

Stories of the Hebrew Bible

Lesson 7: Moses Part 2 – Let My People Go

3.21.2021

Objectives: Explore life of Moses as seminal figure in Judaism, focusing on his prophetic role of freeing Israelites from slavery.

Materials: Moses DVD, teachers should download lesson plan and attachments onto their desktop.

Time allotment: Suggested for 60 minute online class.

1. Zoom Welcome (as youth arrive into the breakout classroom)

- Teachers and youth are expected to log on to zoom at 11:15am (15 min before class begins at 11:30am) so that everyone can be organized into correct breakout classrooms. We want to make sure there is an attentive adult in each breakout classroom with youth.
- Greet youth and ask everyone to correct their display name as needed. Ask everyone to select “gallery view” to see everyone else.
- Staff will take attendance.

2. Opening Discussion (5 minutes, begin while waiting for everyone to arrive)

- What do you know about Passover?

(Hint: Passover is the seven-day Jewish holiday of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Passover takes place every spring, this year it will begin March 27. Passover means God’s judgement “passed over” the Israelites during the plague, killing the firstborns of Egypt and forcing the Pharaoh to free the Israelites.)

- Why do you think the Passover Seder, for over 3,000 years is the most celebrated and widely observed holiday in the Jewish tradition?

(Hint: The holy day commemorates the freedom of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery, marking the beginning of the Jewish people as a nation and the beginning of their unique relationship with God.)

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

Teacher reads: (adapted from Rabbi Zoë Klein)

“God told Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea, and the sea would part. But according to Jewish interpretation, the sea did not part initially, and the children of Israel hesitated. They needed to be led. According to a Jewish midrash, a leader appeared in the person of Nachshon, who strode into the sea. The waters first reached his waist, then his chest and shoulders. And at the very last moment, as the waters reached his nostrils, the Red Sea parted and the Children of Israel followed him into the sea.”

4. Brief Check-in (5 minutes)

Continue weekly ritual/check-in (e.g. sharing a joy or sorrow so that everyone feels present in class).

5. The Ten Plagues (35 minutes)

Teacher summarizes (synopsis between the Burning Bush and the Plagues):

Last week, we learned about Moses encountering the voice of God speaking from a burning bush. Afterwards, Moses runs back to his father-in-law and seeks Jethro’s council. Moses questions his own sanity, full of self-doubt at hearing a voice claiming to be God. But Jethro convinces Moses that it was indeed God, calling him to return to Egypt and free the Israelites.

On his way to Egypt, Moses meets his brother Aaron in the desert. Aaron tells him that God had spoken to him, to go to Moses and help free the Israelites. Together they continue on to Egypt.

When Moses and Aaron arrive in the slave camp, they show miraculous signs to convince the Israelites that God has chosen Moses to lead them out from Egypt into the wilderness. Some are skeptical, but many believe in the signs and urge Moses to go speak to Pharaoh.

Moses and Aaron ask Pharaoh to let the slaves go out into the wilderness for three days so they might worship their God. Pharaoh laughs them out of court, angered by their insult. In turn, Pharaoh demands that the slaves be required to produce twice as many bricks in shorter amount of time. If they do not, they will be beaten. The Hebrews cannot meet these demands and are subsequently beaten. The Israelites turn on Moses, and Moses loses faith. He still doesn’t fully trust that God has chosen him. Aaron urges Moses to speak again to Pharaoh. The next section of the video continues the story from there...

Important note: In the ancient world, magic and supernatural powers were familiar aspects of life. Magi(cians) were employed to heal and perform miracles. While our modern, scientific world might question supernatural magic, the question for ancient cultures was WHOSE magic/power prevailed in the end (and by extension, WHOSE god is the true and most powerful god).

Screen share (with audio), “Moses” DVD (approx 25 minutes):

- Start at chapter 11 and continue to the end of the scene, 1:21:00, when Moses and Aaron have final audience with Pharaoh and his dead son.

Questions for Discussion:

- Why does it take so many plagues to change Pharaoh’s heart? Why is it so hard for those in power to give up power?

(Hint: these plagues are not only about supernatural powers, but also the power of religion and politics. People in powerful positions have to make hard decisions that impact the people they are in charge of. When, over time, their focus is more about maintaining their own power, their “hearts harden” and it can be difficult to let go of their power over others and do what’s best for people they are in charge of.)

- Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic was sent by God or the universe? Whose hearts do you think are most hardened? Do you think living through this pandemic will soften the hearts of people in power today? Why or why not?

- How do the plagues work as prophetic, symbolic action? Think closely about what is being impacted by each plague.

(Hint: Think about each of the plagues and their ecological impact. Primordial waters turned into blood... frogs/lice/flyes that point to habitats of water/earth/air... pestilence and boils that affect animals... hail and locusts that affect vegetation... darkness that affects cosmological reality... and death of firstborns that points to human life. This echoes the power of Creation in Genesis, but now undoing life under Pharaoh’s rule, and suggesting the possibility of a new creation for the Israelites.)

- What is prophetic about people’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic today?

6. Parting of the Red Sea (20 minutes)

Screen share (with audio), “Moses” DVD (8-10 minutes):

- Start at chapter 14 and play for a minute until after comment “He’s trying to blow the Egyptians away” at 1:29:35.
- Fast forward to 1:31:30, rejoice in the parting of the sea and play for a minute, until the Israelites run into the sea.
- Fast forward to 1:35:00, Egyptian soldiers run into the sea.
- End at 1:39:20, Israelites walking with torches.

Questions for Discussion:

- In the Hebrew Bible, there is no mention of how long it took for the parting of the waters. Why do you think the director chose to portray the parting of the Red Sea as something that took a long time and not an instant miracle?

(Hint: for all the displays of supernatural power, the plagues failed to finally change Pharaoh's heart! The rabbis understood this story as ultimately NOT about displays of supernatural power but whether people would come to have faith in God. So rather than an instant miracle, what would it mean for the Hebrews to have to wait on God to act, even as the Egyptian soldiers were closing in on them?)

- What has happened to the people's faith by this time, both in God and in Moses' leadership? What do you think has happened to Moses' own faith, both in God and in the role he has been called to play?
- If time allows, read the quote from Rabbi Zoë Klein again:

“God told Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea, and the sea would part. But according to Jewish interpretation, the sea did not part initially, and the children of Israel hesitated. They needed to be led. According to a Jewish midrash, a leader appeared in the person of Nachshon, who strode into the sea. The waters first reached his waist, then his chest and shoulders. And at the very last moment, as the waters reached his nostrils, the Red Sea parted and the Children of Israel followed him into the sea.”

Which version of the story—Moses parting the sea with his staff or Nachshon walking into the sea up to his nostrils—is more powerful to you, more of an act of faith? Why?

7. **Extinguish the chalice**, saying together: *“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*
8. **Leave zoom breakout classroom**: wait until all youth have left, click “Leave” then “Leave Meeting.”