

VA'ERA

Fri. 12.01.18

Exodus 7: 14-26. Moses and Aaron visit Pharaoh and say "God says: let My people go." Then we have the first seven plagues: blood, frogs, lice, insects, cattle, blight, boils and hail.

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The rabbinical post was vacant in a Manchester congregation, and a rabbi, who had recently given up a pulpit in an Essex synagogue, applied for the position. The President of the Manchester congregation did the usual thing: he wrote a letter asking for references. Shortly afterwards, he received the following answer:

"Our former rabbi can easily be compared to Moses, to Shakespeare and to God."

The Manchester congregation was impressed and delighted with this glowing praise and so they appointed the Essex rabbi to their pulpit. But it did not take them long to discover that their new rabbi was no genius.

So, in a huff, the President wrote a sizzling letter to the Essex congregation, upbraiding them for the deception and demanding an explanation. Several days later they were in receipt of the following reply:

"Why do you insult us? Who has deceived you? We answered as we did with good reason.

"Our former rabbi can be compared to Moses, because, like him, he speaks no English; to Shakespeare because, like him, he speaks as if he had pebbles rolling around in his mouth; and to God because, like Him, our former rabbi is positively not human!"

Moses had a stammer. He was 80 and Aaron 83 when they made their demand on Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. Couldn't someone a bit younger and more suitable have been found?

Once the Israelites gave them the chance, Moses and Aaron would demonstrate effective leadership. Moses was no orator, but Aaron could speak for him. Whilst Aaron could not summon the thunder and hail, Moses did. For 40 years, Moses would prove to be a fine leader. Neither of them let the Israelites down.

We know, from demographic figures, that we are living longer. What leadership will our older generation offer to the younger generation crossing the wilderness of the present days?

Much of the professional leadership of this congregation is in (to me, at least!) quite young hands, although there are a number of older people still guiding us in the lay areas. We may argue that many younger people are unwilling to pick up the reins, as they have other priorities in their lives. Fortunately, our silver generation have experience and wisdom.

Into the hands of an 80-year-old and an 83-year-old, Adonai entrusted the Jews and Judaism. Into their hands, Adonai placed the past, present and future of Judaism. It is a daunting challenge that our leaders have to face.

One problem of having 80-year-old leaders is that it can be hard to convince the younger generation to listen to them. . The young are often self-confident. They do not speak the same language.

In Exodus 6, Adonai tells Moses, "I am Adonai. I will free you from the labours of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage." But "when Moses", we read just three verses later, "told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage."

There is much that keeps us in bondage today: mortgages, loans, repayments, school fees, commuting, work deadlines, newspapers and the media; we may be in bondage to guns and drugs in our cities; perhaps also to terrorists. We are even in bondage to study. In all of this, where is God?

"Where is God?" asks Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk. The answer? "Wherever human beings let God in." Adonai told Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Adonai, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, 'Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness'."

I am not asking octogenarians to lead me to God. I only ask them to do what they can best do: to point me in the right direction. As long as I value their leadership, they will always point me in the right direction.

I do not ask the older generation to pay my loans (although they're welcome to!). In truth, they have lived longer than I, and they know that there is more to living than paying loans and reading "The Times". There is God. Adonai is somewhere out there in the wilderness and if I will only let our elders lead, I know I will find God because I have opened myself to let God in."

[Adapted from a paper by Dr Alan Kay.]