

# Powers Equal to Our Tasks

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Shir Tikvah Congregation

Over lunch yesterday, my friend Bruce Manning shared with me the story of Eugene Feingold. Mr. Feingold was a distinguished professor of social work at the University of Michigan for more than 35 years. He retired at the age of 62, but decided that his work was not yet done. So, at the dawn of his retirement, he did something radical. Professor Feingold went back to school. To law school in fact. But instead of just let the esteemed professor in to take a few courses, Michigan had rules. The man with the Ph.D. needed to sit for the LSAT (Law School Admission Test); apparently, his degrees from Darmouth in the 1950s did not satisfy the admissions committee. And, Michigan did not permit part time students; Professor Feingold needed to enroll full time. So he did. And went on to receive his law degree in 1992, pass the bar, and spent the rest of his life advocating *pro bono* for the protection of the first amendment by leading the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. He did so until he died in 2002.

In this weeks Torah portion, the stage is set for one of the greatest confrontations in human history. God, as presumably only God can do, has convinced Moses and Aaron to appear before Pharaoh and plead on behalf of the Israelite people; that they must no longer be slaves; The Eternal has called them forth to freedom. Even after Moses protests that he gets tongue-tied, God is resolute (a good feature of a deity, we would argue): You will repeat all that I command you, says God (Exodus 7:1-6), and Aaron will speak to Pharaoh; he will call Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from this land. When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My people, the Israelites. The Egyptians will know that I am Adonai when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst.”

This is drama at its best! As if this weren't enough, our story is punctuated by one extraordinary but oft overlooked fact; another line of text, seemingly lost to history. Moses was 80 years old and Aaron 83 when they made their demand on Pharaoh (v: 7).

Moses was 80. Aaron was 83. And they stood up to Pharaoh in an improbable moment to proclaim that the Israelites slaves should be freed and permitted to leave Egypt.

As if the story weren't absurd enough! Now we learn that the slave and the schlepmy goat herder who rise before the presumed God of Egypt and demand freedom for Israelites, do so even as their bodies are already bent with age, with far more yesterdays than tomorrows resting upon their horizon.

Helen Keller, a gentle prophet, proclaimed, "It is for us to pray not for task equal to our powers, but for powers equal to our tasks, to go forward with a great desire forever beating at the door of our hearts as we travel toward our distant goal."

This stunning revelation—that we might be called at times in our lives for greatness, for purpose, for things that seem beyond our reach and are utterly, ridiculously absurd—came to two men who never applied for nor wanted the job as "Great Liberators of Israel," but who nonetheless were called by the moment of history and their people and the time and by God to rise up and heed the call. They defied reality: a reality of slavery and humiliation, poverty, and endless suffering. They had no idea what the new reality would look like; a reality of no longer being slaves and following a God who, by the Divine's own account, had virtually ignored their cries for the past several years; and who, by the way, only Moses could talk with directly. And yet, in their defiance, in the midst of their trepidation, they discovered the secret to eternal life. They discovered hope.

Professor Feingold found new purpose in his 60s.

Moses and Aaron were octogenarians when they reshaped the human story forever.

Debbie Friedman, whose yartzheit we observe tonight, spent 40 years creating Jewish music and prayer and ultimately, reshaping the ways we understand community and synagogue life. In her early days, cantors and rabbis fought her music and routinely warned of the threat of "sing-able" music in the synagogue being the end of all decorum and authentic prayer. Could she—or they—have imagined the slight woman with the guitar and the giant voice from St. Paul would lead a revolution to transform Jewish prayer?

Who is sitting here tonight, in the quiet of this Shabbat hour, listening to the voice of an American society that says we must be young and beautiful in order to be successful, knows—knows—those voices are wrong? Deep in your kishkes, you know, really know, that there is something deeply powerful inside you to offer?

Who is being called & knows that now is the moment to answer the call, as absurd as it might be, that when a moment comes for us to shape the future, who has powers equal to our tasks, is ready—scared, even terrified—but called forth with the beating of your heart to travel now?

Now, I realize it is easy to shut down, to say, “I’m no Moses. I’m not going to liberate an enslaved people. This yutz isn’t talking about me.”

Stop.

Breathe.

I am absolutely speaking to YOU.

Perhaps you ARE the one who is going to be the person to help us get marriage equality passed. Or sensible gun safety legislation enacted. Or stop the scourge of human trafficking. Or raise our consciousness for climate change.

Or maybe, maybe, this is the very moment you are called to do something you’ve always put off.

Maybe it is as simple as learning to knit. Or swim. Cook. Or write poetry.

Maybe your job is awful and this is the year you’re ready to take the leap of faith into something unknown because you believe in the depths of your heart you have something more to offer.

Could it be that now is the moment that you’ve decided that yes, your heart is full and you are ready to love and be loved. Or forgive someone who wronged you, not because they’ve apologized, but because you’re done holding onto the pain that person caused and because being free means being whole.

Is now the moment beating at the door of your heart, beckoning you to stop denying your fabulousness and realize we've only got one wild and precious moment to live and it can all be over in an instant and we're created for moments such as these and because really—show me some well behaved man or woman who history gives a damn about.

The story of the Exodus is the master story of the Jewish people: a motley band of slaves cries loud enough to evoke the empathy of the central Creative Force of the Universe who demands their liberation, frees them from bondage, and sets them on a course of redemption and an eternal covenant of service. Tucked amidst the plagues and pharaoh and grant spiritual protest is a spiritual message of dignity: the dignity that comes from living a life of purpose, of answering when called in the affirmative, of serving an idea and ideal greater than our individual selves. The story of the Exodus narrates the transcendent power of community and the inherent worth of each individual; it is a grand story, not simply for the movement from slavery to freedom to service. It is a great story because its essential spiritual lesson is that the call of humanity is to serve.

The poet Mary Oliver writes, “Ten times a day something happens to me like this - some strengthening throb of amazement - some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”

Nu?

You're being called.

At this moment.

Now.

“It is for us to pray not for tasks equal to our powers, but for powers equal to our tasks, to go forward with a great desire forever beating at the door of our hearts...”