

(#24) Lagged, Late, So Long

In terms of narrative in the Book of Exodus, our discussion has not yet progressed very far. As I close out Part 1 of this book, I ask you to jump ahead about 20 chapters, to another dramatic point:

God has told Moses, “Come up to Me into the mount and be there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the law and the commandment, which I have written, to teach them” (Ex 24:18, JPS adapted). Things are progressing with teachings, including elaborate instructions for constructing a traveling wilderness worship space. Eight chapters later, however, God tells Moses to go back down, because “your people, the people you brought out of *Mitzrayim*, has become corrupt” (Ex 32:7).

...Use of “your people” (masculine singular) here, in God speaking to Moses, lends itself to more commentary suggesting that perhaps the *erev rav* are responsible for what looks like idolatrous behavior and that Moses is responsible for this group of people coming along on the Exodus. Perhaps we’ll explore this further in Part 2 of this book. Meanwhile...

Whenever translations vary a great deal, that is a clue that there is something interesting going on with the Hebrew. See Source Pages for some different ways of looking at what happened: It seems that Moses was “late” or he “lagged” or was “so long,” and this led to a crisis, known as the “incident of the Golden Calf” (Ex 32:1ff).

One way I’ve come to envision this Torah moment is like this: Imagine you’re on a roadtrip with relative strangers to parts unknown, when the driver disappears behind a creepy truck-stop. Is he seeking directions or obtaining supplies? In need of privacy – to relieve himself, or meditate, whatever? Or, given that we barely know these fellow travelers, are we sure we rule out that driver might be up to no good, something we’d rather not witness or be party to?

Unless the instruction before he disappeared were dramatic and very specific – like “give me ten minutes and then come after me” or “wait twenty minutes and then take off, no matter what” – how do we decide what to do and when, as his return is delayed? If the driver left someone else in charge, do we automatically trust them? If our relationships to other travelers are stronger than links to a leader, will factions develop? How long do we wait before declaring “enough is enough” and commandeering the car or going our own ways?

I suspect that most of us, at some point, have been in a situation of uncertainty and some gravity which forced us to decide, for safety and sanity, if and when to bail.

We’ve probably been involved in situations, too -- in our public politics if not on a personal road trip -- in which someone claims to speak for God and all involved have to decide whom to trust and how to move forward, individually and collectively.

Return, for a moment, to the “Another River” section at the start of this book:

**This right here is the purpose of this book:
Re-reading Exodus
so that Jews and non-Jews,
with our varied relationships, and lack thereof, to text and tradition,
can together find new ways to think about, and jointly act for, liberation.**

Perhaps you are reading these words shortly after the book's release date in late March 2020;
or maybe you've reached this stage in late April, 24 days into *Sefira*;
or you might be reading at another time entirely.

Many readers will find this page while the Rona (COVID-19) is still making our lives more uncertain than we had once thought usual. And, dear reader, your author is having a hard time imaging what life will be like in the Nation's Capitol, its underbelly or elsewhere, in the rest of the U.S., or beyond.

...So, what are we supposed to do when faced with uncertainty?

Most of the Golden Calf story does not offer the best model for handling a crisis or any kind of situation. It does remind us of how frightening uncertainty can be, on our own and within a community. The Golden Calf story warns us of how dangerous it is to let that fright convince us to jump to conclusions and then launch into action, thinking that we know the answers.

Considering the problems that arose due to delay or lag or lateness, I am reminded, too, of a phrase from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail: Justice too long delayed is justice denied.

Like so much in Jewish tradition, this leaves us in the tension between two ideas: not acting precipitously from fear, on the one hand; on the other, not allowing fear to keep us from action when it's time, in the tag-line of We Act Radio, to

#dosomething.

Sefira: Counting Days & Weeks/Marking the Journey

How are we doing on this Rereading Exodus journey?
Where have we yet to travel?
What more needs to be said about avenues we've already explored?

**After nightfall, see Appendix and note --
Yesterday we counted twenty-three.**

Possibly something was lost or deliberately omitted from biblical text at some point. It seems likely, however, that Exodus is simply not concerned with the backgrounds of the woman who raised Moses or of his birth mother. Neither woman is named during the early reporting on his origins. Nor is Moses' father, for that matter.

Later (Exodus 6:20), the names Amram and Yocheved (Jocheved, Jochebed) are introduced for Moses' parents, and they appear several more times in the Torah. Pharaoh's daughter does not appear again after her six verses, and she remains unnamed in the Bible. She is called "*Batya*" or "*Bitya*," which means "Daughter of God," in later Jewish tradition.

In one midrash, it is God who names Pharaoh's daughter [*Bat Pharaoh*]:

Rabbi Yehoshuah taught in the name of Rabbi Levi that The Holy one said to Batyah the daughter of Pharaoh: Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son; you, too, though you are not My daughter, yet I will call you My Daughter. This is why it says: "These were the sons of Bithiah daughter of Pharaoh" -- *Vayikra Rabbah* [midrash on Leviticus] 1:3

Exodus 2:1

Three translations, with one footnote, of Exodus 2:1

When the people saw that Moses **was so long** in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."

– JPS Tanakh, 1985

And the people saw that Moses **lagged** in coming down from the mountain, and the people assembled against Aaron and said to him, "Rise up, make us gods that will go before us..."

– Robert Alter, 2004 (Norton)

Now when the people saw that Moses **was shamefully-late*** in coming down from the mountain, the people assembled against Aharon and said to him: Arise, make us a god who will go before us..."

– Everett Fox, 1983 (Schocken)

*Fox's note on this verse: Others, "delayed," but the Hebrew verb (*boshesh*) carries the connotation of "causing-shame/embarrassment."