



Shabbat Table Questions for the Eshel National Retreat 2021: Parshat Va'era

Is anyone listening??

At the end of last week's parsha Moshe feels like a failure because no one is listening to him.

“Since I have come to Pharaoh to speak in your Name he has dealt worse with this people; You have not saved your people.” (5:23)

God reassures him with renewed promises of redemption, but to no avail. When he returns to the people, they too do not listen to him. Frustrated with God, Moses retorts: “If the children of Israel do not listen to me, how will Pharaoh listen to me?”

Moshe blames his “uncircumcised lips” for this failure but the Sefat Emet (Rabbi R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib MiGur) turns it around. His stutter isn't the reason no one is listening. *It was the failure of Pharaoh and then of the children of Israel to listen that caused him to stutter!* The Sefat Emet describes the problem as “the exile of language.”
Speech fails and is lost if no one is there to listen.

1. Does this insight ring true for you? *When you know you are being heard do you speak differently?*
2. Who in your life was ready to hear you in a way that enabled you to speak your truth?
3. Pharaoh cannot hear because he is imprisoned in his own royal solipsism. The people cannot hear because they are stuck in their woundedness. Why do you think those around you, friends, family, and community, cannot hear you? Has that stood in the way of you being included in Orthodox life?

Evolution or Revolution:



The Journey or the Destination?

There has always been a tension between those who seek revolutionary change and others who feel that incremental change is more desirable. *For some, the goal is all important, for others the journey is enough.*

On Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend we remember that Dr. King was frustrated by what he termed “gradualism”; he felt it gave the illusion of movement with little improvement. (Read the *I Have a Dream* speech [here](#) where he makes that point.)

This debate also finds expression in the tradition to drink four cups of wine at the seder. These cups are associated with 4 expressions of redemption found one after the other in our parasha.

1. V’hotzeiti - I will bring you out
2. V’hitzalti - I will save you
3. V’ga’alti - I will redeem you
4. V’lakachti - I will make you my people

(Exodus 6:6-7)

However, there are actually 5 expressions of redemption in the Parsha.

5. V’heveiti - I will bring you into the land I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

(Exodus 6:8)

In fact, two traditions exist, one of drinking 4 cups of wine and another of drinking 5 cups of wine at the seder. The four cup tradition became normative, but the Gaonim (7th - 11th Century), the Rif (R. Isaac Alfasi 1013-1103), the Ra’avad (R. Avraham ben David 1125-1198), the Maharal of Prague (R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel 1512-1609) and others drank a fifth cup of wine in celebration of the arrival in the land of Israel. In 1948 R. Menachem Kasher (1895-1983) urged the re-adoption of the fifth cup of wine in light of the return to Zion, but it was not widely accepted.



Which tradition speaks to you?

1. *Should we be celebrating redemption, even if we are not yet fully liberated?*
2. Why do you think Dayenu is in the Seder? Do you find the Dayenu sentiment encouraging or frustrating, comforting or disturbing? Have you ever felt the song was ironic and humorous rather than serious? *When is enough enough?*
3. How do you feel about the movement that has happened over the past decade in the Orthodox community on LGBTQ issues? In your view has it been evolutionary or revolutionary? When are you impatient and when do you let yourself celebrate?
4. For Moses, there is tragic quality to his story; it ends before the promises are fulfilled. For many of us the search for a spiritual home as a queer Jew is unfinished. What qualities do you think a leader needs to be fully embracing of Orthodox LGBTQ+ Jews? Does it matter what generation our leaders are from?
5. Maimonides and others suggest that the fifth cup *is poured but not drunk*; this is the source of the cup of Elijah. Maybe he comes to decide our debate on evolutionary or revolutionary change, or maybe he is there to announce the arrival of the Mashiach. *What does the cup of Elijah mean to you?*