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Parshat HaShavua sheet

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Parshat Vaera
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PROOF IN THE PUTTING

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week, the Torah tells us how the Egyptian exile entered its waning moments as the dawn of redemption begins. Moshe and Aharon threatened Pharaoh with strong repercussions if Hashem's will was not fulfilled and the Jews were not redeemed from Egypt. But before they took action, Moshe and Aharon proved they were messengers from Hashem by displaying their ability to control and even change nature. The first miraculous spectacle occurred on a governmental level, in Pharaoh's palace. After those demonstration did not impress the ruler, only then did the nation feel the brunt of Hashem's punishment they were stricken with the plague of blood.

Moshe and Aharon did not enter the palace of the tyrant unaware of his arrogance. They had met him before and were mockingly rebuffed. But this time they were equipped to prove their powers and authority. They were forewarned that their adversary would doubt their authority, and he would ask them to produce celestial credentials with a sign that they were truly Divinely ordained.

Hashem tells them, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Provide a wonder for yourselves,' you shall say to Aharon, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh — it will become a snake!' " (Exodus 7:9).

The Noam Elimelech, Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, questions the wording. What would Pharaoh mean with the words "Provide a wonder for yourselves"? He asks. The wondrous act was not for Moshe and Aharon, rather it was for Pharaoh! Shouldn't the posuk read "provide a wonder for me"? With these words did Pharaoh, the master showman whose world renowned chicanery held Moshe at bay for a year, teach us something about the nature of miraculous occurrences that prove a point to a skeptic?

P.T. Barnum was a master showman who astounded hordes of foolish curiosity seekers with displays of the bizarre and the seemingly impossible. One of his amazing displays had a lamb grazing peacefully in a display cage, while two fierce lions strolled nonchalantly only a few feet away. He obviously felt that the exhibit would attract hundreds who would marvel at his pretended prescient fulfillment, albeit partial, of the prophet Yishayahu's (11:6) description of the Messianic era. "And the wolf shall lie with the lamb, and the leopard will lay down with the kid, and the lion shall walk with the lamb dwell peacefully." One of Barnum's friends, who was amazed at the sight of this post Messianic mimicry, asked in wonder, "how long do you think you will be able to maintain this exhibit?" Barnum shrugged his shoulders, smirked, and replied sardonically, "as long as my diminishing supply of lambs holds out!"

Reb Elimelech of Lizensk explains the words with which Hashem warned Moshe and Aharon, "It will be when Pharaoh will ask, 'give for yourselves a sign.'"

Pharaoh the charlatan would know the difference between a true sign and a spectacular hoax. The difference is how the performer perceives it. Pharaoh's conniving magicians performed sorcery that they themselves knew to be filled with lies. As performers, they were not impressed.

Pharaoh would ask for a sign, not only that would impress him, but would impress Moshe and Aharon as well. The greatest accomplishment in life, and the greatest way to influence others in a meaningful and lasting way, is to be as impressed and excited about one's own actions as are others.

A parent or teacher who discusses Torah with true enthusiasm, impressed by the Heavenly genius contained within, will surely impact a child in a more meaningful way than a parent who exudes an "I heard this one already" attitude toward his audience. Pharaoh understood that, and Hashem told his Divine messengers that Pharaoh, who knew very well how to lie, would ask for the real sign — one that generated the same excitement for the messengers as well as the recipients. It was not only a sign for himself, but for Moshe and Aharon as well. The Proof is not always in the way something is received. Sometimes the proof is in the putting!

Pharaoh's Mistake

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Interestingly, the Tribe of Levi were exempt from the slavery because of a decree that Yosef made many hundreds of years earlier, guaranteeing freedom and independence to any 'Priests' – people devoted to spirituality. However, this begs the question: why did Pharaoh allow this exemption to continue, being that he was such a ruthless and powerful leader who could surely cancel Yosef's decree?

Rabbi Yonasan Eibenschutz offers a profound insight into Pharaoh's reasoning. Through his astrologers, Pharaoh foresaw that the future redeemer of the Jewish people would emerge from the Tribe of Levi (indeed, Moses was from the Tribe of Levi). However, instead of enslaving them to break their spirit, Pharaoh made a calculated decision. He reasoned that if the Levites were spared the suffering and toil of slavery, they would remain disconnected from the pain and struggles of the Jewish people and they would not be able to empathize with their suffering. This would prevent them from caring enough to be an effective redeemer. Moreover, a person who had not shared in the people's anguish would find it impossible to rally them behind his cause as they would see him as an outsider, incapable of truly understanding their plight.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Eibenschutz continues that the Jewish people also did not initially accept Moses as their leader precisely because of his privileged upbringing. This, posits Rabbi Eibenschutz, is the meaning of the verse in Shemot. "But they did not listen to Moses because of shortness of spirit (*kotzer ruach*) and hard labor." They were not able to listen to Moses because of the fact that they had experienced shortness of spirit and hard work and he never had. Moses grew up as a free man, living in the palace. They were not ready to listen to him or to let him become their redeemer as he!

Thus, whether it was because he was a Levi or because he grew up in a comfortable lifestyle, there was good reason that both Pharaoh and the Jewish nation could not envisage Moses as being an effective leader, with the required level of empathy and concern. Indeed, it seems that it wasn't inevitable that Moses would develop into the person who could lead the Jewish people, rather he made a concerted effort to develop the trait of empathy and to relate to the suffering of his brethren.

The Torah relates: "Moses grew up and went out to his brothers, and saw their suffering..." Rashi elaborates: on the words, "he saw their suffering" that "he placed his eyes and heart to feel pain over them." Rashi teaches that Moses actively made an effort to empathize and see what the Jewish people were going through, and contemplated what they were enduring. This enabled him to develop the trait of empathy that was essential for him to be able to ultimately gain the trust of the people, and to be an effective leader.

Moses transcended his privileged upbringing through his conscious efforts to empathize with his brethren. The Torah recounts how, as a young man, Moses "went out to his brothers and saw their burdens" ([Shemot 2:11](#)). The Alter MiKelm emphasizes the deliberate nature of Moshe's actions: he didn't merely observe their suffering passively but actively placed his eyes and attention on their pain. He allowed himself to feel their anguish as if it were his own, forging a deep connection with his people despite his different circumstances.

To be a leader, it is not enough to feel the pain of the people, one must act upon it. Moses did just that when he saw an Egyptian beating a Jew. He risked his life to save the Jew and kill the Egyptian. Again, in Midian, he came to the rescue of Yitro's daughters because he could not accept oppression of innocent people.

This type of selfless empathy was entirely alien to Pharaoh. Pharaoh was someone who only cared about himself, and showed no concern for the great suffering that he brought upon his people through his stubborn refusal to free the Jewish people. This is demonstrated in his reaction to the first plague of blood. The Torah relates that, "Pharaoh hardened his heart and he did not listen to them [Moshe and Aaron]." The next verse states that, "Pharaoh turned and went to his home, and also did not pay attention to this." The commentaries ask, what does the Torah refer to when it says that 'he did not pay attention to this' - the previous verse already stated that Pharaoh did not listen to the arguments of Moshe and Aaron? The Netsiv explains that the second verse is telling us that Pharaoh was also unmoved by the pain that his people were suffering through the plague, and did not seek out any ways in which he could ease their pain.

A man driven by selfishness and a lust for power, Pharaoh could not comprehend a leader like Moshe, who was willing to make himself vulnerable and share in the suffering of others. Consequently, Pharaoh projected his own character onto Moshe, assuming he would remain detached and indifferent to the suffering that he had not experienced. Pharaoh's mistake was that Moshe worked on himself to develop his compassion and empathy and thereby became the greatest leader of the Jewish people. May we all merit to emulate Moshe's efforts of developing the key quality of empathy.

“I will bring you to the land, concerning which I raised My hand to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, and I will give it to you as a heritage; I am Hashem” (6:8)

Rabbeinu Bachya notes that Hashem gave them the land as a “morasha,” which means something that is bequeathed to others, rather than as a “yerusha,” an inheritance. This is a veiled reference to future developments that would lead to this generation dying in the wilderness, leaving their children as the ones who actually inherited the land. However, this generation was still charged with bequeathing the land to the next generation, teaching them about the importance and sanctity of Eretz Yisrael and igniting their enthusiasm for the land that was being passed down to them. We also find the word “morasha” used in connection with Torah: “Moshe by us to commanded was Torah The ,morasha for the community of Yaakov.” Torah is given to us, but it is also a “morasha,” a gift that we are entrusted with transmitting to the next generation. Torah is not just for us to keep to ourselves. We also have to create an environment that will inspire our children to embrace the Torah.

“Come, speak to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and he will let the Children of Israel out of his land” (6:11)

Why did Hashem tell Moshe to “come to Pharaoh” rather than instructing to him “go to Pharaoh”? Chizkuni explains that the answer lies in the fact that Hashem is always with us and offers assistance to those who strive to fulfill His will. Hashem encouraged Moshe by saying the He was going to go Pharaoh and that Moshe should “come” along with Him. Moshe would not have to “go” on this mission alone. Hashem chose a word that Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman – ד"ר תשפ וארא - פרשת - Page 2 would reassure Moshe of His guidance and nearness during the interactions with Pharaoh and wherever He would send Moshe. When one works toward spiritual goals, Hashem is always right there with him, helping him along the way.

“So Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and He commanded them concerning the Children of Israel and concerning Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to let the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt” (6:13)

Why did Hashem tell Moshe to take the people out of the “land of Mitzrayim” instead of just saying to take them out of Mitzrayim? Hashem was making the point that leaving Mitzrayim did not just entail a journey from Point A to Point B. They also had to leave all that characterized the “land of Mitzrayim” – its lifestyle, its culture, and its attachment to physical pleasure. Egyptian culture had taken root within Jewish society over the years of their stay and it was important that they leave that behind. Moshe’s mission was to lead the people out of Mitzrayim completely by totally changing their mindset and values. This is a question that we still have to ask ourselves today: Are we thinking like Jews or like Americans? Is our mindset and outlook on life driven by Torah values or American culture? It is easy to be sucked in by the society around us and we have to be very careful to keep our values.

“And you shall say to him: Hashem, G-d of the Hebrews, has sent me to you, saying: Send out My people that they may serve Me in the wilderness; and behold you have not listened until now” (7:16)

Everyone knows that Moshe commanded Pharaoh: “Let my people go!” But not everyone knows that his demand came with one additional point: “Let my people go that they may serve me!” Three times in the parsha, Moshe demanded the release of the Jews specifically for the purpose of serving Hashem. Leaving Egypt was not just about being emancipated Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman – ד"ר תשפ וארא - פרשת - Page 4 from slavery – it was mainly for the purpose of being able to live as Jews. Freedom is a means to serve Hashem properly. In our lives today, the same is true about money. Accumulating money is not the end game, it is only a means to attain what we need to serve Hashem. Just as the Torah always emphasizes that the purpose of freedom was to serve Hashem, we should keep in mind that the same is true of earning money.

“And Moshe was eighty years old, and Aharon was eighty three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh” (7:7)

Why does the Torah tell us how old Moshe and Aharon were? Seforno says that the Torah wants to show that despite their age, Moshe and Aharon acted swiftly and with great energy to carry out the instructions of Hashem. Even though they were both over 80, they did not let their age slow them down when Hashem had given them a job to do. As we get older, it is not a simple task to maintain the same level of serving Hashem despite limitations on our time and our physical energy. Even when we are juggling a lot of things in our lives, whether they are commitments to our families and home lives or more challenging and difficult situations, we should work hard to make sure that we do not slow down in our service of Hashem.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

The Urgency of Removing the Frogs

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Thesefer Darash Mordechai asks, why did Moshe need to cry out to Hashem to remove the frogs (Shemos 8:8)? Pharaoh deserved every plague he received. He deserved the full duration of Hashem's intended punishment. It seems that here Moshe intervened. He left the palace and cried out to Hashem to remove the frogs that He had placed upon Pharaoh. Why not let Pharaoh suffer a little longer? Why did Moshe seemingly preemptively stop this plague?

The Darash Mordechai offers several answers to this question. First, he cites an answer in the name of the Imrei Emes (Rav Avraham Mordechai Alter, the fourth Gerer Rebbe). We see that Hashem was very particular about *kavod malchus* (preserving the honor of the monarchy). Despite the fact that Pharaoh was wicked, he was a king. There is a concept that a king must be given honor. In order to display *kavod malchus*, Moshe Rabbeinu acquiesced to Pharaoh's request that the frogs be removed. The Darash Mordechai then quotes an answer from the Rebbe, Rav Bunim of P'Shische. He says the purpose of the plagues was to establish *Emunah* (Belief in G-d) in the world. The Ramban speaks about this. After the Exodus, no one could doubt that there was a *Ribono shel Olam* who controls the world. Part of *Emunah* is that there is a thing called *koach hatefillah*. A person needs to believe in the power of prayer. Moshe wanted to demonstrate that prayer has the power even – as it were – to override a decree of the Almighty. Therefore, that is why Moshe prayed for the *maka* to cease, and that is why the plague of frogs was truncated, so to speak.

Finally, the Darash Mordechai cites an answer from the Chiddushei HaRim (Rav Yitzchak Meir Alter, the first Gerer Rebbe). Moshe Rabbeinu did not merely daven over here. The Torah has many words to express prayer. Here the Torah uses the words “*Va'Yitz'ak Moshe el Hashem*” (Moshe cried out to Hashem), which indicates one of the highest and most intense forms of *Tefilla*. In fact, the *pasuk* in Parshas Shemos says “Behold the *tzeaka* (crying out) of *Bnei Yisrael* has reached Me...” (Shemos 3:9). The Zohar says that *tzeaka* goes straight to the *Ribono shel Olam*, bypassing any intermediaries. Sometimes someone needs *amalachto* to boost his prayers and to take them in to the *Ribono shel Olam*, so to speak. *Tzeaka* literally is a primal scream. That scream is so powerful that it goes straight to the *Ribono shel Olam*.

This really intensifies the question. It does not say “*Vayispalel Moshe el Hashem*” (which would indicate a more conventional word for prayer) but “*Va'Yitzak*”. Moshe was so concerned that the frogs should cease that he resorted to the most powerful form of *Tefilla* that exists – namely, *Tze'aka*! Why?

In *Tefilas Geshem* (recited on Shemini Atzeres to pray for rain of blessing for the coming winter season) we invoke the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and then Moshe. The paragraph regarding Moshe mentions how he provided water for the people. We conclude with the words “Upon the Rock he struck and waters came forth.” Many commentaries ask, this would seem like an inappropriate time to bring up “*Al ha'Selah hach, va'yetzoo mayim*”? The hitting of the Rock is what caused Moshe Rabbeinu to not be able to go into *Eretz Yisrael*. So why bring that up? We talk about the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It would seem that we should mention Moshe's merits as well, and steer clear of his actions that may have been problematic.

The Chiddushei HaRim makes a magnificent observation. Moshe Rabbeinu knew what he was doing when he hit the rock. It was not a mistake. Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to save *Klal Yisrael* from Divine criticism. He reasoned: Here I talk to them repeatedly and still they do not do the right thing. If I go to a stone and say to the stone “Give forth your water” and just like that, it gives forth its water, how would that reflect on the Jewish people? Moshe could talk until he was blue in the face to the Jewish people, who benefited from G-d's kindness, and they might not listen. And yet the stone obeys instantly! What a poor reflection that would be on *Klal Yisrael*! Therefore, Moshe decided he would not speak to the rock. He would instead hit the rock, thereby lessening the implicit criticism of *Klal Yisrael*. It is for such self-sacrifice and concern for the welfare of the Jewish people that Moshe is praised in *Tefilas Geshem*.

The Chiddushei HaRim applies the same line of reasoning with regard to the frogs: Moshe Rabbeinu had commanded the frogs to ascend from the Nile. The frogs obeyed the command of Hashem. They ascended from their comfortable home in the Nile. They went into the ovens of the Egyptians and died there. They were killed *Al Kiddush Hashem*. The frogs reflected poorly on the Jewish people. Hashem gave them an order and they followed it to martyrdom, while the Jews had sunk spiritually to the 49th level of spiritual impurity. “These are idolaters and these are also idolaters.”

As long as the frogs were present and jumping into the Egyptian ovens, every minute was another indictment of *Klal Yisrael*. Therefore, when Moshe had the opportunity to get rid of the frogs, he did so with intensity: *Va'Yitzak*! “I want to stop them in their tracks and immediately halt this embarrassing comparison between their actions and that of the Jewish people.” He therefore used the highest form of *Tefilla*.

Pharaoh's Conundrum

by Rabbi Ari Kahn

As the showdown between God and Pharaoh nears its apex, we are faced with a moral dilemma that has far-reaching ramifications. It may be argued that Pharaoh is no more than a pawn in a cosmic drama, since the enslavement of the Jews was pre-determined, and had been foretold to Avraham hundreds of years earlier. To what extent, then, did Pharaoh have free will? To what extent did he deserve the severe punishment meted out to him? Any competent defense attorney engaged to defend Pharaoh might choose between several different strategies. On the one hand, the defense could point out, Pharaoh was simply carrying out the will of God; if anything, he deserves kudos, not Divine wrath. Alternatively, Pharaoh could claim a lack of culpability due to diminished capacity: God Himself had "hardened" heart; was he at liberty to have behaved any other way?

A close reading of the biblical text disqualifies both of these defense strategies: As far as diminished capacity is concerned, the text clearly indicates that Pharaoh's heart was manipulated by God only after Pharaoh himself had displayed arrogance and a stubborn streak. Through the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own heart. He needed no coercing to issue decrees that made the Israelites' lives unbearable, nor did he come under any undue influence when he refused to heed Moshe's calls before, during and after the plagues of blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts and pestilence. In fact, one could argue that by subsequently "hardening" his heart, God allowed Pharaoh to continue to travel down the path he had already chosen. Pharaoh had clearly indicated his attitude toward the Children of Israel; the plagues were events of such tremendous supernatural interference in the course of history that they effectively denied him the ability to continue to conduct the affairs of state in the manner he had chosen. By hardening his heart, God allowed Pharaoh to continue to make his own choices in the face of crushing supernatural force. God's intervention, then, gave Pharaoh back his free will, as opposed to taking it away.

As for the contention that Pharaoh should have been rewarded because he was "on a mission from God", rather than punished for his treatment of the Israelites, Pharaoh's own words belie this claim: What sort of messenger of God, upon being confronted by Moshe, denies any knowledge of God and refuses to accept the word of His prophet? Moreover, the pre-determined slavery that had been foretold to Avraham did not specify where the slavery would take place or what its nature would be. Pharaoh could easily have abdicated the role of enslaver, refused to assume the morally reprehensible position of oppressor. Furthermore, the covenant that God forged with Avraham spoke of enslavement and suffering, but did not speak of infanticide. The sheer cruelty displayed by Pharaoh went far beyond the call of duty.

From the outset, Pharaoh expressed an objective problem with the Israelites. He regarded them as a fifth column, strangers, foreigners residing in "his" land, a people who could not be trusted. Ironically, the Israelites had been in the land of Egypt for generations, and the Egyptian economy had been saved by none other than an Israelite. Yet Pharaoh chose not to study history; he did not remember Yosef.

Pharaoh could have chosen another way to solve the problem he perceived: Rather than victimizing or ostracizing these strangers, he could have co-opted them, subsumed them into the greater Egyptian nation (a nation that had successfully subsumed waves of foreigners from the north). By affording them full rights, acceptance, appreciation, he could have turned his "adversaries" into allies. Throughout history, the Children of Israel have always been susceptible to the seductive advances of alien cultures; the astounding rate of assimilation in the modern era speaks eloquently in favor of this strategy. By displaying his distrust of these strangers, by legislating their "otherness", Pharaoh effectively insured their continued existence as a separate nation, while at the same time sealing his own fate and the fate of his kingdom. Pharaoh had shown his hand: It was not the Will of God that he wished to fulfill, it was his own paranoia and xenophobia that led him down the path he chose.

The Torah's message regarding Pharaoh's choice rings out loud and clear throughout the remainder of the Five Books: We are enjoined, time and time again, to learn from Pharaoh's bad choices. We are commanded to treat the stranger with respect, love and acceptance. We are instilled with an acute sense of history, and taught to distill from the slavery experience what it is like to be disenfranchised. The Torah instructs us to redouble our efforts to see to it that others will not be treated as we were. Like Pharaoh, we are capable of choosing the path of hatred and suspicion or of peace and respect; one of the quintessential principles of Judaism is the moral imperative to choose the path of peace.

Pharaoh made the wrong choice, and neither a good cardiologist nor a sharp defense attorney could have changed the outcome. The choices he made were made freely, willingly, enthusiastically. His misdeeds were his own; his treatment of the emerging Jewish nation was criminal, and his punishment well-deserved.

