

When You Discover You're Like No Other • Parshat Va'era

Imagine your world suddenly covered with frogs jumping on every surface: “Aaron held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt” (Ex. 6:10). It would be absolutely revolting. The God of this slave people was capable of much aggravation and destruction, the Egyptians finally realized. Nevertheless, Pharaoh, in this week's Torah reading, sent his magicians the task of replicating this plague, ironically creating even more amphibian havoc: “But the magician-priests did the same with their spells, and brought frogs upon the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:2).

The statement of God's singularity and uniqueness appears elsewhere in *Tanakh*. In Jeremiah, we read, "There is none like You, O Lord; You are great, and great is Your name in might" (10:6). In the first book of Samuel, Hannah intones a prayer upon delivering Samuel to Shiloh: "There is no one holy like the Lord; indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God" (2:2). In difficult times and in times of great joy, our people has held steadfastly to a belief in monotheism even when we suffered for it, even when no one around us believed in one God.

I believe that this iconoclasm – the capacity to challenge cherished beliefs and reigning institutional norms – rubbed off on the Jewish people as well. Believing something no one else believes and challenging existing ways of thinking and being can also help mold the way we generate new ideas, invent new medicines, and chart new pathways in science and the arts. Could belief in a God who is like no other extend to a belief in personal human singularity as well? There is no other God. God is unique. There is no one else like me. I am unique.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Radical Then, Radical Now*, reminds us of this singularity: "We are not insignificant, nor are we alone. We are here because someone willed us into being, who wanted us to be, who knows our innermost thoughts, who values us in our uniqueness, whose breath we breathe and in whose arms we rest; someone in and through whom we are connected to all that is." Uniqueness can be uncomfortable rather than reassuring. We do what others do to belong. It takes courage to imitate God by being who we were uniquely meant to be.

Gregory Berns, a professor of neurology at Emory, wrote his book *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently* to demonstrate the brain's plasticity and ability to challenge ideas long accepted. The iconoclast is the ultimate leader because the iconoclast allows himself or herself to think and act differently. "We take for granted