What, in God’s Name is Going on?

For two years, while I was working on my undergraduate degree in Political Theory and Constitutional Democracy, I interned at the State Capitol in Lansing, Michigan. In one office, I investigated if members of the union representing restaurant workers wanted a smoking ban or not – and read studies about if it was actually safer or not to require safety belts on school buses, trying to inform and shape policy and make lives better. In the second office I interned in, I sometimes would be asked to research presidential candidates policies to see if they matched with my boss’s policies – but most of my time was spent drafting letters back to constituents. Those who had written a form letter, I wrote was tasked with writing a form letter back. Those who had spent the time to craft their own language, I spent time crafting my “own” replies.

I learned a lot in that limited time. I learned to always include the main message of a letter or email, in a single sentence, in the first full paragraph. I learned the power of lobbyists who pre-wrote legislation, the dollar amount it took to win an average election in the State of Michigan, and how sometimes when the representative called from the floor and no one else was in the room, know-it-all nineteen year-olds helped shaped the energy policy for the State of Michigan with their ideas being brought to the floor, and then battered in a collaborative process.

A process called democracy.

We idealize it. I idealise it. And I can tell you it is often shaped by ignorance, guess work and gut feeling. Pre-conceived notions, friendships, and failable individuals just trying to do their best. But that it is an incredibly collaborative process where one can not get caught in themselves and their sureness of being correct. That the collaborative process is a mess, but it is a beautiful mess.

This week’s Torah portion is not about democracy. In fact, it is about despotism, cruelty and slavery. Children secretly killed and then – when the plot of civil resistance fails, children openly killed. Parents forced to work without hope for themselves or their families.

And it is also in this Torah portion that God reveals God’s self – for a second time – to the world. It is the beginning of the path by which, as Josephine Lazarus taught, “The petty tribal god – cruel and partisan – becomes the Universal and Eternal God.” God is revealed in the burning bush – the sneh – this remarkable foreshadowing of the scene at Mount Sinai, done in miniature - We’ll get to the bush in a moment. But I want to spend a few moments on other places God appears in our narrative. I believe the first place God appears is through Shifra and Puah – names preserved through the centuries in every Sefer Torah. The Midwives to the Hebrews, ordered to kill the first born boys, were civilly disobedient, and saved these children’s lives. And when Pharaoh then commanded that firstborn male children were to be thrown into the Nile river, God appears again. Not just in the common midwives, but also the rich influencers of society. Just as God, a few lines down, hears the cry of the Jewish people and is reminded to come to our aid, Pharaoh's daughter first hears the cry – the wail of a baby – rescues that infant from the Nile, and enlists his mother to his care.

It is recorded that the Ari – Isaac Luria, taught that Pharaoh’s daughter went along with her father’s policies. Until she saw the endangered Hebrew child. Until that moment the Israelites had been an abstraction; and she was prepared to believe the worst about them. Once she encountered an innocent, vulnerable Israelite, however, she had to recognize her common humanity with the baby. Giving us this beautiful teaching: “Only one who can hear the cry of Moses the baby will be able to properly understand the words of Moses the lawgiver.” x2

The journey of Moses the lawgiver begins at that bush aflame, where he shows his ability to focus on the world aflame, and God reveals God’s self to the insecure – incomplete Moses.

The Moses who says “I am not the right person for this responsibility” – and God answers, according to Rabbi Alexander Zusia Freedman – it is your questioning, your imposter syndrome, your lack of self-infatuation and sureness, that MAKES you the right person. I mean, imaging what would happen if someone was so self-assured of their own rightness that they couldn’t see beyond their anger and ego – people might lose their lives and nations might lose their dignity.

And when Moses asks God’s name – the answer is worth well paying attention to. God answers Eh-ye asher eh-ye.. “I will be what I will be”. “I am becoming what I am becoming”. A reference to the fact that yud-heh-vav-heh, which appears as one of the name of God in our sacred text, contains in it the past, present and future – A reference to the words coming up that God will be with us from Generation to Generation. And, I believe, a reference to the idea that God is constantly still becoming.

I’ll repeat here the words of the essayist and sister of Emma Lazarus whose poem is associated with the Statue of Liberty, Josephine Lazarus: “The petty tribal god – cruel and partisan – becomes the Universal and Eternal God.”

I will become what I will become. Democracy is messy. You don’t have to look to years of attempts of electoral reform in Canada to see this, you can look at Israel as well, in its fourth round of elections in two years. Some predict that it will be a battle between the Israelis and the Star Wars fan group lead by Gid-on Sa’ar “ A New Hope”.

A few chapters after our Haftarah in Isaiah we hear the words, “A Voice Cries out in the Wilderness.” In his book on “What’s Happened to Politics” our United Nations Ambassador Bob Rae writes, “Leadership is not a voice crying in the wilderness, aloof and apart. It requires an ability to command as well as to inspire, to learn in the process of collaboration…..”

I will be what I will be. God is still becoming – in collaboration with us, and our attempts at creating a more just and equitable world. Sometimes in moments of Sneh and Sinai – but more often in moments where we hear the cry, and need to find it in ourselves to react.

In the words of our Passover Haggadah, brought forward by Rabbi Hara Person:

For the sake of redemption—ours and the world’s—

we pray together hallowed words

that connect us to Jews everywhere,

and to all who are in need:

the stranger and the lost,

the hungry and the unjustly imprisoned.

For our redemption is bound up with theirs,

and with the deliverance of all people.