**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 10:2) makes a surprising statement about the plagues which God brought upon Egypt, noting that they were, in one sense, beneficial for the Egyptians: “The plagues which the Almighty brought upon the Egyptians caused them to make peace…” As the Midrash proceeds to relate, Egypt at this time was embroiled in a territorial dispute with a neighboring country, Kush (commonly identified as Ethiopia), and this conflict was resolved during the second plague, the plague of frogs. Moshe warned Pharaoh before the plague that frogs would strike “*kol gevulkha*” – literally, “all your boundary.” The plague would affect all of Egyptian territory, and thus the scope of the plague determined which land belonged to Egypt and which belonged to its neighboring countries. In this sense, the plague of frogs was beneficial for Egypt, putting to rest a conflict that had been raging between the kingdom and a neighboring nation.

What might the Midrash here seek to convey by telling of this tangential effect of the plague of frogs?

On one level, perhaps, the Midrash might be urging us to find the proverbial “silver lining” in even the most adverse situations. Even when we find ourselves beset by difficult “plagues,” by hardships and challenges, we can identify some beneficial outcome or aspect of the crisis. Rarely is a “plague” entirely bereft of benefit. Just as the Midrash found a “silver lining” to the plagues that ravaged Egypt, similarly, we can often find something beneficial in the challenging situations that we confront over the course of life.

There may, however, also be a more specific aspect of this “benefit” provided by the plague of frogs, to which *Chazal* here draw our attention. The Egyptians’ enslavement of *Benei Yisrael* stemmed from their belief in their right to encroach upon other people’s “territory,” their personal space and freedom. They felt entitled to *Benei Yisrael*’s time and labor. The Egyptian bondage was, in a sense, a “territorial” issue – a question of whether a powerful nation has the right to control a weaker nation. The Midrash here perhaps expresses the point that true peace is achieved when people respect each other’s boundaries, when we deny ourselves the right to control other people and encroach upon their rights and freedoms. While it might seem advantageous for us to manipulate other people and try to gain as much as we can from them, in truth, we attain the greatest blessing of all – the blessing of peace and stability – by recognizing the “boundaries” between different people and never trying to violate other people’s personal space. The plagues that descended upon Egypt brought the country peace by clarifying its boundaries with other nations – conveying the message that it would be to its benefit to respect other people’s “territory” rather than feeling entitled to it.

Sunday

Before the onset of the first of the ten plagues that God brought upon Egypt – the plague of blood – God sent Moshe to issue a warning to Pharaoh. Moshe was to tell the king, “So said the Lord: Through this shall you know that I am the Lord! I am hereby striking with the staff which is in my hand the water in the river, and it will be transformed to blood” (7:17). The objective of this plague was for Pharaoh to recognize God – “Through this shall you know that I am the Lord.” Yet, as we know, this is not what happened. Even after Egypt’s water turned to blood, we read, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he did not listen to them… Pharaoh turned away and went home, and paid no attention even to this” (7:22-23).

We might wonder how it is possible that God made such a definitive pronouncement – that the plague of blood would convince Pharaoh “that I am the Lord” – which turned out to be wrong. Why did God declare that this plague would be effective in changing Pharaoh’s heart, knowing that it would not?

Rabbeinu Bechayei, sensitive to this question, explains God’s pronouncement to mean, “Through this you ought to know that I am the Lord” (in Rabbeinu Bechayei’s words, “*ra’ui lekha she-teida*…”). In other words, this statement was prescriptive, not descriptive; God was not declaring what would happen, but rather declaring what should happen, that this plague should have the effect of proving to Pharaoh that he should recognize God as King of the universe whose command must be obeyed. But He did not predict that this would indeed happen.

A different explanation is indicated by the commentary of Rabbeinu Chaim Paltiel. He interprets the phrase “*be-zot teida*” (“through this shall you know”) to mean “*be-zot* ***tatchil*** *lei-dai*” – “through this **shall you begin** to know.” The Tolna Rebbe explained that according to this understanding, God’s pronouncement was indeed accurate. Although it outwardly appeared after the plague that, as the Torah tells, Pharaoh paid no heed to this plague and was unchanged, God saw the slight stirrings of change in the king’s heart. Even Pharaoh himself was unaware of any internal impact, but God, who knows people’s minds and hearts far better than even they do, was able to definitively foretell that such an impact would take place. The process of changing Pharaoh’s mindset was not intended to occur in an instant; it would occur gradually, one small step after one small step, with each plague bringing Pharaoh ever closer to the recognition “that I am the Lord.”

The Tolna Rebbe noted the practical implications of this understanding of “*be-zot teida*,” which reminds us of the value and significance of even slight stirrings of change, and that these stirrings are not necessarily discernible. Often, when people try to grow and improve, they despair too quickly, seeing that their efforts are fruitless, yielding no results. Moshe’s prophecy before the plague of blood shows us that change can occur even without our realizing it, that every bit of effort we invest yields a positive result, difficult as it might be for us to see. Even when the discernible outcome of our attempts at self-improvement is very far from our goal, we must not despair, because every bit of work we put in brings us a small step closer to our goal – and every small step should be celebrated as a significant accomplishment.

Monday

Parashat Vaera begins with God’s promise of redemption which He commanded Moshe to convey to *Benei Yisrael*, whose spirits were crushed by the newly-intensified workload to which Pharaoh subjected them with his edict requiring them to fetch their own straw with which to produce bricks. This promise consists of the famous “*arba’a leshonot ge’ula*” – the “four expressions of redemption,” the fourth of which is, “I shall take you for Me as a nation, and I shall be for you as a God” (6:7). Several commentators, including the Ramban and Seforno, explain that this refers to the Revelation at Mount Sinai, when *Benei Yisrael* formally entered into a covenant with God, such that they became His nation and He became their God.

After this promise, God adds, “and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who is taking you from underneath the suffering of Egypt.” The question obviously arises as to what *Benei Yisrael* would know then, at Mount Sinai, that they would not know previously. Would they not know before *Ma’amad Har Sinai* that it was God who brought them out of Egypt?

Several different interpretations to this verse have been offered by the commentators. The Ramban explains that the second half of this verse – “and you shall know that I am the Lord your God” – continues not the first half, which foretells the Revelation at Sinai, but rather the previous verse, in which God promises to release the people from bondage. God conveyed to the people that upon witnessing the miracles of the Exodus, they will realize that God overturned the laws of nature for them, because He has chosen them as His treasured nation. This process would show *Benei Yisrael* that the omnipotent Creator, who miraculously released them from bondage, was “the Lord your God” – the God who chose them to be His special nation.

Seforno suggests that the phrase “you shall know that I am the Lord your God” is a command, not a prophecy. According to Seforno, after God announced His promises of redemption, He told the people to realize that it is “the Lord your God” who is promising that He would be “taking you from underneath the suffering of Egypt.” As He was “your God” – the Divine Being who oversees and controls all events and all people – they could feel confident that He would fulfill His promises.

In truth, this verse is discussed already in the Gemara, which offers a different interpretation. In Masekhet Berakhot (38a), the Gemara cites different views as to whether the term “*ha-motzi*” (“who takes”) refers to the past – and means, “who has taken” – or the future – and means, “who will take.” (The context of the debate is the blessing recited over bread, the question whether the proper text is “*motzi lechem* *min ha-aretz*” or “*ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz*.”) One view draws proof from our verse, in which God says of Himself before the Exodus “*ha-motzi etkhem*” – that He would be bringing the nation out of Egypt – that the term “*ha-motzi*” refers to a future event. As this verb is used already before the Exodus, foretelling the events that would transpire, this verse would appear to prove that the word “*ha-motzi*” refers to the future. The other view, however, retorts that in this verse God promises the people, in the words of the Gemara, “When I bring you out, I will do something such that you will know that I am the One who is bringing you out of Egypt.” In other words, God here informed the people that after they leave Egypt, He would ensure that they would know for certainty that He was the One who brought them from Egypt, that this process occurred not through natural means, and not by any human force, but rather exclusively by the Almighty. The Gemara does not specify to what this refers, but we might speculate that it speaks of the splitting of the sea, which occurred a week after the nation’s departure from Egypt, or *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, when the people heard God pronounce, “I am the Lord your God who took you from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” In any event, according to the Gemara’s reading, God in this verse informed the people that their freedom would be followed by an extraordinary event (or perhaps a number of extraordinary events) that would make it perfectly clear to them that it was He who brought them out of slavery.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted a number of different approaches that have been taken to explain God’s promise to *Benei Yisrael* towards the beginning of Parashat Vaera (6:7), “I shall take you for Me as a nation, and I shall be for you as a God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who is taking you from underneath the suffering of Egypt.” As we saw, the second half of this verse sounds like a promise that after God takes *Benei Yisrael* as His nation (which is explained by some as a reference to the Revelation at Sinai), they would know that He took them from Egypt. The question naturally arises as to why such a promise was necessary. Seemingly, upon witnessing and experiencing the miracles of the Exodus, it would be plainly obvious to *Benei Yisrael* that it was God who was releasing them from bondage.

Netziv, in his *Ha’ameik Davar* commentary, avoids this problem by contending that the word “*vi-ydatem*” (“you shall know”) refers to a much higher level of “knowledge” than simply the recognition that the miracles of the Exodus were performed by God. According to Netziv, this promise speaks of “*deveikut ve-da’at Elokim*” – “attachment and knowledge of God.” This refers to focused attention on God’s power and providence, and a deeply entrenched emotional connection with the Creator. According to Netziv, God promised *Benei Yisrael* that after He would forge a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, a segment of the population – the scholarly elite – would be privileged to “know” God on an especially exalted level.

A much different explanation is suggested by Rav Moshe Pollak, in his [*Va-yedaber Moshe*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41455&st=&pgnum=191). The Name of God used in this phrase, the Name known as “*Havaya*” (spelled “*yod*,” “*hei*,” “*vav*” and “*hei*”), is commonly associated specifically with God’s attribute of compassion, as opposed to the attribute of justice. In this verse, God tells the people that in the future, they will recognize that the Exodus was an act of great mercy and compassion. At the time the process unfolded, after suffering the pain and humiliation of bondage for so many years, they likely felt that redemption was something they rightfully deserved. In their minds, they had earned the right to be freed. But in the future, after they receive the Torah and begin to learn what God expects of us, how great we are capable of becoming and how great the Almighty wants us to become, they will realize how they were wholly unworthy of the miracles they experienced. They will thus recognize after receiving the Torah that “I am the Lord your God who is taking from underneath the suffering of Egypt” – that the Exodus was wrought by the Name of “*Havaya*,” God’s attribute of mercy, because on the level of strict justice, they were not truly deserving of the miraculous Exodus from Egypt.

The more we learn and the more we grow, the more we realize just how much we have yet to learn and yet to grow. We might feel content with our current level of knowledge and observance – and, indeed, we all can and should take pride in what we’ve accomplished – but we always have higher levels to reach and more ambitious goals to pursue. Our eyes should always be set on loftier standards, and we should never feel completely comfortable with our current standing, recognizing instead that as much as we’ve achieved, we can be so much better and achieve so much more, and we are expected to maximize our potential to its very fullest.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vaera tells of the promises of redemption which God conveyed to *Benei Yisrael* through Moshe after Pharaoh intensified their workload in response to Moshe’s demand to allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave. We read that *Benei Yisrael* paid no heed to these promises, broken and dispirited as they were from their harsh labor (6:9), whereupon God spoke to Moshe and Aharon “and commanded them to [go to] the Israelites and to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to bring the Israelites out of Egypt” (6:13).

The implication of this verse is that God sent Moshe and Aharon not only back to Pharaoh, but also back to the people. It is not clear, however, what this mission to the people entailed. We understand that Moshe and Aharon were to return to Pharaoh to reiterate their demand that he let *Benei Yisrael* leave, but the Torah does not seem to explain the purpose for which Moshe and Aharon were to return to *Benei Yisrael*.

Some commentators avoid this question by reinterpreting the phrase “*el Benei Yisrael*” (“to the Israelites”) to mean something other than a command to speak to the people. Rav Saadia Gaon, for example, interprets the verse to mean that God issued commands to Moshe and Aharon “about” Pharaoh and “about” *Benei Yisrael*. Translating the word “*el*” in this verse as “about,” rather than “to,” Rav Saadia Gaon claims that the Torah speaks of God’s commands to Moshe and Aharon regarding the entire process that would now be unfolding, the process of the plagues and the Exodus from Egypt.

A generally similar approach is taken by Rashi, who likewise explains this verse as a command regarding *Benei Yisrael* and regarding Pharaoh, as opposed to a command to speak to *Benei Yisrael* and Pharaoh. According to Rashi, God here commands Moshe and Aharon to show respect to Pharaoh, despite his evildoing, given his stature as king, and to be patient and tolerant of *Benei Yisrael* who, understandably, felt embittered and resentful of Moshe and Aharon after the initial failure of their mission.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashanah 3:5), however, explains much differently, claiming that Moshe and Aharon were commanded to convey God’s instruction to the people. Specifically, the Yerushalmi writes, God told Moshe and Aharon to instruct the people to release their servants. It appears that even in the nation’s state of exile and bondage, there were some among *Benei Yisrael* who were more powerful than others, and had Israelite servants. Before the onset of the ten plagues and the process of the Exodus, God demanded that *Benei Yisrael* release the servants whom they held under their control. The prophet Yirmiyahu (34:13-14) mentions God issuing such a command at the time of the Exodus, and the Yerushalmi teaches that Yirmiyahu refers to this verse in Parashat Vaera, in which God “commanded Moshe and Aharon [to go] to the Israelites.” According to the Yerushalmi, this means that Moshe and Aharon were to go to the people and demand that they release their servants.

On one level, the significance of this command being issued before the process of the Exodus lies in the fact that *Benei Yisrael* needed to show that they were prepared to do what the Egyptians were called upon to do. Before God punished Egypt for refusing to release *Benei Yisrael* from slavery, it was imperative that *Benei Yisrael* release their own servants. It would be inconsistent, if not hypocritical, for *Benei Yisrael* to expect God to intervene to release them from servitude while they themselves held servants.

The *Penei Menachem* (Rav Pinchas Menachem Alter, one of the Rebbes of Ger), however, suggested an additional layer of meaning underlying the Yerushalmi’s remark. When the Yerushalmi says that the people were commanded with regard to “*shilu’ach avadim*” (“sending away servants”), the *Penei Menachem* explained, it means that they were called upon to send away the “slaves” within themselves, to rid their minds of their internal slavery, of their sense of subservience to people and things other than God. The process of the Exodus was intended to free *Benei Yisrael* so they could become the loyal servants of the Almighty. And for this to happen, it did not suffice for God to release the people from the shackles of Egypt; they needed to release themselves from their self-imposed shackles, from the various negative habits and tendencies to which they had grown accustomed and had become, in a sense, subservient. If we are to become free to serve the Almighty, we must rely on Him to protect us from external forces that threaten to seize control over us, but in addition, we must work to achieve freedom from the “masters” under whose control we’ve brought ourselves, and wholeheartedly devote our allegiance to nobody and nothing other than God.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vaeira of Moshe’s unsuccessful attempt to reassure *Benei Yisrael* after his initial meeting with Pharaoh resulted in a significantly harsher workload. Moshe relayed to the people God’s promise of redemption, but they paid no attention, their bodies and spirits broken by their insufferable conditions (6:9). God then instructed Moshe to return to Pharaoh to demand *Benei Yisrael*’s release, to which Moshe responded, “But the Israelites did not listen to me – so how will Pharaoh listen to me?!” (6:12). Despite Moshe’s protest, God reiterated His command that Moshe approach Pharaoh and initiate the process that would culminate in *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Egypt.

The Midrash, cited by the Tosafists (in *Da’at Zekeinim* to Devarim 31:14), tells that this verse was recalled by God some forty years later in a dialogue with Moshe just before his death. God informed Moshe of his imminent by saying, “***Hein*** *karevu yamekha la-mut*” (“Behold, your days are approaching the time of death” – Devarim 31:14), and the Midrash tells that Moshe protested God’s use of the term “*hein*” in this context. In one of his final addresses to *Benei Yisrael* (Devarim 10:14), Moshe described to the people God’s infinite power and greatness by proclaiming, “***Hein*** *l-Hashem Elokekha ha-shamayim u-shmei ha-shamayim, ha-aretz ve-khol asher bah*” – “Behold, the Lord your God controls the heavens and the upper heavens; the earth and everything within it.” Moshe felt it improper for God to announce his imminent death with the same word – “*hein*” – that Moshe had used in praising God’s unlimited control over the universe to *Benei Yisrael*. God then turned Moshe’s complaint around and directed it back at him, noting that he had once used the word “*hein*” in protesting against God. Here in Parashat Vaeira, Moshe responded to God’s command to approach Pharaoh by arguing, “***Hein*** *Benei Yisrael lo shame’u eilai*” – “But the Israelites did not listen to me,” and so Pharaoh would certainly refuse to obey his command. As Moshe used the word “*hein*” in arguing with God, it was appropriate for God to use this word in telling Moshe that he would be dying before the nation’s entry into the *Eretz Yisrael*.

What might the Midrash here seek to convey by associating Moshe’s complaint here in Parashat Vaeira with his praise in Sefer Devarim of God’s omnipotence and control over the universe?

It would seem that the Midrash’s message, very simply, is that our recognition that “*hein l-Hashem Elokekha ha-shamayim u-shmei ha-shamayim*,” that God created and controls the universe, should lead us to unquestioningly obey His commands. In the exchange depicted by the Midrash, it appears, God noted Moshe’s inconsistency in pointing out God’s infinite greatness, on the one hand, and, on the other, challenging the logic of His command to return to Pharaoh. Whereas we humans are very limited in our knowledge and understanding, God’s knowledge and understanding of how the world operates is infinite, as He created and exclusively governs it. As such, we are to obey His laws without hesitation, even if they defy our limited human vision and logic. Just as Moshe could not understand the value in returning to Pharaoh after even *Benei Yisrael* had rejected his message of redemption, similarly, we often fail to see the value in many of the *mitzvot* and halakhic details that we are called upon to observe. The Midrash here reminds us that once we believe that “*hein l-Hashem Elokekha ha-shamayim u-shmei ha-shamayim*,” that God’s knowledge and might are infinite, then we must unwaveringly trust that He knows far better than we ever can how to best serve Him, and how to best help ourselves and the world.

Friday

Parashat Vaeira begins with God speaking to Moshe after Pharaoh had rejected his demand to release *Benei Yisrael* and intensified their workload in response. God told Moshe to relay to the people His promises of redemption, but the people paid no need to these promises (6:9). God then instructed Moshe to return to Pharaoh and repeat his demand to release *Benei Yisrael*, to which Moshe replied, “But the Israelites did not listen to me – so how will Pharaoh listen to me?!” (6:12). If *Benei Yisrael* paid no attention to him when He relayed to them God’s promise of redemption, Moshe thought, then certainly there was no reason to expect Pharaoh to pay attention to his demand that he release them.

Many commentators noted the seeming inconsistency of Moshe’s logic in this response. The Torah explicitly attributed the people’s rejection of his message to the suffering and torment they endured: “they did not listen to Moshe due to shortness of spirit and hard labor.” The unbearable pain and pressure of their newly-intensified workload made it impossible for them to hear Moshe’s lofty promises of redemption. Why, then, did their rejection of him prove that Pharaoh would likewise refuse to listen to him?

The Tolna Rebbe suggested that this was precisely God’s response to Moshe in the next verse. The Torah tells that after Moshe asked God why he should expect Pharaoh to pay attention to him, God spoke to Moshe and Aharon “and commanded them with respect to the Israelites” (6:13). Rashi explains this to mean that God commanded Moshe and Aharon “to lead them calmly, and to tolerate them.” Apparently, the Tolna Rebbe explained, Moshe’s remark about *Benei Yisrael*’s rejection of his message bespoke a certain lack of patience and tolerance on his part. The fact that he viewed their cold response as indicative of the response he could expect from Pharaoh, showed that he did not fully understand them. He did not recognize the extent of the people’s “*kotzer ruach va-avoda kasha*” – their broken spirits and backbreaking labor, which prevented them from heeding his message. If he had, he would never have made any sort of comparison between the people’s reaction and Pharaoh’s anticipated reaction. God therefore admonished Moshe to be more tolerant and understanding, to realize *Benei Yisrael*’s pain and how difficult it made it for them to listen to him.

A crucial component of effective leadership of any kind is recognizing and understanding the plight and struggles of the people under one’s charge. In any sort of leadership capacity, we must try to appreciate the “*kotzer ru’ach va-avoda kasha*,” the various struggles and challenges, which make it difficult for people to do the right thing. Education and leadership require patience and the ability to acknowledge people’s struggles and the obstacles which they need to overcome to act the way they should.

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