Changing the World, One Person at a Time--Thoughts on Parashat Bo

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bo

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Moses Judah (1735-1822) is a relatively unknown American Jew, a member of New York's Congregation Shearith Israel throughout his life. He had fought in the American Revolution, had served in various synagogue offices, and generally led a quiet life. He is buried in Shearith Israel's historic Chatham Square Cemetery. He died on Yom Kippur. In announcing his death, the New York Evening Post noted that he was "a native of this city and one of its oldest freemen... He was much esteemed for his correct deportment."

In 1799, Moses Judah was elected to the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves. The Society, founded in 1785, had the goal of helping slaves gain their freedom. Moses Judah was instrumental in the freeing of many slaves.

He was one of those special human beings who exert themselves to fight injustice. During his lifetime, most people supported slavery, or tolerated it, or simply looked the other way. To his eternal credit, Moses Judah not only opposed slavery in theory, but did something actively to redeem slaves.

The American experience with slavery reminds us that evil generally does not go away by itself. Good people have to make sacrifices, even go to war, in order to create a moral, just and righteous society. Without these many "unsung heroes", evil would persist.

The Torah portion this week continues the story of the redemption of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. While the Torah makes it clear that it was God who effected the liberation of Israelite slaves, it also reminds us of little--but significant--acts of personal heroism. The two midwives refused to murder

Israelite children, in defiance of Pharaoh's orders; the daughter of Pharaoh saved an Israelite child's life; Moses killed a cruel Egyptian taskmaster. Yet, it appears that most people in that society were supportive or apathetic in the face of injustice and cruelty to the slaves. We don't read about any Egyptian society for the manumission of Israelite slaves, and we don't even read much about Israelite resistance to their oppressors. The case of Israelite freedom is extraordinary because it came about through Divine intervention, with very little human participation. This represents an exception to the usual rule of history.

We live at a time when the world is still overflowing with oppression, cruelty, violence. The people of Israel, though no longer slaves, are under siege; anti-Semitism continues to spread; terrorism is encouraged, tolerated, or explained away by so many. Modern-day Pharaohs attempt to oppress and crush us and other peoples throughout the world.

Moses Judah provides an example to us. He demonstrated that each good person can do something positive, however humble it may seem. Each person can take a stand, make a statement, take an action, make a contribution. We cannot assume that evil will disappear on its own. It must be confronted by heroes of the spirit in every generation.

* * *The Angel for Shabbat column is presented as a service of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, fostering an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism. Please become a partner in promoting our ideas and ideals by joining and contributing at jewishideas.org

Angel for Shabbat