, for some unknown reason, to the Jewish people. They read about the religion, studied when they could and hung out with other Jews. To these hidden meshpucha, the Jewish way of life was like a magnet.

For Moses, it was the same thing. Moses couldn't keep his eyes off of the slave masters and how they treated their Jewish slaves. His heart ached to see how they were treated.

With every beating, with every blow, our Moses (to steal a phrase from a recent US president) "felt their pain." It bothered him. It haunted him. He couldn't get their suffering out of his mind.

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And one day Moses finally snapped. He saw this Egyptian brute beating a Jew and for Moses that was the last straw. It was almost as if he was being beaten as well. He flew into a rage, grabbed the slave master and went crazy with anger. Before Moses knew what had happened, the master was lying dead on the ground, and it was Moses who had killed him.

Imagine the scene. When he sees what he has done, Moses is stunned. He looks at his hands in disbelief. He hears the growing clamor of the crowd and the marching of approaching soldiers. Moses knows, as they say in the Old Westerns. that it's time to "Get out of Dodge." Moses runs.

He goes all the way to Midian where Jethro, a local priest, welcomes him and gives him shelter, and a job, tending sheep, and promises that his daughter, Zipporah can become his wife.

And then, it happens. Moses is out tending the flock, having an any old kinda day, when Whoosh! It happens. A bush catches on fire, but, lo and behold, it doesn't burn up. Instead the bush just burns and burns and burns and it catches Moses' attention.

Then, in what is the longest dialogue in the Bible between God and anybody, it is God who speaks directly to Moses. And in one of the most well remembered scene in the entire Bible, God tries to persuade Moses to go back to Egypt and become the leader of the Jewish people and tell Pharaoh to "Let My People Go!"

What happens next is very interesting. Moses listens but then he tries to get out of it. He uses all kinds of arguments. Wouldn't you? This is a big assignment and a dangerous one. If we had the same chance, wouldn't we want to do what Moses did? Wouldn't we want to beg off, too?

At first, I think Moses was tempted to say, Yes. After all, he had seen the presence and the power of God right in front of him, in the form of a burning bush. It's clear that he cares about his people who are suffering in Egypt. He already demonstrated that by decking the evil slave master.

But then, Moses shakes his head, reconsiders and then withdraws. Moses thinks, "Who am I to carry out such a difficult task?"

But God's not taking No for an answer. God reassures Moses saying "I will be with you on the way." Then God waits as Moses takes a long pause. And finally in the awkward silence between the two of them, Moses agrees -- sort of.

Moses says, "If I do this, and I'm saying "if." When I come to the Israelites and tell them that You have sent me, and then what if they ask me your Name? What should I tell them?"

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Moses' question to God about what name to call him shows us that Moses is already considering making the trip to Egypt. He's thinking it through. He's wondering that if he takes this on, how will he proceed. How will he handle the skeptics and doubters that he's bound to encounter not only in Pharaoh's palace, but among the Hebrew slaves as well.

But God is right on Moses' case and doesn't miss a beat. He answers Moses' question and then goes on to tell him exactly what will happen, how Pharaoh will fight to hold onto the Jewish slaves, how God will defeat Pharaoh, how the people will get gifts from their Egyptian neighbors before they leave and how they will come to this very mountain to worship the Lord.

But then, out of the blue Moses panics and says, "Wait a minute here. Pharaoh won't believe me and worse yet, neither will my people."

And God agrees and seems to be saying to Moses, "OK OK, you've got a good point. So God gives Moses a number of signs. First there's the rod that turns itself into a snake and then becomes a rod again and then hand that has leprosy and then is healed, and water that becomes blood. God has thought of everything. He gives Moses just the tools he needs to accomplish the task.

So if Moses was almost ready to say yes, then surely these signs should do the trick and convince him to go. You'd think. But NOOOOOOOO! Moses panics yet again.

All of Moses' rationalizations have been used up. And I can relate because in my own life, I've been in the same spot as Moses and I'm sure you have, too.

For example, a friend calls and it's someone you like and someone you haven't seen for a while. She says, "Let's go to lunch tomorrow." You say, "Tomorrow I'm busy." And secretly you breathe a sigh of relief that you're off the hook.

But then she says, "If tomorrow's no good. Then how about Thursday?"

"You say, "Thursday's my hair appointment." And then you make a mental note to be sure to call the salon and make an appointment for Thursday.

Then she says, "No problem, you pick the day." And you say, as much as you really don't want to, as much as you wish you didn't have to, -- you finally tell the truth and you say, "Look, it's not that I don't want to have lunch with you. It's not you. It's me. I've been having these funny feelings -- panic attacks sort of -- I get claustrophobic in crowds, and sometimes in restaurants. It's a problem and I just can't go."

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And you feel bad and glad at the same time. Glad you told the truth but bad that the situation had forced you to speak about something that you'd rather have kept private.

Well, if ever something like that has happened to you, you're not alone. Our Moses felt the same. When push came to shove and God kept pressing him. Moses finally said that he's really not afraid of Pharaoh and really not afraid of the people. Moses is afraid of myself.

Moses says, "Ki ki-vad pe u-chad lashon on-no-chi," which means, send someone else. Please, God, send someone else for I am, literally, a person with a heavy mouth and a heavy tongue. I am a person with a handicap, a person with a disability.

Nowhere in the Torah until now does Moses ever mention his difference. Not to his wife, not to his children, not to anyone. But it's there as a part of his consciousness and now, and only now, and to God and only to God, does he let this difference surface. This is the only time that Moses talks about his disability out loud.

In this passage we get a glimpse into Moses' soul. We feel what Moses feels. He's tortured and maybe even embarrassed at the fact that he has a difficult time putting words together and getting them out. Who knows? Maybe that's why he became a shepherd, so that he could be alone in the fields and not have to talk to people very much.

It's only half a sentence, but what Moses says is revealing. This is the real reason Moses didn't want to go. He makes no other excuses and when God offers him help saying, "I will be with you, and I will send your brother, Aaron to go along too, as the spokesperson. With those reassuring words, and now, without reservation, Moses gets on board.

What I've learned from what Moses says about himself and his disability is that apart from everything else, success is a matter of attitude. Sometimes a negative feeling, sometimes a disability can destroy self-esteem and gnaw away at a person's sense of worth. It can have a negative effect on anyone, even a Moses. Or not. It all depends on how we perceive ourselves and how much we allow ourselves or other people to define us by our weaknesses, rather than our strengths.

As many of you know, in another life I was a teacher and a puppeteer. As a teacher I used puppets to teach about disabilities and differences. I made puppets that represented children who were hearing impaired, visually impaired, who had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair, who had seizures because of epilepsy.

They were called The Kids on the Block and I wrote stories about their lives. These stories were designed to help children understand that a disability is only one part of a person, not the whole part, and over the years I talked with lots of people, parents and kids, disabled and not, who gave me ideas about what to say.

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I remember one woman who was the mother of a little girl who was hearing impaired -- what we used to call deaf. And she had a speech difference, too (maybe like Moses) that we used to call "dumb."

I asked this mom what it was like when Rebecca was born. Well, the mom said, "the reactions were interesting. One aunt said, "What a shame she's deaf... and she was such a pretty little girl."

What did that mean? The mom asked. "That now that we know that Rebecca is deaf she is no longer pretty? Or maybe that only ugly children should lose their hearing?"

And one neighbor told the mom, "I was knitting a baby blanket for baby Rebecca, but when I found out that she was handicapped, I just stopped." As though, the mother said to me, "having a disability is a death sentence."

Old attitudes die hard. Maybe that's what Moses' story is trying to tell us. And maybe Moses' experience with his speech difference is a wake-up call for all of us.

After all, Moses is considered by many as our greatest leader. What might have happened to the Jewish people if God had let him off the hook and said, "Poor Moses. You're disabled. We can't expect much from you."

Or what if Moses had been unrelenting --. A victim full of self-pity, who whined, "Leave me alone, God, Can't you see I'm disabled, I just can't."

But neither of those two things happened. Instead, God, as our role model, encouraged Moses. "I'll be with you," God said. And Moses, sensing that acceptance and support, said, 'OK, God, I'll do it."

As we read Shemot, and focus our attention on Moses, our great leader, our superb teacher, our brother with a disability, we have the opportunity to use God as our guide. Our goal is to become more than just tolerant of persons with differences. We work for something more. We use Moses as our role model to learn how to become more accepting. But most of all, when we meet, or work with, or live next door to a person with a disability we work to become appreciative -- appreciative of life's differences, because it is life's differences that enhance us all.

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