

Holy Ground – Liberating the Imagination

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Last month in Torah we began reading the book of *Shemot* / Exodus, our archetypal journey from enslavement to liberation and movement towards a higher calling. The calling begins as Moses approaches the bush which burns yet is not consumed, where God says to him: "*Shal na'alekha mei'al raglekha, ki ha-makom asher atah omeid alav, admat kodesh hu* - Cast off your shoes from your feet, for the place upon which you are standing is holy ground".

Am I the only one who has ever wondered why we keep our shoes ON in shul?

And just what is the nature of this particular holy ground which necessitates Moses removing his shoes?

Perhaps that at times of such raw intensity, our most basic response is to remember and renew our connection with the earth itself from which we come, the ground of our very being and source of our sustenance, as well as to connect with our spiritual source.

And perhaps, too, we need to come closer to our most essential nature, unencumbered by any additional layers of separation, which the shoes represent.

Indeed, hasidic teachers draw out this connection further: "*Rege*", the Hebrew word for "foot", is connected to the source of the English word "regular", meaning the way we've accustomed ourselves to walk, that which we have made habitual. And the Hebrew root for shoes, "*na'alayim*", also yields the word "*na'ul*", which means to be locked.

So we can understand "*shal na'alekha mei-al raglekha*" as "cast off the locks from your habitual ways of being, doing, or thinking". Allow yourself an "out-of-the-box" experience (or an out-of-enslavement experience). In the words of one poignant prayer: Dear God, protect us from that to which we have become too accustomed.

For indeed, the deepest binding force of enslavement is often an imprisonment of the imagination - the inability to imagine any other possibilities - to see and open to the potential to do something different.

As *parshat Shemot* this year coincides with the weekend of our celebration of the life, work, and inspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King, it's particularly fitting to note the story of the Hebrew midwives who, in our first recorded instance of civil disobedience, had the imagination and courage to disobey the orders of the tyrannical pharaoh, to let the boy babies, including Moses, live to fulfill their potential. And it's similarly fitting to recognize the 24th *yarzeit* of Hiram Bingham, who served as American consul in Paris in 1940, and disobeyed the directives of his earthly higher-ups by issuing papers which enabled the escape of over 2,000 Jews from Nazi-occupied France.

And one other symbol of the flexibility of imagination sometimes required of us comes in a rather unexpected form: Moses asks for a sign, God instructs him to throw his shepherd's staff on the ground, and voila - the staff turns into a serpent - a snake! Why a snake? Perhaps, as some have noted, because one salient feature of the snake is its skeleton - it is essentially all spine - all vertebrae! Is this not the ultimate expression of flexibility of movement?

So I invite you to take a deep breath ... and another ... and imagine. ... Imagine a world in which all of our yearnings, and all of our words and deeds are coming from a place of the deepest caring - for the earth, for ourselves, for each other ... every word and deed a manifestation of the Divine Love that permeates and fills the holy ground upon which we all stand - the flame that burns continually ... and is never consumed.