
Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
Portion of Va'eira

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Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Va’eira

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1. The Egyptian Purview of Existence Dean

The Torah tells us in the Portion of Shemos that G’d instructed Moshe to go to Pharaoh along with the elders of the Jewish people and present themselves as His agents to request that the Jewish people be released from bondage. The Torah states, "**You and the elders of Israel shall come to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘Hashem, the G’d of the Hebrews, happened upon us. And now please let us go...’**" When Moshe and Aaron later appeared before Pharaoh the verse states, "**Afterwards Moshe and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, ‘So said Hashem (YKVK), the G’d of Israel, Send out My people that they may celebrate for Me in the wilderness.’**" Pharaoh replied, "**Who is Hashem (YKVK) that I should heed His voice to send out Israel? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Israel!'**"

It is clear from the verses, that Moshe and Aaron did not communicate to Pharaoh as they were instructed by G’d to do. G’d had told them to present themselves as the agents of "**G’d of the Hebrews (Elokei Ha’Ivrim).**" Yet they presented themselves as the agents of "**Hashem (YKVK) the G’d of Israel**" However after Pharaoh rejected their representation as being the agents of "**YKVK**," Moshe re-stated his representation and referred to G’d as the "**G’d of the Hebrews (Elokei Ha’Ivrim).**" Why did Moshe not initially communicate to Pharaoh as he was instructed? He was told to represent himself as the agent of "**the G’d of the Hebrews**" but he chose to say, "**the G’d of Israel.**"

Initially, when Moshe and Aaron were to go Pharaoh, they were to be accompanied by the seventy elders of the Jewish people. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that by the time Moshe and Aaron had arrived at the palace, all of the elders had chosen to remove themselves out of fear. Moshe and Aaron were left alone to go before Pharaoh. Moshe had understood that the reason that G’d had told him to present himself as the agent of the "**G’d of the Hebrews**" because he was being accompanied by the seventy elders who were a representation of the Jewish people who at that time were

pagans. The pre-Sinai status of the Jewish people was "**Hebrews (Ivrim).**" However, after the elders disassociated themselves from Moshe and Aaron and were not present, Moshe understood that the proper appellation that he should use was one that referred to entity of the Jewish people as "**Israel.**" He not representing the physical entity that was in Egypt at the time but rather they he was representing the Jewish people as an entity of holiness.

The Torah tells us that Yaakov, our Patriarch was given the name "**Israel**" after he had defeated the archangel of Esav. It is a name that established him as the one who lords over angels and man. Although Yaakov was a physical being, his dimension was spiritual. He transcended the physicality of the world. The Jewish people who are his descendants possess that same innateness of spirituality. Initially, the Jewish people were known as "**Hebrews**" which is an appellation that identifies them based on their origin ("**Hebrew**" means "from the other side of the river"). Since Pharaoh believed that all existence was limited to the material, the appellation of "**Israel**" was something that he could not fathom or accept. He thus rejected Moshe's representation of "**YKVK**" and "**Israel.**" Upon seeing Pharaoh's reaction, Moshe and Aaron restated their representation as being the agents of "**the G’d of the Hebrews**" (not YKVK).

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the title "**Pharaoh**" which was given to all the Egyptian monarchs, contains the Hebrew letters "*ayin pey raish*" which spells "*afar*" (earth/dust), indicating that the foundation for the Egyptian civilization was based on the belief that all existence is limited to the mundane. There was no spiritual element that has relevance to existence.

The Midrash states, "**Moshe and Aaron said, ‘Perhaps Pharaoh did not heed our request because we altered the words of G’d. G’d had initially said to us to represent ourselves as the agents of ‘the G’d of the Hebrews’; however, we chose the appellation of ‘Hashem(YKVK), the G’d of Israel.’ This is the reason he rejected us.’ They thus altered their initial presentation and referred to themselves as the agents of ‘the G’d of the Hebrews.’ Pharaoh gritted his teeth and responded to them in a disrespectful manner...’**

After Moshe and Aaron understood that they needed to present themselves as the agents of the “G’d of the Hebrews,” they appreciated that G’d’s initial instruction was not because they were supposed to be accompanied by the seventy elders who were the representatives of the people who were pagans at that time, but rather, because they needed to address Pharaoh within his own purview of belief, which was that everything was limited to the physical.

2. *Recognition and Reflection*

The Torah tells us that G’d spoke to Moshe using four expressions of redemption. The Torah states, “**Say to the Children of Israel: ‘I am Hashem and I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I shall take you to Me for a people and I shall be a G’d to you; and you shall know that I am Hashem your G’d, Who takes you out from under the burden of the Egyptians.’**” Sforno explains “**you shall know that I am Hashem...**” to mean, “One who recognizes and reflects upon what had transpired will know that I am Hashem, your G’d.” It is not sufficient to merely experience the various phases of redemption but rather one must contemplate and reflect upon the happenings of redemption in order to appreciate their significance. Sforno continues, “One must verify and reflect upon every detail of the Divine Providence that was revealed. If one does so, he will have no doubt that G’d will fulfill the promise that He made to bring about the future.”

Even if one believes in G’d (*emunah*) – that He is the Omnipotent and Almighty Being, it is has no baring on one’s faith/trust (*betachon*). In addition to belief, one must have trust in G’d; however, one is only able to achieve faith if one recognizes and reflects upon what G’d has done for him in the past and the present. This will thus allow him to have faith in Him in the future. Thus, as Sforno, explains, “Then you will be worthy that I will bring you to the Land that I have promised to your forefathers.” As the verse states, “**I shall bring you to the Land about which I raised My hand to give to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov and I shall give it to you as a heritage...**”

The term that the Torah uses regarding the Land that was promised to our forefathers is “heritage” (*morasha*) and not “inheritance” (*yerusha*). The Torah

states regarding the Torah itself in the Portion of Vezos Haberachah, “**The Torah that Moshe commanded us, is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov.**” Rabbeinu Bachya explains that there is a difference between a “heritage” (*morasha*) and an “inheritance” (*yerusha*). An inheritance is something that one receives as an heir and because it belongs to him, he may do with it as he chooses. If he chooses to destroy or squander it without passing it to the next generation, it is his prerogative because it belongs to him. In contrast, a heritage is given to one with the express intent that he must safeguard it in order to pass it along to the next generation intact. Thus, he must maintain and secure it so that future generations will appreciate its value. The Torah was given to the Jewish people as a heritage to be theirs and to transmit to future generations until the end of time. A heritage comes with criteria to which one must adhere.

The Torah refers to the Land of Israel also as a “heritage” since the Jewish people must meet certain criteria in order to retain it and benefit from its bounty. They must live upon the land in full conformance with the Torah in all of its aspects. G’d forewarned them, “**You should not behave as the Canaanites that lived in the Land because it will expel you.**” One’s responsibility for the future generations is to live in the Land as the Torah prescribes. One can only have an appreciation of G’d and for what He has done on our behalf, if one reflects upon and contemplates every detail of the blessing that He has bestowed. As Sforno concludes, if the Jewish people will reflect and contemplate upon what G’d has done for them, then they will be worthy to enter into the Land, as a heritage.

3. *The Essence of Every Jew*

The Torah tells us that G’d told Moshe to communicate the four expressions of redemption to them. The Torah states, “**Therefore, say (*l’chein ehmor*) to the Children of Israel: ‘...I shall take you out...I shall rescue you...I shall redeem you...I shall take you to Me...’**” Rashi cites the Midrash, “The term ‘*l’chein*’ is an expression of an oath.” G’d bound Himself to the Jewish people with an oath, that He will bring about the four phases of redemption, culminating with taking the Jewish people to be His.

Baal HaTurim states, “The numerical value (gematria) of the word ‘*l’chein*’ is 100. This is alluding to that in the merit of Avraham who fathered a child at the age of 100 G’d took an oath to redeem the Jewish people.

It also alludes to Yitzchak whose yield of crop during the year of famine was a hundred fold (mea shearim) a harvest during an ordinary year. It also alludes to the merit of Yaakov who had fathered all of his children by the age of 100.” Thus, in the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov G’d committed Himself to redeem the Jewish people from Egypt through the four expressions of redemption.

Although the Jewish people were not worthy in their own right to be redeemed, G’d nevertheless bound Himself with an oath to redeem them in the merit of the holy Patriarchs. As we see from the Midrash, when the Jewish people and the Egyptians were both crossing the Sea after it had split, the angels had come to G’d with a claim, “Why are the Egyptians the only ones to be destroyed? The Jewish people also deserve to be destroyed because they (the Jewish people) are pagans and they (the Egyptians) are pagans.” Despite their unworthiness, G’d redeemed them in the merit of the holy Patriarchs.

Before the High Holidays, a member of the Brisk community had auditioned to be a cantor in one of its synagogues for the High Holiday services. To his dismay, he was rejected by the committee. Demanding to be reconsidered, the man came before Reb Chaim Soloveitchik z’tl who was known as the Brisker Rav, the Rav of Brisk. He claimed that he was indeed highly qualified to be the cantor for the High Holidays. Reb Chaim asked him why does he feel qualified? The man cited Jewish Law, “The Ramah writes in the Code of Laws that the most qualified cantor for the High Holidays should be minimally thirty years of age. He should be married with children. And he should be a Torah scholar with good deeds. Since I have all of these qualifications, I feel I am qualified for the position.” Reb Chaim of Brisk said, “It is good that you have these qualifications, but could you give me a sample of your performance as a cantor?” The individual began to sing. Reb Chaim immediately realized that every note that the man had song was off pitch. Reb Chaim said to him, “The qualifications that are cited by the Ramah in the Code of Law have relevance to an individual who is qualified as a cantor. However, if one has no relevance to being a cantor, because he cannot sing, these qualifications are not relevant.”

The Jewish people in Egypt were idolaters. They only retained their identity in the context of their language, dress and names as Jews. Other than these areas, they were fully acculturated with the Egyptian culture. The only objective for redemption from Egypt was to go to Sinai

and become G’d’s people. Being at the lowest level of spirituality, seemingly would indicate that the Jewish people had no relevance to becoming G’d’s people, (similar to the man who wanted to be a cantor but could not sing). G’d, nevertheless, took an oath to redeem them from Egypt and take them to be His, because they were the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. This is alluded through the word “*l’chein*” to indicate that although the Jewish people at that moment were assimilated, their essence is spiritual. Thus, the potential of every Jew, because he is a descendant of the holy Patriarchs can rise to become close to G’d to be taken as His people. This communication is expressed through the word “*l’chein*” to give every Jew a sense of who he truly is.

4. *Opening One’s Heart*

The Torah states in the Portion of Shemos, “....**Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their suffering ...**” Rashi explains, “He allowed his eyes and heart to sense their suffering.” Moshe not only observed the plight of the Jewish people, he reflected upon their predicament and was thus able to internalized their pain. The Torah is revealing to us that in order for one to be affected by what he sees, it is not sufficient to only realize something, he must reflect upon it. The Torah continues, “**and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brethren...so he struck down the Egyptian.**” When Moshe saw the Egyptian beating the Jew, he could not tolerate the injustice that was being perpetrated. He thus killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. Moshe did not merely observe an injustice being perpetrated, but rather he was pained and affected by it because of the degree of his internalization of the suffering of the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us that G’d told Moshe to communicate the four expressions of redemption to the Jewish people. After Moshe had done so and proven that he was the agent of G’d the Torah states, “**So Moshe spoke accordingly to the Children of Israel, but they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of wind (*kotzeir ruach*) and hard work.**” Although Moshe had communicated to the Jewish people that their redemption was imminent, they nevertheless could not accept it because they were overwhelmed from the bondage. They did not have the capacity to internalize what Moshe had told them.

Sforno explains, “The Jewish people did not listen to Moshe because they did not reflect upon what they had heard to understand that they should have the trust in G’d to redeem them. They did not appreciate the value of what was being presented to them. They could not understand that G’d would redeem them as a kindness. As we find with Avraham, our Patriarch. Avraham and his wife Sarah, were barren. The Torah tells us that when G’d told Avraham that he would have a son, **‘He believed’** and it was considered a ‘righteousness.’...It is because of this lack of faith and their unwillingness to appreciate what Moshe had said to them, this generation was not worthy to enter the Land of Israel. However, their offspring would enter into the land.” The reason the Jewish people were not able to appreciate what Moshe had told them was because they chose to not reflect and contemplate upon it.

The Torah states, **“You should know in your heart that Hashem is G’d...”** It is not sufficient for one to understand that G’s is the Almighty, one must reflect and contemplate upon it so that one can have a sense of who G’d is. This is the meaning of “You shall take it to your heart....” When one will sufficiently reflect upon this, he will be moved to action to do His Will.

The Torah states after the plague of blood came upon Egypt, **“Pharaoh turned away and came to his palace. He did not take this to heart.”** Although the Egyptian people were denied water for seven days because all of the water had turned to blood, Pharaoh chose not to allow what he saw to affect him. He chose not to reflect upon what was happening. He did not contemplate for a moment the magnitude of what was happening around him, that his subjects could only survive if they depended on their Jewish slaves for water. Although Pharaoh saw what was happening he remained unaffected because he chose not to reflect upon it.

5. The Importance of Balance

The Torah states, **“V’yedaber Elokim - G’d spoke to Moshe and said to him, ‘I am Hashem...”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Moshe was addressed by G’d in a formal and reprimanding context. The appellation of **“Elokim”** connotes the Attribute of Justice, indicating that Moshe was being faulted for a failing. Additionally the usage of the term **“v’yedaber (spoke)”** is a formal manner of speech rather than **“vayomer(said).”** Moshe was addressed by G’d in this manner because of an inappropriate question that he had asked. After Pharaoh had withdrawn the straw subsidy from the Jewish people

and demanded the same quota of bricks to be produced, Moshe approached G’d with the question, **“My Lord, why have You done evil to this people, why have you sent me?”**

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains, “The question that was posed by Moshe to G’d was especially inappropriate because he had posed it to G’d Himself, a Great King. Why did Moshe allow himself to ask a question that seems to be clearly inappropriate? It was because of his familiarity and intimacy with G’d. G’d had shown him a joyous Countenance that He had not previously revealed to anyone other than Moshe. As it states, **“...My Name Hashem (YKVK) I did not make Myself known to them (the Patriarchs).”** This establishes the special relationship that Moshe had with G’d. After Moshe had asked the question that was inappropriate G’d revealed to him His Countenance of Judgment, which instills fear and awe. The verse states, **‘V’yedaber Elokim - G’d spoke to Moshe...I am Hashem’** Meaning, although G’d revealed His Countenance of Joy, through the Name Hashem (YKVK) Moshe should have experienced that joy within a context of trepidation. As the Gemara states, ‘Even in a moment of joy there should be trepidation.’”

Due to G’d demonstrating His overwhelming love for Moshe, he felt close to Him and thus took the liberty to pose the question that he should not have asked. It was Moshe’s love for G’d that compelled him to ask the question because he was concerned for the glory of G’d. Since Moshe had come to the Jewish people as G’d’s Redeemer, which was proven and confirmed through the revealed miracles that G’d had instructed him to perform, indicating that it was immanent that the bondage would improve. However, when the bondage intensified, it created a setting for a desecration of G’d’s Name. Moshe’s question emanated from his love for G’d. He was concerned about how G’d would be perceived by the Jewish people. The Torah tells us that Pinchas as a zealot killed Zimri, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon because he was openly desecrating the Name of G’d by cohabiting with Cozbi the Midianite princess. Pinchas’ act of zealotry was rooted on his love for G’d and thus merited many miracles which protected him from being killed. Ramban writes that the commandment to love G’d is a more advanced level than the commandment to fear G’d. Love is something that motivates while fear causes restraint. If this is so, why was Moshe’s question considered inappropriate?

King David writes in Psalms, “But You offer forgiveness so that we may fear You...” Meaning, the reason G’d grants forgiveness is so that the Jewish people should fear Him. Understanding that only He can grant forgiveness will evoke fear and awe of G’d. The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that although Moshe and the Jewish people were the direct beneficiaries of the revealed miracles of the exodus, they had not said “Baruch Hashem! (Blessed is G’d).” However, Yisro after hearing all that had transpired regarding the Jewish people when they had left Egypt, did acknowledge G’d in this manner. As the Gemara states, “It is something unbecoming (and a blemish on their record) that Moshe and the 600,000 Jews who left Egypt did not say ‘Baruch (Blessed)’ while Yisro did say ‘Baruch.’”

Although the Jewish people acknowledged every aspect of miracle that had transpired during the splitting of the Sea through the Song of the Sea, they did not express their thanks to G’d as Yisro had done. Despite the fact that the Jewish people had the clarity to describe the miracles in detail, they were not moved to the point of expressing their thanks. Similarly, one can have an overwhelming love for G’d; however, one may take liberties because one does not simultaneously sense the awesomeness of His Being. Thus, it will not evoke fear within him. By fearing and revering G’d, one will understand the boundaries that exist between himself and the Creator.

Moshe had a unique love for G’d, because what G’d had revealed to him but as the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains his fear of G’d was not commensurate with his love. Thus, he took the liberty to ask the question. G’d responded, “**Now you will see (the redemption).**” Chazal explain that the word “Now” infers that Moshe will merit seeing the present redemption from Egypt but will not merit bringing the Jewish people into the Land of Israel.