

**Beshallah**  
**1/25/2013**

Power. What a weighty word.

I'm going to ask for a bit of congregant participation tonight – don't be scared, there are no right or wrong answers.

First, close your eyes – and don't you fall asleep on me!

Listen to the following questions and think about your answer (but don't shout it out yet!)

When I say "Power", what immediately comes to mind?

What images do you see?

What people and emotions do you associate with power?

Open your eyes.

What images do you see?

-superman, hitler, kings crown, my electricity bill

(pause for responses)

Who are the people with power?

-rich people

(pause for responses)

What emotions come up when you hear the word power?

-discomfort, responsibility

(pause for responses)

People toss the word around a lot: "Knowledge is power," "Power to the people", "With great power comes great responsibility."

But the dictionary defines power as a much less loaded term. Power is simply "the ability to act". Objective, unbiased, neither positive nor negative. Power is, at its core, the capacity to do.

But how often do we really feel powerful? How often do we feel like we have the ability to act?

Contemporary author Alice Walker once said: “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”

I think we, as human beings, often relinquish power without realizing we are doing so.

Take, for example, the Israelites.

Jacob and his family settle in Egypt and start, well, procreating. It turns out that Egypt is a pretty conducive place for building a community, at least at first, and they thrive in this new land. In fact, they thrive so much that they outstay their welcome. The descendants of Jacob become large enough to pose a threat, large enough that the leader of the country is no longer comfortable with their presence. A new Pharaoh appears on the scene, and the beginning of the book of Exodus tells us exactly how he felt about this new, rapidly expanding population: “The Israelite people are much too numerous for us,” he says. “Let us deal shrewdly with them.”

And so they do. The Egyptians deal so shrewdly with the Israelites that the Israelites are enslaved without a fight. They groan under their labor, but they do not protest. They do not ask why, or go on strike. They forfeit their power, both their power as individuals and the power in numbers that caused Pharaoh to worry about them in the first place. By the time they realize that they have become slaves, their self-perception is too negative and downtrodden to affect change.

Luckily, God comes along. God empowers Moses and sends him to rally the troops. But the Israelites won’t budge. They don’t have the momentum, they don’t have the oomph. And so the ten plagues rain down, one after the other, and the Israelites are spared, and each plague nudges the Israelite a little more. But still they wait for permission to leave, still they wait for Pharaoh’s go-ahead.

And thus we arrive at the beginning of this week’s Torah portion. Finally, the Israelites are free.

They leave in a rush, straight into the desert, straight into the middle of nowhere.

And just as they are building confidence, just as they have mustered up enough courage to leave their slave masters behind, Pharaoh picks up the chase.

This bedraggled, fragile people finds itself at the shore of the Sea of Reeds, Pharaoh’s army close on their heels - and their budding courage, any power they had begun to think they maybe had, vanishes.

“Let us go back”, they say.

“We’d rather be alive as slaves than free but dead!”

But Moses responds to the fears of the people, Moses remembers that he has the ability to act. He reminds the Israelites that they’ve got God on their side, that they have a powerful ally.

And then it happens.

The sea parts.

In the midst of the expanse of an ocean, there now lies a dry path.

The splitting of the Sea of Reeds is majestic, cinematic, miraculous. It is the sun bursting through the clouds on an especially dreary day, it is the clicking into place of all of the jumbled up pieces.

This moment is the moment that proves it all, the moment that allows the Israelite people to DO something, to take a deep breath and step forward into the unknown.

\*\*

I wonder sometimes if we are all waiting for the sea to part.

We spend a lot of time feeling powerless. We are very good at making excuses – excuses with pretty valid arguments, or so we think. We ignore problems because they seem insurmountable, and so time goes on and they become more insurmountable. Pharaoh is no more, but we are still slaves. We are slaves to ourselves. We are immobilized by our rationales, our excuses. We tell ourselves that we are powerless in the face of imposed class schedules or work meetings, that we are incapable of fixing a broken system, that we don’t have the power to make change.

But we do.

We each have the ability to act. We each have power. More importantly, we are incredibly powerful when we act together.

We can no longer wait for the sea to part.

If there is God in all of us, and I believe there is, then it is up to us to part our own seas and the seas of our community.

We must first believe in our ability, we must first believe in the power that each of us possesses. Then we must surround ourselves with people who believe in what we believe in, people who want the same changes we do. And then we must act.

When God split the Sea of Reeds, it was a miracle. Today, many think of miracles as relics of a time past, imaginary moments used for literary purposes.

I believe that the sea parted, and I believe it was a miracle. I believe that we are Godly beings, and that as such, we too are capable of making miracles. They may not be as cinematic, they may not involve the booming voice of Charlton Heston. But the miracles we bring about as a community do something much more important than shock and awe.

They give us strength.