Stand Up, Stand Tall: Thoughts for Parashat Vaera

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vaera

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“And the Lord said unto Moses: Rise up early in the morning and stand [tall] before Pharaoh… (Shemoth 9:13).”

Rabbi Hayyim Benattar, author of the Ohr haHayyim commentary on Torah, comments on this verse that God instructed Moses—a naturally humble man—to stand tall, not to bend his head in the presence of Pharaoh. Moses was not to think of himself as being subservient to Pharaoh; on the contrary, Moses was to consider himself to be Pharaoh’s superior. Moses was coming at the behest of God; Moses was representing justice and morality. Although Moses was to retain inner humility, he was not to show deference to the wicked Pharaoh.

Often enough, people are confronted with wickedness and injustice; but instead of standing tall in opposition to the perpetrators of evil, people bow their heads. They lose self-confidence. They think: I am too small and too weak to resist. It’s best to go along or to stay quiet. Resistance can be unpleasant, even dangerous. Thus, evil continues to spread.

God’s command to Moses to stand tall before Pharaoh should be construed as a command to each of us to stand tall in opposition to tyrants, manipulators, liars, and agents of corruption of all kinds. While retaining our inner humility and gentleness, we must not bend our heads in the presence of wicked and unjust people. To show subservience is to give the forces of evil another victory over goodness and truth.

The late Professor Norman Geras, who taught at the University of Manchester in England, wrote about “the contract of mutual indifference.” His basic thesis was that when people become indifferent to the injustices perpetrated against others,

the general morality of society declines. If we don't care about the sufferings of others, we cannot expect them to care about our sufferings. If we look aside when others are being abused, we cannot expect them to stand up for us when we are the victims of abuse. Mutual indifference is the sign of a morally defective society/world. It is not only degrading to the victims of injustice, it is degrading to the perpetrators themselves. It robs everyone of their essential humanity.

Professor Geras writes: "To accept the world as it (more or less) is, is to help to prolong a state of grave danger. This world, accommodating and countenancing too much of what ought not to be tolerated—plain persistent injustice, stark avoidable human suffering—is a world very receptive to present and future atrocity, a world overpopulated with bystanders….As long as the situation lasts, it degrades the moral culture of the planet. It poisons the conscience of humankind." (The Contract of Mutual Indifference, Verso Books, New York and London, 1999, p. 120.)

How can the contract of mutual indifference be rectified? How can humanity overcome widespread apathy in the face of injustice? How can the arrogant be humbled and the wicked be foiled? There is only one answer, and it is for each person to assume personal responsibility. It is for each good and moral person to express indignation, to resist the tyrants and demagogues. Unless each person is ready to shake off moral indifference and fearfulness, the forces of evil will continue to prevail.

"And the Lord said unto Moses: Rise up early in the morning and stand [tall] before Pharaoh." We are likewise commanded to stand tall before the Pharaohs of our times, to resist the agents of oppression, falsehood and injustice who undermine the fabric of our society and our world.

Angel for Shabbat