**S.A.L.T. PARASHAT VAERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Rambam, in Hilkhot Sefer Torah (chapter 8), lists all the paragraph breaks that must be made in the text of the Sefer Torah. These include\ both *petuchot* – full-line breaks, where a piece of text begins on the line below the preceding text – and *setumot* – empty space on a single line, where the text begins on the same line as the preceding text, after an empty space. His list of the paragraph breaks in Parashat Vaera is subject to a good deal of controversy, due to variant editions of the Rambam’s wording. According to some editions, the Rambam includes a paragraph break – specifically, a *setuma* – after God’s command to Moshe to warn Pharaoh about the impending plague of frogs (after the words, “*ya’alu ha-tzefard’im*” – 7:29). This command is followed by God’s subsequent command that Aharon should raise his staff to bring the plague (8:1), and according to some editions of the Rambam’s list, this second command begins a new paragraph in the Torah. The *Kesef Mishneh* cites those who claim that this verse does not actually belong in the Rambam’s list, and it was added due to a copyist’s error. However, the *Kesef Mishneh* accepts what appears to have been the standard edition of the *Mishneh Torah*, which included this verse in the Rambam’s list. He notes that in the Ixar edition of the Torah, this verse indeed begins a new paragraph.

This controversy affects another verse in Sefer Shemot, as well. The Rambam concludes his list of the paragraph breaks in Sefer Shemot by noting that this book includes a total of ninety-five *setumot*. If we omit the reference to the aforementioned verse in Parashat Vaera, then we are left with only ninety-four *setumot*. As such, those who follow the edition that omits this reference are compelled to alter the Rambam’s text elsewhere in this passage. Namely, they claim that the Rambam lists two *setumot* in the final of the Ten Commandments. The Rambam lists “*lo tachmod*” (“you shall not covet”) as one of the verses that begin after a *setuma* paragraph break, but according to this view, the Rambam actually lists “*lo tachmod*” twice – referring to the two verses that comprise the tenth of the *Aseret Ha-dibberot*, both of which begin with the words “*lo tachmod*.” Meaning, according to those who maintain that God’s command to Aharon to produce the plague of frogs does not begin a new paragraph, the “missing” *setuma* is found at the end of the Ten Commandments, as in their view, both verses of the final commandment constitute independent paragraphs.

Common practice follows the view disapprovingly cited by the *Kesef Mishneh*, according to which God’s command to Aharon in Parashat Vaera does not begin a new paragraph, whereas each verse of the command of “*lo tachmod*” constitutes a separate paragraph.

Rav Tzvi Hersh Grodzynsky, in his [*Mikra’ei Kodesh* (Parashat Vaera)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=8939&st=&pgnum=483&hilite=), suggests drawing proof to this view from the presentation of the Ten Commandments in Sefer Devarim (chapter 5). There, as in Sefer Shemot, the commandment of “*lo tachmod*” consists of two imperative statements (though the second begins with “*lo tit’aveh*,” as opposed to “*lo tachmod*’), and Rav Grodzynsky notes that both imperative statements constitute independent paragraphs. It thus stands to reason that the parallel verses in the first version of the Ten Commandments, in Sefer Shemot, also follow this format, with each comprising a separate paragraph. Although there are several differences between the two versions of the Ten Commandments, there are no discrepancies with regard to paragraph breaks. The only exception is that in the first version, in Sefer Shemot, the fourth commandment (“*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat*”) begins after a *petucha* paragraph break, on the line below the end of the third commandment, whereas in Sefer Devarim, the fourth commandment begins with a *setuma*. However, there are no instances of a paragraph break in one version of the Ten Commandments at a place where there is no paragraph break at all in the other version. It thus seems reasonable to assume that just as “*lo tachmod*” comprises two separate paragraphs in Sefer Devarim, it likewise comprises two paragraphs in Sefer Shemot. By extension, then, God’s command to Aharon to bring the plague of frogs does not begin a new paragraph.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the controversy surrounding the verse in Parashat Vaera (8:1) in which God commands Aharon to raise his staff to bring the plague of frogs upon the Egyptians. According to some editions of the Rambam’s Hilkhot Sefer Torah (chapter 8), this verse begins a new paragraph (“*setuma*”), and thus a space must be left in between the preceding text and this verse. Others, however, disagreed. We saw that as the Rambam explicitly requires ninety-five *setuma* paragraphs breaks in Sefer Shemot, the second view must “compensate” for this paragraph break, and it thus maintains that a paragraph break is made in between the two verses of the final of the Ten Commandments (“*lo tachmod*”). This is, indeed, the accepted practice.

The *Noda Bi-yehuda* (*Mahadura Kamayta*,Y.D. 79) addresses the case of a Sefer Torah which was found written according to the first opinion, with a paragraph break in Parashat Vaera, but no paragraph break in between the two verses of the command of “*lo tachmod*.” He rules that although the accepted custom follows the second opinion, nevertheless, the community should not correct the Sefer Torah to accommodate this view. The *Noda Bi-yehuda* notes that the *Kesef Mishneh* opposed modifying the accepted text of the Rambam’s ruling, and upheld the view that a paragraph break is made in the verse in question in Parashat Vaera and not in between the verses of “*lo tachmod*.” In light of this opinion, a Sefer Torah that was found written in accordance with this view should not be changed, and may be used.

Rav Efrayim Zalman Margoliyot, in his [*Sha’arei Efrayim* (*Pitchei She’arim* 6:21)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=34320&st=&pgnum=144&hilite=), strongly disputes the *Noda Bi-yehuda*’s ruling. He cites the work *Or Torah*, which brings numerous sources and manuscripts of the *Mishneh Torah* to prove that the correct edition of the Rambam’s text follows the second view mentioned above. Rav Margoliyot goes so far as to say that if the *Kesef Mishneh* had seen these manuscripts, he would not have rejected the emendation made in the text of the Rambam. Therefore, he writes, although there is perhaps room to permit a congregation that discovered this mistake in the Torah to continue using the Torah for that day’s reading, the text of the Sefer Torah must be corrected afterwards. Rav Margoliyot cites this ruling from the *Devar Shemuel* (343), who noted that this case does not fall under the rule allowing the use of a Sefer Torah which contains a mistake that is acceptable according to some halakhic authorities. (The *Devar Shemuel* cites this rule in the name of the Mahari Mintz.) Generally, once a Sefer Torah is written, a mistake may be ignored if it is written in a manner that satisfies the view of some *poskim*, even though that view is not followed. The *Devar Shemuel* contended that in the case under discussion, it is considered the universally accepted opinion to make no paragraph break in the verse in Parashat Vaera, and to make a break in between the two segments of the command of “*lo tachmod*.” Therefore, if the opposite was done, the Sefer Torah must be corrected.

Interestingly, Rav Margoliyot cites the *Ma’aseh Rokei’ach* commentary to the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* as citing testimony that a certain Torah scroll which was meticulously written according to the famous text of Ben-Asher follows the accepted view. The Rambam (Hilkhot Sefer Torah 8:4) accepted the text of Ben-Asher, and writes that the Torah scroll he wrote (commonly identified as the Aleppo Codex) followed Ben-Asher’s text. It thus stands to reason that the correct text of the Rambam’s list of paragraph breaks follows this view, that a paragraph break is made in the tenth of the Ten Commandments but not before the verse in question in Parashat Vaera. For this reason, too, Rav Margoliyot ruled that a Sefer Torah written in accordance with the other view must be corrected.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vaera tells of the first seven of the ten plagues that God visited upon the Egyptians, with the account of the final three plagues appearing in Parashat Bo. Numerous commentators observed the clear pattern that runs through the plagues – namely, every third plague occurs without any warning to Pharaoh. Whereas the other plagues were preceded by Moshe and Aharon’s approaching Pharaoh to warn of the impending disaster, these plagues – vermin, boils and darkness – were brought upon the kingdom without advanced notice. Indeed, as we read in the *Haggadah*, Rabbi Yehuda divided the ten plagues into three groups of three, three and four plagues each, an arrangement that is likely based on this pattern.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his [*Oznayim La-Torah*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=39722&st=&pgnum=105&hilite=) (Shemot 7:17), makes another observation about these three groups of plagues. In each group, he notes, the warning of the first plague was given to Pharaoh at a private meeting, and the warning of the second was given in the palace. God sent Moshe to warn the Egyptian monarch about the plagues of blood (7:15), wild beasts (8:16) and hail (9:13) early in the morning, when Pharaoh went to bathe. Before the plagues of frogs (7:27), pestilence (9:1) and locusts (10:1), however, God simply tells Moshe, “*Bo el Pharaoh*” – “Go to Pharaoh” – which most likely refers to meeting Pharaoh in the palace. (Proof may be drawn from the fact that after the warning of locusts, Pharaoh’s servants plead with him to free *Benei Yisrael*, and then Moshe and Aharon are summoned back to Pharaoh; it certainly appears that this meeting occurred in palace.) It emerges, then, that three different methods were used in an attempt to convince Pharaoh to free *Benei Yisrael*: private warnings, public warnings, and no warnings. This was done, Rav Sorotzkin explains, so that Pharaoh cannot later claim that he failed to obey because he did not receive an appropriate warning. God punished Egypt after issuing all possible kinds of warnings, including no warning at all, to establish that all possibilities were covered in His attempt to persuade Pharaoh to obey His command.

We might learn from Rav Sorotzkin’s insight that people respond differently to different forms of influence. In Pharaoh’s case, no method of persuasion worked, but most people can be affected, at least to some extent, by one method or another. The way one person is uplifted and moved will have no effect on another person. Not every source of inspiration is suitable or effective for all people. Just as God had Moshe try different methods in an attempt to persuade Pharaoh, we must realize that many different methods exist with which we can, potentially, impact upon our children, students and peers, and not every method is necessarily appropriate for all of them. With patience, common sense and an open mind, we can, hopefully, find the right technique for all those under our charge, so we can do what we can to uplift and exert a positive influence upon them all.

Tuesday

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 13) cites Reish Lakish as offering an explanation for the Torah’s account of God “hardening Pharaoh’s heart” so that he refused to allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave Egypt. Reish Lakish explained that once God repeatedly warns a sinner to repent, and the sinner refuses, God withholds from him the possibility of repentance. Thus, after God repeatedly warned Pharaoh of calamity if he refused to release the slaves, and Pharaoh remained defiant, He hardened Pharaoh’s heart (9:12). This Midrashic passage serves as an early source for the Rambam’s famous comments in Hilkhot Teshuva (6:3) that a person guilty of especially grievous sins, or who sins consistently for a prolonged period, can be punished by being denied the ability to change.

Rav Yosef Salant, in his [*Be’er Yosef* (Parashat Bo)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=47091&st=&pgnum=229&hilite), explains on this basis the symbolic significance of the plague of hail – the first plague brought upon Pharaoh after God hardened his heart. As the Torah describes (9:24), this plague included fire, which miraculously descended from the heavens together with the ice pellets. Already Rashi, citing the Midrash, noted the miraculous “harmony” that was maintained between the ice and fire, which would normally clash with one another. Rav Salant suggested that this miracle symbolized the phenomenon of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Ordinarily, “fire” – crisis and suffering – has the ability to “melt” even the hardest hearts. A person facing a dire situation or experiencing pain and hardship should naturally feel humbled and subdued, and hence more susceptible to positive change. The supernatural cooperation between the ice and fire during the plague of hail thus symbolized the supernatural hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, as the “fire” of crisis and calamity failed to “melt” his heart and force him into submission as it normally would.

The metaphor of fire and water in this context reminds us that under ordinary circumstances, the “ice” within us is susceptible to “melting.” Our hearts are, naturally, “frozen” and resistant to change. We prefer remaining within our comfort zone, and respond to calls for change with suspicion or intimidation. By nature, we want to continue being who we are, like a solid piece of ice. But just as God decreed that ice should melt in response to heat, He likewise decreed that our hearts are capable of softening. It is only under extraordinary circumstances, such as in the case of Pharaoh, when God miraculously keeps a sinner’s heart “frozen,” just as He kept the ice pellets frozen during the plague of hail. But in all other circumstances, He grants us the ability to “melt,” to change our hearts and our conduct and improve ourselves – even though our initial instinct to remain “frozen.” And so if we ever feel as though we are “frozen” in place, when we find ourselves “stuck” in negative habits and tendencies, we must remember that we just need the right amount of “heat” to “melt” the “ice” and allow us to change. Different forms of “heat” will work for different people, but the first, most vital step is to acknowledge that it can happen. We must therefore never despair, and instead continue working, patiently and steadily, confident in our ability to eventually make the changes that we know we need to make in our hearts and in our behavior.

Wednesday

Parashat Vaera begins with God’s pronouncement of the “four expressions of redemption” (“*arba leshonot ge’ula*”) which He instructed Moshe to convey to *Benei Yisrael*. The Torah tells that *Benei Yisrael* paid no attention to Moshe, exasperated as they were from the intensified workload which had recently been imposed upon them. God then told Moshe to return to Pharaoh to demand that he release *Benei Yisrael*, whereupon Moshe turned to God and noted that even *Benei Yisrael* did not listen to him, and so certainly Pharaoh would pay no attention to him. The Torah then relates, “The Lord spoke to Moshe and Aharon and instructed them with regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt” (6:13). The *Sifrei*, in Parashat Behaalotekha (91), explains this verse to mean, “You must know that they [*Benei Yisrael*] are obstinate and troublesome, but you must accept it upon yourselves that they will curse you and hurl stones at you.” In response to Moshe’s frustration over *Benei Yisrael*’s rejection of his prophecy, God informed Moshe that he must bear this frustration, and this is part of the job he had accepted. The people under his charge were “obstinate and troublesome,” and he was to tend to them with patience and selfless devotion.

This interpretation of the verse likely relates to the word “*va-yetzaveim*” – “He commanded them.” When an authority figure issues a command, the subject under his charge is required to carry out the order regardless of the difficulties entailed, and even if he experiences no fulfillment or satisfaction from the work. A command is absolute, and obligates the subject irrespective of whether he derives direct benefit or enjoyment from fulfilling the command. And it is in this vein that *Chazal* understood the word “*va-yetzaveim*” in this verse, which refers to God’s assigning Moshe and Aharon the role as leaders over *Benei Yisrael*. God was indicating to Moshe and Aharon that their responsibilities to *Benei Yisrael* remain in force even when they are difficult and aggravating, and even when they provide no gratification. Leadership is often fraught with frustration, the first tastes of which Moshe had just experienced. God was alerting Moshe to the fact that his role is a “command,” one which he must fulfill out of a loyal sense of duty and responsibility, and not on condition that the job is enjoyable or convenient.

The lesson of “*va-yetzaveim*” applies not only to people in leadership position, but to all of us. We are to work on behalf of others out of a sense of duty and responsibility, and with an understanding that our obligations do not depend on our level of enjoyment or feeling of satisfaction. Not always will our efforts earn us appreciation or respect, and at times they will bring us just the opposite. *Chazal*’s interpretation of God’s command to Moshe and Aharon reminds us that as much as we justifiably yearn for recognition and gratification in exchange for the help and services we provide for other people, this is not guaranteed, and it must never be a precondition for investing these efforts. We are to get involved and help out of a strong sense of duty, and even when such work fails to provide the joy and satisfaction that it normally provides.

Thursday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Vaera of Moshe’s concerns when he was told by God to once again confront Pharaoh to demand the release of *Benei Yisrael*. Moshe noted that *Benei Yisrael* had rejected his prophetic message, and so Pharaoh would undoubtedly do the same, and he further noted that he suffered from a speech impediment: “*va-ani aral sefatayim*” (6:12,30).

The Ramban (6:12-13), in a lengthy discussion of the chronology of the events, writes that when Moshe first approached *Benei Yisrael* to convey God’s message of redemption, and then when he first confronted Pharaoh, others (the nation’s elders and Aharon) spoke on his behalf because of his speech impediment. However, in the beginning of Parashat Vaera, when God proclaimed the “four expressions of redemption,” He specifically asked Moshe to convey this message to *Benei Yisrael* (“*Lakhein emor li-vnei Yisrael*…” – 6:6). When this message fell upon deaf ears, Moshe attributed this failure to his inadequate oratory skills. And thus when God commanded him to return to Pharaoh, Moshe resisted, noting that if his handicap prevented his prophetic message from reaching the hearts of *Benei Yisrael*, there was no reason to believe he would succeed in changing Pharaoh’s heart.

Interestingly, in describing Moshe’s reluctance to speak, the Ramban does not formulate Moshe’s concerns as relating to his feared ineffectiveness due to his handicap. Rather, the Ramban writes that Moshe was “embarrassed” to speak because of his impediment (“*haya bosh le-daber*”). We might wonder as to the precise nature and cause of this “embarrassment.” Was Moshe truly insecure because he did not speak fluidly? Was he worried about embarrassing himself? Or does the Ramban perhaps refer here to a different kind of embarrassment?

[Rav Moshe Taragin](http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/848048/rabbi-moshe-taragin/post-shacharit-torah-why-is-moshe-ashamed-/) speculated that perhaps Moshe’s “embarrassment” was not about his personal dignity, but rather due to his role as the nation’s representative. He approached Pharaoh not as an individual, but as the spokesperson for *Benei Yisrael*. As such, his inability to speak fluidly and articulately might bring shame upon the people he was representing, and he felt ashamed for them. Moshe insisted that *Benei Yisrael* deserved a suitable spokesman, who could represent them with honor, and so he was reluctant to assume this role in light of his speech impediment.

Rav Taragin noted that if, indeed, this is the Ramban’s intent, then his comments remind us to be cognizant of who and what we represent as we go about our daily affairs. We live not just as individuals, but rather as representatives of the groups, institutions and value systems with which we associate. Our day-to-day speech and conduct, the way we present ourselves and interact with others, brings either honor or dishonor to all that we represent. This awareness should motivate us to conduct ourselves in a dignified, courteous and becoming manner wherever we go and with whomever we speak, in order to reflect positively upon our nation, our faith, our families, and everything else that we knowingly or unknowingly represent.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vaera of *Benei Yisrael*’s refusal to accept Moshe’s prophecy of redemption, due to “*kotzer ru’ach*” (“shortness of spirit”) and “*avoda kasha*” (“hard labor” – 6:9). The plain meaning of the text is that due to the harsh conditions which they suffered, and which were intensified as a result of Moshe’s initial encounter with Pharaoh, the people were exasperated, in despair, and thus unable to trust in Moshe’s promises of redemption.

The *Mekhilta* (Parashat Bo, *Masechta De-pischa*, 5) offers a much different – and surprising – interpretation of the term “*avoda kasha*” (“hard labor”) in this verse, claiming that it refers to the people’s involvement in *avoda zara* (idol worship). Their idol worship was “hard” in the sense that it was very difficult for them to withdraw from it, entrenched as they were in Egyptian mores. The *Mekhilta* makes reference in this context to the famous prophecy of Yechezkel (20) in which God recalls *Benei Yisrael*’s idol worship in Egypt and their refusal to abandon it before the Exodus.

Clearly, the plain meaning of this verse is that *Benei Yisrael* could not accept Moshe’s prophecies because of their despair wrought by the harsh conditions of enslavement which they endured. How might we explain *Chazal*’s reference to the people’s idol worship in this context?

Perhaps, *Chazal* sought to draw a comparison between despair over spiritual failure and other forms of despair. Just as the harsh labor led *Benei Yisrael* to despair, to lose hope in a future of freedom, joy and dignity, similarly, their cultural assimilation in Egypt made a return to their ancestors’ faith seem impossible. Just as our difficult conditions in life seem permanent and unchanging, causing us hopelessness, our spiritual standing also often appears permanent, and we despair of the possibility of positive change. If so, then *Chazal* here urge us to avoid this misconception and believe in our ability to grow and improve. Even if we feel “stuck” in place and unable to advance, we must remember that we are all capable of progressing. Just as *Benei Yisrael*’s despair turned into the jubilation of the Exodus, our seemingly hopeless spiritual condition can improve through consistent and concentrated effort, along with patience and faith in ourselves. *Avodat Hashem* is “*avoda kasha*” – hard work, requiring breaking old habits and reversing ingrained tendencies. The story of the process of *yetzi’at Mitzrayim* teaches us, however, that our own process of spiritual growth is well within our reach, difficult and overwhelming as the prospect of change may at first appear.