

Pesach
Freedom and Dignity in Being Seen
Yali Szulanski - Class of 2025

It is an act of courage and of kindness, when we see suffering in our midst, to do something about it. This is especially true when the one who suffers is quiet, forgotten, or cast aside. When suffering is obvious – when we hear wailing, participate in mourning, or see continuous coverage – responding to it feels urgent and natural. But most of the time, pain in our communities is quiet, hidden, and lonely. We often fail to see it, let alone to address it.

Going through a challenging time is an experience of struggle and isolation. Our communal spaces may be buzzing with activity, but those who suffer silently begin to slowly disconnect. Most, therefore, often find themselves toiling away in a private *Mitzrayim*, building fortresses they hope will provide them shelter and support. From the moment Moshe saw the suffering of his kinsfolk, they were no longer invisible. In fact, they became the focus of the story. Opening our eyes to those in our communities who struggle allows them to become part of the narrative in the same way – to write stories where they are included.

Freedom for the Jewish people started with a simple act of seeing. Moshe, raised in comfort and privilege, walks out of Pharaoh's palace and sees, for the first time, the suffering of the Hebrew slaves. While Moshe grows to adulthood in the palace, and enjoys the resources available to him there, he is seemingly ignorant of the people living adjacent to, but not part of, the same environment. Everything changes when Moshe sees the suffering of the Hebrew slaves. In that moment, he identifies with them.

וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אַחֵיוּ וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלֵתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֵּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאַחָיו

Moshe went out to his kinsfolk, and saw their suffering, and saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man, one of his brothers” (*Shemot* 2:11)

Rashi takes it a step further, and tells us that Moshe not only saw their suffering, but also empathized with it, that he “set his eyes and mind to share in their distress” (Rashi on *Shemot* 2:11). This simple act of empathy – of aligning himself with the suffering of his brethren, of feeling it so deeply in his body that he is compelled to act – forever changes the way this society operates.

While it takes several decades – a lot of soul searching, a lost sheep, and a few miracles to get there – once Moshe sees the suffering of his people, he is unable to disconnect from it. In fact, he is compelled to dedicate his entire life to leading them to freedom, and letting them live with dignity. When Moshe kills the oppressor, he begins a journey of bringing a marginalized community to light, allowing them to claim their identity and live with dignity.

This week is rich with Torah about emerging from darkness to light. We gather at Seders to retell the story of *Bnei Yisrael's* journey to freedom, and of Moshe's innovative leadership. We sing of our people's path from slavery to freedom, and rejoice when the sea splits, and we step forth into our identity as Jewish people. At most Seder tables, there will be a variety of *haggadot* that tell the story of Pesach from a unique perspective. Sometimes, though, there may be people at our tables who do not see themselves in the story being told. Sometimes, those people are children, who then internalize the narrative that their existence isn't relevant - doesn't matter - doesn't count.

When a child does not fit into the narrative - perhaps they are struggling with mental health challenges, perhaps they are neurodiverse, or perhaps there is something else they battle silently - families need nurturing, support, information, and help, often facing conflicting interests involving the school, the synagogue, and the care team. When a child cannot function in their school, the family often disengages from their synagogue and friends to conserve energy for the child's care. This, in turn, impacts the family's spiritual wellness. This, in turn, makes them harder to see.

This Shabbat we take out two *Sifrei Torah*. In the first, we read seven *aliyot* from *Parashat Ki Tissa*. In this reading, Moshe is having a particularly poignant exchange with God. We zoom into a moment immediately following the sin of the Golden Calf, where *Bnei Yisrael* lost their trust in God and Moshe and begged for a leader they could see. Moshe asks for God to reveal Godself to him - to give the people something they can see. Moshe, having just passionately argued for the forgiveness of *Bnei Yisrael* asks God to be seen:

וְעַתָּה אִם־נָא מִצְאֹתֵי ה' בְּעֵינַי הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת־דַּרְכֶּךָ וְאִדְעֶךָ לְמַעַן אֲמַצְאֶחֶן בְּעֵינַי וְרָאֶה כִּי עִמָּךְ הִגֹּוֹי הַזֶּה:

Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor. Consider, too, that this nation is Your people.”
(*Shemot* 33:12)

Moshe says: Please let me see you, and please see us so that we can thrive. God and Moshe go back and forth, with Moshe pleading for God to show God's face, and God responding that any human seeing God's true form would be led to death. In this exchange, we notice, perhaps, that God relates to the plight of the unseen, to the quiet suffering of those in the margins. As a final agreement, God allows Moshe to see - but not fully - the divine form:

וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת־כַּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֵרַי וּפְנֵי לֹא יֵרְאוּ: {פ}
Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen. (*Shemot* 33:23)

The *Mishneh Torah* deepens our understanding of this statement by adding nuance to this moment, suggesting that Moshe seeing the Divine form is more than just a moment of

proof, but rather a moment of acknowledgement. When we really see someone, their identity is distinguished within our mind from that of other people.

וְנִחְקְקָה צוּרְתּוֹ בְּלִבּוֹ שֶׁנִּמְצָא אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ נִפְרָד בְּדַעְתּוֹ מִשְׂאָר הָאֲנָשִׁים.
(משנה תורה, הלכות יסודי התורה א'')

...and a person whose image has been engraved within one's heart. Thus this person's identity is distinguished within one's mind from that of other people. (*Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of the Torah, 1:6)

Moshe and God reach an understanding in their shared space in which they venture with vulnerability and emotional honesty. Moshe, who sees the suffering in his midst, lives with the mission to ease it, and God who knows that some of his children struggle with the path before them. It is in the calling to Moshe to carve a new set of tablets that God compassionately welcomes back the struggling children - by giving them another chance. It is in these second chances, these new ways of seeing, that those who struggle find their way back into community life. In the end, God reveals to Moshe the 13 divine attributes of mercy, in which we receive a blueprint for how to navigate the world with kindness, compassion, and inclusivity. Like God, we must be slow to anger, full of repentance and self-reflection, and we must be kind. (*Shemot* 34:7)

When we are able to see people for who they are - as whole, beautiful, ever-changing, and contributing members of our communities - we are able to create the spaces for them. When we open those spaces, we are able to embrace more of our communities in the spaces where we congregate. When we are able to notice those who are missing from the story, or those who are not present at our tables - we are able to fully live in our values of compassion and inclusion. We must ask ourselves what it is that we are not seeing; we must find out what it is that we do not know; and we must open the doors within our communities to ease the quiet suffering of our people.

As Moshe brought *B'nai Yisrael* agency, dignity, identity and freedom, so can we do the same for the children of God who beg for us to see them.



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