



Giving Up Functional Atheism for New Year's Parashat Va'era 5779 – January 4, 2019 Rabbi Dara Frimmer

We are back in the familiar space of enthusiasm for fresh starts, and regret for mistakes and missed opportunities already marked down thanks to the turning of the secular year. Happy 2019.

And, perhaps, you've noticed? The media is flooded with clickbait headlines about keeping your New Year's resolutions: *5 Easy Steps to Ensure You Won't Fail* (only to be echoed by articles claiming they can do it in 4, or 3, or 1 Easy Step!); *Make a Bet With Your Own Money That You'll Follow Through*; and my all-time favorite, *Just Purchase This Product and You'll Be Happier*.

It's a season of consumerism and quick fixes. It's faith in the possibility of change, even for our most entrenched behaviors. And, it's fear that we will fall into the same trap we fell into last year, last month, or even just this morning.

It's a mixture and medley of emotions - not one of them truer than the next.

And in this week's portion, Va'era, we find Moses on his own roller coaster of mixed and meddled emotions. Last week, God chose Moses to free the Israelites, confront Pharaoh and speak truth to power. Since then, Moses has felt awe and wonder, fear and intimidation, and likely, a lot of frustration.

You see, it hasn't really been going that well.

Not only does Pharaoh ignore Moses' warning, but, as a result of Moses' intercession, Pharaoh makes life harder for the Israelites. The Israelites are angry with Moses. Moses is angry with God.

Yet *this* week's parsha begins as if no setbacks have taken place. God speaks to Moses. Moses is re-inspired. Commanded by God, with new visionary language, Moses approaches the Israelites...and fails in stupendous fashion. The verse says "*vayidaber Moshe ken el b'nai yisrael* (And Moses said *all* of this to the Children of Israel), *v'lo shamu el Moshe*, (they would not listen him)." (Exodus 6:9)

So, he blew it, right? Not according to the Torah. That setback does not earn even a *few* words of consolation or disapproval. God sends him back into the ring with the very next verse.

And, so it goes: Moses takes a small step forward, retreats, God responds. Moses takes a small step forward, retreats, God responds. *Would it have been that Moses could have googled that first night of failure to find, “The 5 Easy Steps to Complete Redemption....”*

It’s not easy to do the work of change. As the New Year turns, we tend to focus on workouts and diets, but there are other resolutions we quietly make: This year, I won’t be as judgmental. This year, I’ll reach out to my friends more often. This year, I’ll spend more time with those I love. Those resolutions *also* take mental and physical strength to follow through. Those resolutions also depress us when we experience setbacks and perceived failures.

Parker Palmer, a renowned author and educator, talks about some of the challenges that hold people back from self-actualization. One of the common behaviors is something called **Functional Atheism**. It’s the idea that while most of us say we believe in God, or, more likely, we subscribe to a religion and participate in a religious community that incorporates God language, ultimately, we function, day-to-day, as atheists. In other words: There is no God; therefore, this task, this challenge, this moment, is entirely dependent on me. As Palmer writes, “This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, *we are the ones who must make it happen.*”¹

Now, as with most things, *in moderation*, self-confidence and a go-get-’em attitude is worth incorporating. But, taken to the extreme, functional atheism hurts us more than helps us. We may not be aware of the damage it can do when, day after day, we tell ourselves, and, likely others, “I got this. It’s on me.” What might feel good and right, putting forth practices that fall in line with the American value for self-starters and Manifest Destiny, turns out to be a modern-day recipe for resentment and shame.

I was recently exploring a Dr. Seuss *All About Insects* book with some 3-year-olds. As the focus switched from body parts and antennae, to built-in protections that keep insects safe, the kids’ eyes widened: There, on the pages, were insects with stingers, horrible smells and camouflage colors. The kids were especially intrigued to learn about an insect called a spittlebug, with the ability to quickly blow spit bubbles all over its body to hide itself from predators. Each small, vulnerable insect was gifted with a body part or function or color, solely intended to protect it against predators in the wild. Necessary protections that served their function well.

In so many ways, when we face challenges and disappointment, we are like those small, vulnerable creatures. But instead of stingers and spit bubbles, we choose methods of protection that leave us emotionally barricaded, spiritually debilitated and, most likely, burned out. Rather than reaching out for support, *we tend to go it alone*. Rather than accept setbacks as a natural outcome of change, we declare them evidence of futility.

It is in this week’s parsha, Va’era, that Moses challenges God, defending his desire to back out of the deal: “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech?”

Pause for a moment to take this in. He had one setback this week. One moment in the early stages of redemption in which the people (who, by the way, are described as having *crushed spirits thanks to cruel bondage*) reject his renewed offer of optimism, and, Moses decides he is unworthy. Incapable. Unable to

¹ <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/leading-from-within/>

perform or be effective. His one failure becomes a resurrected Mark of Cain - forever branded, unable to imagine a new path forward. He gives up.

Point of Interest: Do you know what most of these clickbait articles suggest is the key to sticking by your New Year's resolution? **Community**. Make your goals public. Talk about them with others. Let them hold you accountable in ways that are compassionate and loving. Receive support. *Don't go it alone*.

The JPS Torah Commentary to the Book of Exodus glosses on God's reaction to Moses' plea: "*Ignoring Moses' objections, God orders him and his brother to resume their mission to both Israel and Pharaoh.*" Get back in the ring, says God. If you can't remember that I am always with you, bring your brother. Nobody, and I mean, nobody, does this alone.

Functional Atheism tells us, "You do it alone."
Torah says, "No, you don't."

One man does not redeem the people. He is joined by Aaron, and, by other accounts, his sister Miriam. One man does not fulfill the covenant with God. An entire people at the foot of Mt. Sinai have to say, "*Na'aseh v'nishmah*" - We will observe and learn to understand this gift from God together.

Still, the lure of Functional Atheism is strong and seductive. With compassion, Palmer warns us: We think we feel stronger when we say "I got this. It's on me...", but, the ultimate result is weakness and dejection. Functional Atheism "leads us to impose our will on others, stressing our relationships, sometimes to the point of breaking. It often eventuates in burnout, depression, and despair, as we learn that the world *will not bend to our will* and we become embittered about that fact..."²

"The Israelites would not listen to me," said Moses, "How then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech?" I give up, says Moses. I can't do this. The world did not bend to my will.

For the last 2 weeks, since we began the Book of Exodus, God has been saying to Moses, "I will be with you." God has said it a *number* of times, even using different expressions of partnership and protection, just in case Moses doesn't quite get it. And you know what? He doesn't get it. Even for Moses, who had God's voice and fiery presence before him, *it was hard to believe he would not ultimately be working on his own*.

How much more so for us? We are generations removed from Revelation at Sinai. For many, we are generations removed from a familial practice in which parents and grandparents prayed openly for God's help or spoke about God's presence in their daily lives.

And look at the society in which we live: a society that lionizes self-made-millionaires and billionaires (as if anyone could get that wealthy on their own) and rewards the individual who creates a YouTube channel focused solely on the particularities of his/her life.

I want to suggest we make a change. A New Year's resolution. Whether we know it or not, we put incredible pressure upon ourselves, as individuals, to fix and to know and to be right, all, or, at least *most* of the time. That pressure is unsustainable. We're forgetting that we have partners, God, and community to help.

² <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/leading-from-within/>

When we give up the practice of Functional Atheism by inviting in God's presence, or by opening our hand to receive support from our neighbor or friend, "We learn that we need not carry the whole load but can share it with others, liberating us and empowering them. We learn that sometimes we are [even] free to lay the load down altogether."³ Maybe we give it to our brother for a while...

If we reach out to God, or to members of our community, when feeling scared or vulnerable, we stand a better chance of choosing *appropriate armor* as protection. Not the armor that "is heavy and prevents us from growing, being seen, and being in connection with others," says Brene Brown, in her book Dare to Lead. When we stop trying to do it all by ourselves, we learn *the best protection to fight off fear, depression, rejection or shame is not to bear the burden alone, but to reach out to others*. To learn from those who model and encourage Healthy Striving, Empathy and Self-Compassion.⁴ That's what we receive when we welcome in God. That's what we receive when we reach out to community.

"I will be with you," said God to Moses.

"I will be with you, look for a sign."

If only God had been a little clearer as to what sign God meant.

So, it is up to us, the inheritors of this precious tradition and ancient wisdom, to claim the space we need to register the signs that still arise. As we pause from the work of 21st century redemption and modern-day Revelation. As we rub our tired eyes, overwhelmed by the litany of emails and endless unanswered questions. As we face demands to be more than we are, fear and failure, miracles and morass... In these mixed and medled moments we can listen for God's response: *"I will be with you."*

And so will your brother.

And so will your sister.

"The God of your parents has sent me to you," says God to Moses in this week's Torah portion. As Jews, we believe *this very same God* waits for us today. The God who has watched us grow. The God who is watching us now. My name is *Dynamic Becoming* - *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* - and you, each one of you, are made in My image.

"So, arise, and claim your space," says God. "Get back in the ring. Call on Me, or, recognize that I am already there." Let's begin this New Year together.

Shabbat Shalom.

³ <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/leading-from-within/>

⁴ Language from Brene Brown when talking about Armored vs. Daring Leadership, Dare to Lead