

PASSOVER

The Right Staff

The scene played itself out exactly as God had said it would. Moses and Aaron walked in to Pharaoh's palace and delivered to him God's message, "Let My people go!" But Pharaoh was not impressed. Who were these people who presumed to give orders to the exalted king of Egypt? "Show me a wonder for yourself!" he declared.

Aaron cast his staff to the ground, and before the astonished eyes of Pharaoh and his ministers, the staff morphed into a slithering serpent. Pharaoh signaled to his wizards, and they too cast their staffs to the ground. Their staffs too morphed into serpents, duplicating Aaron's feat. But Aaron had the last word. His serpent reverted to its original form as a staff and swallowed the serpents of the wizard.

The language of Pharaoh's challenge is puzzling. "Show me a wonder for yourself!" What did he mean by the words "for yourself"? The situation called for a wonder for the Egyptians, not "for yourself." Furthermore, what was the point of performing a wonder that Pharaoh's wizards could easily duplicate?

The commentators see this entire scene was an dispute in a far deeper symbolic form. The Jewish people, steeped in the degenerate Egyptian culture, had already sunk to their lowest spiritual level ever. In fact, at the splitting of the sea, which took place about a year later, the angels wondered aloud why the Jews were being delivered and the Egyptians drowned. "Both groups are idolaters!" the angels declared. This was Pharaoh's argument from the start. "Show me a wonder for yourself." Your people are so assimilated and enmeshed in our culture that you no longer capable of transcendence. Show me that you are still retain an element of spirituality. Show me why wonders, those transcendent phenomena, should be performed "for yourself." Your people are no better than the Egyptians.

Moses responded to this charge symbolically by having Aaron cast his staff to the ground. A staff is a straight rod that connects two polar extremities. It is represented by the purely linear Hebrew letter vav, which means hook, implying the connective nature of the linear symbol. The essence of every Jew, his soul, his spirit, his conscience, is the connection between the mundane and the divine, between Heaven and the earth, the outer extremities of existence. Our mission in life is to connect Heaven and earth, but when our symbolic staff is placed in a polluted environment such as Egypt, it is transformed into a serpent, the

symbol of pure evil. In other words, argued Moses, the Jewish people had fallen to such a low level through no fault of their own.

Not so, Pharaoh countered. He ordered the wizards to cast their staffs to the ground, and their staffs also became serpents. In other words, the Egyptians might very well possess the same divine spark within them when they are not under the influence of their environment.

Then Aaron's serpent reverted to a staff and devoured all the Egyptians serpents. Even in the presence of so much evil, the Jewish people retained the power to return to their spiritual purity and defeat the forces of evil.

A young prince was playing in the fields with the children of the royal servants. They were all splattered with mud and having a very good time.

"Look at you!" shouted his exasperated tutor. "Don't you know you are a prince? Don't you know that this sort of play is undignified? Why, I can't even tell the difference among you mud-covered urchins."

"Don't worry," said the prince. "When I hear the king approaching I remember who I am and I become every inch a prince-although a temporarily muddy one."

In our own lives, the strains and stresses of everyday life and the allure of popular culture tend to drag us down from our natural state of spiritual elevation. But we are nonetheless deeply rooted in the hallowed traditions of our heritage. And when we hear the approach of our Father in Heaven, the King of Kings, on the festival of Passover, we are uplifted and inspired, and even if it is only for a short time, we become once again the shining princes and princesses of His chosen people.