

Rabbi Maya Y. Glasser  
Shabbat Shemot- December 28, 2018

There is a scene towards the end of the classic Disney animated film “The Lion King”, in which the main character Simba, now a fully grown lion, is talking to his wise baboon friend Rafiki. Years ago, Simba ran away from home after he witnessed the death of his father, King Mufasa, and he is now anxious about returning to take his rightful place on the throne. “I know what I have to do”, Simba reflects, “but going back means that I’ll have to face my past. I’ve been running from it for so long.” In response, Rafiki smacks Simba’s head with his walking stick. “Gees, what was that for?” Simba yelps. Rafiki answers: “It doesn’t matter, it’s in the past!” “Yea, but it still hurts,” says Simba. “Oh yes, the past can hurt,” Rafiki replies. “But the way I see it, you can either run from it, or learn from it.” He then swings his stick at Simba’s head again, and this time, the lion ducks. Rafiki laughs with glee. “Ah, you see! So what are you going to do?” Simba tells him: “first, I’m going to take your stick.”

This week in our Torah, we are moving forward in time to the book of Exodus, or in Hebrew, Shemot. Years ago, like Simba, the Israelites left their home. They moved to Egypt on Joseph’s advice in order to survive years of famine. This week we begin the next chapter of the journey, in which a new Pharaoh comes to power, a ruler who does not know Joseph. He does not learn from the past, and fears the presence of the Israelites in his kingdom. His ignorance leads to a dark chapter in our history, starting with what we read this week, in which we are enslaved and not able to live as a free people.

The jump from one book of Torah to the next, from Genesis to Exodus, causes our people's story to skip over many generations. This makes it easy not just to run from the past or learn from it, as Rafiki says to Simba, but to forget it entirely. We even see Pharaoh doing exactly that, as he pays no attention to where the Israelites have come from, or why they are there, and simply sees them as the other. Without context, he has no way of getting to know them, or remembering that one of their people saved his country from years of hardship.

However, our Torah provides us with a way to not forget the past, even through a big leap in time. This *parashah* begins with Shemot, names, of our ancestors. This beginning ensures that we cannot forget, that our story has a foundation, and that we continue to have context for where we have been. Before we completely skip ahead to the future, to the Pharaoh who has no interest in the past, and to our lives as slaves, the Torah starts its second book with a reminder of what and who has come before us. "*V'eleh shemot B'nai Yisrael ha'baim Mitzrai'mah et Ya'akov eesh oo'veitoh ba'oo*". "And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household." Then, where the text could merely mention Jacob and his sons offhand, it continues, and lists out each of them: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. Every word in the Torah is significant, which emphasizes the importance of these names. These names become the twelve tribes of Israel, from whom future generations descend. These names remind us that the chapters of our narrative don't happen in isolation, but are deeply connected, building on one another to provide us with

continued opportunities to learn and grow from each part of our story.

Tonight, as we begin a new book of the Torah, we also begin the weekend leading up to a new year, a new part of our story. As we approach January, and think about all of the potential and possibilities that 2019 holds, it could be easy to, like Pharoah, simply forget the past and focus on the future. It could be easy to brush the pain of the past aside, and concentrate on what comes next. It could be easy to run from unpleasant memories, to attempt to jump ahead in time without really reflecting on where we've been. However, as Rafiki reminds us, though the past can hurt, we can either run from it, or learn from it. We don't want to continue to get hit with a walking stick, but rather to adapt and build skills to respond to circumstances accordingly. Being mindful of the past can help us use our pain and experiences to grow and become stronger, and more capable of overcoming challenges. The previous chapters of our story, whether personal, communal, or national, are all important. Rather than events that have happened in isolation, they are a foundation for us that we can use to face what lies ahead. Our past is an integral part of our present and the future; we can't move forward without it.

Even the grammar of the first word of the book of Shemot, "*v'eleh*", emphasizes this point, and demonstrates the powerful connection between each piece of the story. Though it is the first word of the first verse of a new book of the Torah, the word is not "*eleh*", but "*v'eleh*". The prefix "v-" in Hebrew is a conjunction that means "and". Rather than acting like the beginning of something completely new, the first word we see in the book of Shemot is "and these". This shows that the story is essentially picking up

exactly where Genesis left off, despite the plot moving forward as a new chapter starts. Before we can continue on our journey, the Torah reminds us of where we left off; even its grammar links us to the events that came before.

The 18th century commentator Or HaChaim writes that “the word v’eleh... is employed to show continuity with the people who had preceded [Jacob’s sons]. In this instance the preceding people were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all of whom were outstandingly righteous.” His interpretation shows that the conjunction “and” does not merely link two pieces of our story together, but all of the pieces, and all of the generations. It is a reminder that we are inextricably intertwined with those who came before us. It is a reminder that our actions in the present matter, since they, too, are part of the plot moving forward. It is a reminder that we will one day be the previous generations that people write about, and we also want to be known as outstandingly righteous.

As we enter 2019, we may be tempted to forget the past, or run from it. I’m sure that each of us has hurtful memories from this year. I’m sure that there are actions we took, events that occurred, and emotions that we felt that we’d rather not reflect on. Instead, I invite you to remember the “v-”, and see 2019 not as a clean slate, but as a piece of a continuing narrative joined together by “and”. I invite you to think about 2019 as the next part of your story, and our story, the story of this country and the world. I invite you to learn from the past, so that the pain you experienced can help you to navigate whatever challenges lie ahead. If we choose to forget getting smacked with a stick, we won’t know to duck or take the stick away next time. If we only

focus on the future without attempting to learn from the past, we risk being like a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph and caused extreme pain for others. Just as there is not a clean break between Genesis and Exodus, the years of our lives are profoundly intertwined.

*Eloheinu, v'Elohei Avoteinu v'Imoteinu-* our God, and God of all the generations who came before us, may you be present for each member of this community as we embark on a new year. May you help us to use our pain and experiences to learn from the past, so that we can grow. May you strengthen us this year, so that we, too, can be outstandingly righteous, and be the Shemot, the names that become an important part of the story.  
*Amen.*