

A prince once became mad and thought that he was a turkey.

He felt compelled to sit naked under the table,
pecking at bones and pieces of bread, like a turkey.

All the royal physicians
gave up hope of curing him of this madness.

The king grieved tremendously.

A sage came to the king and said,

“I will cure him.”

The sage undressed and
sat naked under the table,

next to the prince, picking crumbs and bones.

“Who are you?” asked the prince.

“What are you doing here?”

“And you?” replied the sage.

“What are you doing here?”

“I am a turkey,” said the prince.

“I’m also a turkey,” answered the sage.

They sat together like this for some time,

until they became good friends.

One day, the sage signaled the king’s servants

to throw him shirts.

He said to the prince,

“What makes you think that a turkey can’t wear a shirt?

You can wear a shirt and still be a turkey.”

With that, the two of them put on shirts.

After a while, the sage again signaled

and they threw him pants.

As before, he asked,

“What makes you think that

you can't be a turkey if you wear pants?"

The sage continued in this manner until
they were both completely dressed.

Then he signaled for regular food, from the table.

The sage then asked the prince,

"What makes you think that

you will stop being a turkey if you eat good food?

You can eat whatever you want and still be a turkey!"

They both ate the food.

Finally, the sage said,

“What makes you think a turkey must sit under the table?

Even a turkey can sit at the table.”

The sage continued in this manner

until the prince was completely cured.

All this because he was willing to come to the prince,

The sage was willing to meet him there under the table,

In full knowledge of who he was,

Even when everyone else thought it was hopeless.

When God tells Moses “Bo el-Paroah”

in the beginning of this week’s Torah portion,

the JPS English translation of the Torah

offers this pragmatic reading

“go to Pharaoh.”

But, the Hebrew scholar among you might say,

‘Hey, isn’t Bo is the sivvui command form of come?’

You would of course be right,

and even knowing so you might –

and really it would be fair to think so –

you might think that

“go to Pharaoh”

And “come to Pharaoh”

have essentially the same meaning.

I don’t think so.

You can say it’s nitpicking,

but I just read “come to Pharaoh”

as substantively different.

Especially under the circumstances

which God instructs Moses

to “come to Pharaoh” under.

In the first verse of Bo,

God tells Moses:

“Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart,
and the hearts of all of his courtiers.”

God tells Moses to come to Pharaoh,

in full knowledge of the fact,

that God has hardened his heart,

in full knowledge of the fact,

that his mission is essentially doomed from the start.

God is upfront as to why

God sends Moses and Aaron

to the man whose heart God hardened.

God says that the reason for doing this

Is garner some good publicity.

“L’ma’an Shiti O-tot Eileh B’Kirbo”

‘So that I may display my signs among them’

“U’L’ma’an T’saper B’Oznei Bincha u’Ven Bincha”

And so that you can tell your child and their children.

So, we know what’s in it for God.

But why would Moses do this?

He had grown up in Pharaoh’s house,

why would he want to see Pharaoh suffer -
even for the sake of God?

Moses, being the good Jewish leader he is,
Argues with God all the time.

Why not here?

Why not protest here?

Perhaps because Moses –

understands ‘come to Pharaoh’ as I do.

Come to Pharaoh,

in full knowledge of his hardened heart
in full knowledge of his former intractability,
come to Pharaoh,
and give him the opportunity to do the right thing.
Come to Pharaoh,
where he is,
knowing who he is,
come with an open heart and an open mind.
Moses was willing to give Pharaoh a chance,
The 8th of such chances in fact.

Moses and Aaron come to Pharaoh –

And they offer him a way out.

Sure, they also threaten Pharaoh with locusts,

but they give him the chance to act in his own self-interest,

In the interest of all of his people too.

And to everyone's surprise Pharaoh's courtiers,

The same ones who also had their hearts hardened,

Convince Pharaoh to yield.

He's so close:

Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron,

And offers them, and all the men,
the chance to go and worship God.

But, being a good Jewish leader,
Moses demands egalitarianism.

When Pharaoh refuses to let the
women and children and flocks of the Israelites go
along with the men to worship

Moses brings the plague of locusts
down upon Egypt with a raised staff.

He knew Pharaoh's heart was hardened,

And yet, time and time again,

Moses comes to him

in hopes that they can alleviate

the suffering of both Egyptians and Israelites

If you're keeping up with daf yomi,

the cycle of reading a page of Talmud a day on a 7-year cycle,

the scene on today's page, brakhot 28a,

provides us with important insight.

Rabban Gamliel was very exacting in

who he would let into his beit midrash,

his house of study.

But he is removed from office -

due to offense he caused to his fellow sage,

Rabbi Yehoshua, by lashing out at him

over a disagreement about

whether the evening prayer is mandatory.

In his place the rabbis elected Rabbi Elezar Ben Azaria,

who was only 18 years old.

Upon his appointment to head of the beit midrash,

a couple of miraculous things happen.

First, the hair and beard of this 18-year-old man became white so that he appeared much older.

But more incredibly,

his first act as head of the beit midrash

is to remove

the doorman Rabban Gamliel had charged

with keeping students he found “unworthy”

out of the beit midrash.

As soon as he has done so,
so many new students come to the beit midrash –
that hundreds of benches have to be added
to accommodate them.

Upon seeing this, Rabban Gamliel despairs
because he realizes
that his hardheartedness
prevented so many people from learning Torah.

He then comes to rabbi Yehoshua,
who he had offended.

He comes to him in full knowledge that
they still disagree about so many things.

He comes to him and asks forgiveness,
and because he comes to him,

Rabbi Yehoshua forgives Rabban Gamliel
and he is restored to his position
as head of the beit midrash.

For those of you keeping up with daf NYT,
the cyclical reading of the New York Times,
on today's daf 27a

David Brooks wrote an op-Ed entitled

“the future of American politics.”

In this op-Ed Brooks decries

the damaging half-truth that

“men and women are primarily motivated by self-interest.”

Brooks rightly reasons that,

“if you base your political and social systems

on the idea that the autonomous self-interested individual

is the basic unit of society then -

you wind up with an individualistic culture
that widens the maneuvering room between people
but shreds the relationships and community between people.”

Even when we know other people have
a tendency to act in a self-interested manner,
we cannot allow this to define our perception of them.

We have to come to our friends, neighbors, and countrymen
in full knowledge of who they are –
we must give them and give ourselves every opportunity
to act in the best interest of everyone.

It may not always work,
sometimes hearts remain too hardened
like Pharaoh's heart was.

But sometimes, as with Rabban Gamliel,
people can exceed our expectations –
but we have to give them the chance.

David Brooks offers four paths we can cultivate
towards creating a better, more just,
and kinder American culture.

1. “Show up all the way.” This means we must be “fully present, honest, and vulnerable in our interactions with others. Recognize your own value. Push through discomfort to connect deeply with others.”
2. “Learn from all voices.” Accept the complexity of the world and the people trying to make their way in it. “It takes every perspective to see a whole issue, assume people have the best intentions and actively focus on the value they bring.”

3. “Treat relationships as wealth.” human bonds are a chief resource. “Recognize the inherent value of each person and meet each person where she or he is.”

4. “Fall forward...your vision is not always the answer but rather a step in the creative learning process.”

None of these paths mean

we must abandon that which is most important.

When we come to someone

and still find them entirely intractable

sometimes we have no choice but

to pursue alternative options to
navigate around the walls they build.

When Pharaoh refuses to let all the Israelites go and worship,
God sends the plague of locusts.

When Pharaoh continues to refuse,
God sends a plague of darkness over Egypt.

The Torah portion tells us

Va'ye'hi Choshekh Al Eretz Mitzraim, Va'ya'meish Choshekh

There was darkness on the land of Egypt,

A deep darkness one could feel.

So dark that no one could get up from their place.

But in the Israelite dwellings,
the portion tells us, there was light.

The Kotzker Rebbe drashes that

It is precisely because
the Egyptians were unwilling
to get up from their place
that the darkness became so all-encompassing –
whereas the Israelites had light

because each one was willing to get up from their place,
to come to their fellow, and make light together.

For many of us today,
the world today may seem dark.

It might seem a heavy, pervading darkness;
the sort of darkness you can feel.

But the lesson is:

If we are unwilling to seek out the other

Then we remain in darkness.

If we want to bring light:

into our homes, into our community, and into our world
we must do so together.

As we learned from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Whose life we honored earlier this month,

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness,

Only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate,

Only love can do that.”

Sometimes, love is coming rather than going to the other,

Sometimes, love is admitting when you’ve been wrong,

Sometimes, love is giving the other chance after chance,
Sometimes, love is getting under the table with someone,
Spending some time seeing the world as they see it,
In hopes that we can eat together at that same table once
more.

Shabbat Shalom.