Hollow at the Center: Thoughts for Parashat Shemot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemot

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“And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them” (Shemot 1:6-7).

As long as Joseph and his generation flourished, the children of Israel flourished. Amazingly, though, no sooner had that generation died off than the situation of the Israelites deteriorated dramatically.

We do not know the names of any Israelite leaders in the generation immediately after Joseph’s death. We know nothing about the Israelites’ communal organization, religious life, or social structure. The Torah gives us just a brief glimpse of that generation, and it only speaks of quantity: the Israelites multiplied tremendously… “the land was filled with them.”

What happened? Why was there no smooth transition of leadership from one generation to the next? Why did no one emerge as a national leader? Why did this vast number of people so easily become enslaved by Pharaoh? Where were their leaders, their statesmen, their warriors?

The Torah does not give a direct answer to these questions. But it does give an indirect answer.

In describing that generation, the Torah speaks only of quantity, not quality. It uses many words to tell us how numerous the Israelites were; it says nothing about the inner life of the people.

The message: the Israelites saw themselves in terms of quantity, not quality. They were affluent; they were successful; they filled the land with their presence and their influence. As they became self-absorbed with their material status, they lost sight of their spiritual foundations. When a nation defines its success by its numbers, when it forgets its spiritual content—it is a nation on the verge of disintegration.

Sometimes, we see nations or communities or institutions that appear so very strong. They count many members. They erect great buildings. They issue glitzy press releases in praise of their numeric strength and their wealth.

But these same nations, communities or institutions have lost sight of their raison d'etre. While their founders were idealistic and courageous, the new generations have lost that spiritual dynamism. They have sunk into the morass of quantity, and they have forfeited the demand for quality. They appear strong—just as the numerous Israelites appeared to Pharaoh. But they are internally very weak. They produce no visionary leaders to guide them; they produce no courageous leaders to wage their battles. They simply have forgotten why they came into existence in the first place…and they fall into slavery all too easily.

In "Atlas Shrugged" by Ayn Rand, there is a passage about a boy who loved a great oak tree. "He felt safe in the oak tree's presence; it was a thing that nothing could change or threaten; it was his greatest symbol of strength." But one night, lightning struck the oak tree, splitting it in two. The next morning, the boy saw the fallen oak which had been rotten from within. In place of its core, it had hollowed out and had become frail. "The trunk was only an empty shell; its heart had rotted away long ago; there was nothing inside.…The living power had gone, and the shape it left had not been able to stand without it." Once the tree's core turned rotten, it was doomed to break when a storm would hit it.

There are countries, communities, institutions—and people—who are like the oak tree in this story. They have the appearance of grandness and power; but they are rotting within. They gradually erode and become hollow. When they fall, people suddenly realize how badly they had been deceived by relying on quantity rather than quality.

In our world, it can be confusing to distinguish between a solid oak and an oak which is rotting at its core. Yet, if we cannot tell the difference, we are destined to great suffering and disillusionment.

The Torah reminds us not to judge success or strength by external numerical standards. The Israelites were not strong even though they multiplied in prodigious numbers. A hollow oak tree is not strong even if it is ancient and massive.

No nation, community, institution or individual can be deemed to be strong unless the inner life is healthy.

Angel for Shabbat