

It is almost too apropos that on this inaugural Shabbat, the first Shabbat in which a new president has assumed power in the United States, we read from Parashat Shemot, the beginning of the book of Exodus, in which a new king, a new Pharaoh, rises to power in Egypt.

It's a famous story: the new Pharaoh perceives a threat in the Israelite people, and encourages his people to oppress them, first with forced labor. When that does not prevent the expansion of the Israelite population, this Pharaoh decrees that the midwives to the Hebrew should kill all of the baby boys born in Hebrew households. When the midwives avoid the task, Pharaoh charges all his people, all Egyptians, as it says, in Exodus, Chapter, 1 verse 22: "every boy that is [born to the Hebrews] you shall throw in the Nile, but let every girl live.

And yet, the next line says that certain Levite man married a certain Levite woman, who conceived and bore a son. Through the care of the woman, her daughter Miriam, and the intervention of Pharaoh's own daughter, this son lives, growing up to be Moshe, the one who ultimately will lead the Hebrew people to redemption.

There is a question about the text, however. It says that this Levite man married this Levite woman, and she immediately conceived the son who will be Moshe. But we know that Moshe's older sister, Miriam, already existed, for she is the one who watches over him as he floats down the Nile.

In the Talmud, in Masechet Sotah, page 12b, a midrash offers this explanation: “The Rabbis state that Amram, Moshe’s father, was the outstanding scholar and leader of his generation. When he saw that Pharaoh had decreed that all the boys be cast into the Nile, he proclaimed: “Are we laboring in vain” [we give birth to sons who will eventually be killed], and so he divorced his wife. All Israel saw this, and in consequence they also divorced their wives. Miriam, who was six years old at the time (or five, according to some of the sources), said: “Father, Father, your decree is harsher than that of Pharaoh. Pharaoh only decreed against the males, but you have decreed against both the males and the females [because all the Israelites withdrew from their wives, neither sons nor daughters would come into the world]. Pharaoh decreed only for this world, but you decreed both for this world and the next [a baby that was born and died as a result of Pharaoh’s decree would reach the World to Come, but an unborn child would not attain this]. It is doubtful whether the decree of the wicked Pharaoh will be fulfilled, but you are righteous, and your decree will undoubtedly be fulfilled.” Amram heeded his daughter, and remarried his wife.”

Amram, in other words, was being what some might call pragmatic. In the face of a tyrant, demanding the death of Israelites sons, it makes a certain kind of sense to refuse to produce sons at all. Why have the Israelite women risk the pain and the danger of pregnancy, why face the repeated grief and rage as sons are wrenched from the home to be killed by the neighboring Egyptians? Better, perhaps to deal with Pharaoh’s reality by avoiding that pain altogether, by abstaining from the joy and risk of reproduction and all of the vision for the future that reproduction implies.

Amram self-protectively adjusts to Pharaoh's reality, avoiding pain in the most practical way he can think to do so.

And then his daughter Miriam comes to school him, making the audacious claim that his behavior is even worse than Pharaoh's; his vision even more shortsighted. He has no right, she tells him, to accommodate to Pharaoh's reality, to deny the life of baby girls, to deny the life of the world to come to all children, even for the sake of avoiding the pain of seeing his sons killed.

Miriam, a prophet even at age 5 or 6, teaches Amram, and all of us, that we have no right to submit to an unjust reality, even when it seems far more pragmatic to do so, even when we feel powerless against it. She reminds Amram, and all of us, that we cannot know what decrees will ultimately be fulfilled, but that if the righteous do not stake a vision in opposition to injustice, if there is no investment in a righteous decree, then it has no possibility of fulfillment, just as surely as a child who is not conceived in the first place cannot possibly grow to adulthood.

Miriam's lesson is not an easy one to live by. It is easier, by far, to accommodate to power, to keep the scope of our vision and of our hopes confined to what feels possible in each moment, and to avoid pain and suffering to the extent possible. But there are times when such adjustment to reality is a kind of death of the soul. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached in 1963: "there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of good-will will be maladjusted until the good societies realize. I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the

many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence...

“In other words, I’m about convinced now that there is need for a new organization in our world. **The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment**--men and women who will be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos. Who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Dr. King could just as easily have invoked the creative maladjustment of the prophet Miriam.

Unfortunately, the realities that Dr. King named demand our creative maladjustment today as much as they did in 1963. And we could even add a few: May we never become adjusted to the targeting of immigrants. May we never become adjusted to the theft of the commons. May we never become adjusted to living in a country where millions have no health care or safe water, or access to a decent education.

I could go on. Of course.

But I’ll leave us with this blessing for this parashah: in the time we are in, and in the times to come, may we have the strength and vision of Miriam, to look beyond the moment. May our hopes and our work not be confined by adjustment to what seems narrowly possible in any given moment. And may we all be as creatively maladjusted as Dr. King.

Shabbat shalom.