



וארא
Va'eira

אשרינו Ashreinu

Enhancing your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion



In Control

Rabbi Moshe Nachbar

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Akiva Splaver ('18)

Akiva Rosenthal ('20)

Aaron Gross ('20)

In this week's parsha, Parshat Va'eira, we see the bulk of the plagues which Hashem rains down on Mitzrayim and on Pharaoh. The Torah tells us that the reason these plagues were brought was to

teach the Egyptian empire of the greatness and sheer power of God. One famous question regarding the makkot is: why was it necessary for Hashem to send 10 of them? Surely God could have gotten the point across with just one "all powerful" plague? Perhaps the Egyptians would have gotten the message if God only sent the plague of the death of the firstborn. Secondly, what can we learn from this narrative in our parsha? How do ten plagues relate to us in our day and age?

The Maharal, Rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague, writes

in his famous sefer *Gevurot Hashem*, that the exodus from Mitzrayim is not something that only pertained to that generation; instead it pertains to all generations and all Jews. The exodus is everlasting. This means that every aspect is constantly applicable to our lives as servants of Hashem.

Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky zt"l, the former Rebbe of the Slonim Chassidic dynasty, addresses this idea in his sefer, *Netivot Shalom*, and answers both questions through the teaching of the tanna, Rebbe Yehuda, quoted from the *Pesach Haggada*.

R' Yehuda takes the ten plagues and puts them into the practical mnemonic of D'tzach- , אדש- , באחב- , which is what we say during the seder. While it may seem that R' Yehuda made this mnemonic to make it easier to remember the ten plagues, Rav Shalom Noach zt"l comments that there is a deeper meaning to this grouping. R' Yehuda divided the makot down into categories of: those which came from the underground; those which came from the ground; and those which came from the sky. The plagues of blood, frogs,

and lice came from below the ground, whereas the next three came from above it. The last three, which were given straight from Hashem and not through Moshe, came straight from *shamayim*.

These three categories illustrate just how much of Hashem's power was imparted on Mitzrayim. The fact that Hashem sent these makot in these categories was to show Pharaoh and all of Mitzrayim just how much the world was in Hashem's control. Every single aspect of life was affected by the plagues. This would not have occurred if Hashem simply sent one plague, like Makat Bechorot, to destroy Mitzrayim. The purpose was to show how Hashem controlled the world and that His power knows no borders. To simply destroy the Egyptian empire was only part of the bigger picture.

This theme of Hashem's control and power is the exact way this narrative in our parsha connect to us nowadays. The Netivot Shalom writes that in every single aspect of life, whatever it may be, Hashem is in control and has done things this way for a reason. Learning about the plagues in Egypt is the way we can remember Hashem's divine power and might and know that there is no lapse in that koach; it exists today and it always will. Hashem should bless us all with the clarity to truly know that He controls every facet of reality, and that His power and love are never-ending.

It's A Hard Knock Life

Akiva Rosenthal ('20)

Many times in the upcoming parshiyot, Hashem seems to take away Pharaoh's free will in order to keep the Jews enslaved so He can perform the makot. If so, Pharaoh shouldn't be punished if he was just acting as Hashem's messenger in a bigger plan to fulfill the promise He made to Avraham in the *brit bein habetarim*. According to the Rambam, one only loses their free will when they commit a horrible sin, so what did Pharaoh do to deserve losing his free will?

The Rambam answers this question saying that Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to make the Jews' lives terrible because the Jews didn't believe Moshe, Aharon, and Hashem could save them. They were worked harder every time Moshe and Aaron

failed to convince Pharaoh to let them go. So, when Hashem performed the makot, he wanted the Jews to see the power of Hashem and of teshuva.

Haketav V'haKabbalah (Rav Mecklenburg) suggests the opposite approach of the Rambam. He says that the purpose of the makot was to allow the Egyptians time to do teshuva. When the Torah says:

ואני אחזק את לבו ולא ישלח את העם

“but I will harden his heart, so that he shall not let the people go” (4:21)

it refers to Pharaoh's choice of not allowing the Jews to leave Egypt. Rav Mecklenburg suggests that Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart indirectly by performing the makot because He knew that Pharaoh valued his reputation and honor more than anything else. He explains that Hashem isn't hardening Pharaoh's heart, rather He is just showing and warning Moshe that Pharaoh won't let them go because of his ego. Pharaoh hardening his own heart was a sign of arrogance because he saw the miracles performed by Hashem, but didn't want to admit that he was no longer in charge.

We see that Hashem wanted Pharaoh and the Egyptians to do teshuva, but they never did. So Hashem performed the makot, hoping they would see that there is a God in the world and realize that they were wrong. Hashem gave Pharaoh and the Egyptians an opportunity to be better people. This is why Moshe goes to Pharaoh so many times to offer redemption, but it is Pharaoh's choice not to take it. We can all learn from the battle between Pharaoh and Hashem that we are in charge of our own actions, but we should never get too confident in our abilities because Hashem is the one running the show.

Making Decisions

Aaron Gross ('20)

This Shabbat we will read Parshat Va'eira, which describes the first seven of the ten plagues. After the fifth plague, the pasuk states that Hashem “will harden Pharaoh's heart” (Shmot 7:3). This verse arouses a very famous philosophical question: if Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart, how can Pharaoh be punished for actions he did not willingly commit?

Many mefarshim are bothered by the question. The Rambam and others note that the pesukim only mention a hardening of Pharaoh's heart after the first five plagues. Therefore, it is implied that during the first five plagues, Pharaoh, through his own will, chose to retain the Jews as slaves. The Rambam suggests that the first five plagues and Hashem's hardening of Pharaoh's heart were the punishments for Pharaoh's first five refusals.

The Ramban, however, offers a different approach. The Ramban argues that had Hashem refrained from hardening Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh would not have made the decision he truly wanted. The first five plagues compelled Pharaoh to grant the Jewish people freedom, a decision he would have made if Hashem had not interfered and hardened his heart. Naf-tali Silberberg (chabad.org) offers an analogy: just as the victim of a mugging would hand over his wallet to the mugger, Pharaoh would allow the Jews to go, but neither is an act of true free choice. Therefore, Hashem interfered and did not allow the plagues to interfere with Pharaoh's decision-making.

The lengths to which Hashem goes to ensure the integrity of Pharaoh's decision teach us an incredible lesson. If Hashem manipulated Pharaoh to such an extreme degree to guarantee the integrity of Pharaoh's evil decision, it is clear that Hashem does anything possible in assisting us to make proper decisions.

Don't Give Up

Akiva Splaver ('18)

When the metaphoric road of life shoots endless amounts of curves our way, we can't help but believe the road ahead to be just as shabby as the miles before. In a similar way, the Jews felt lost in an endless loop of suffering in which no spiritual map or catalyst from God could save them, as their morale was beaten in rugged centuries through Egyptian slavery. The Torah, in Parshat Va'eira, writes:

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה

"...they did not listen to Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work" (Shmot 6:9)

when Moshe told them of God's masterful plan to

save them.

The Da'at Mikra interprets someone who is short of breath as grumpy, not at ease, and unable to accept things he or she hears. In our grumpiest frame of mind, we tend to be unwilling to listen to alternate perspectives. So, when we are at our grumpiest, we should demand ourselves to be more open to new ideas. We should avoid hitting that road block, avoid forcing our minds stubbornly forward in a mental mud skid and try, for once, putting our minds in reverse or making a three point turn. We can change.

According to the Siftei Chachamim, the shortness of breath reflects the Jews' state of mind. They had completely abandoned hope for redemption. The Siftei Chachamim is trying to relay a message for our own lives. When the presence of hope seems absent, we begin to believe that it may be gone forever.

This helps answer a fundamental question about Sefer Shmot: why did God have to put us into slavery in the first place? The Exodus of Egypt shows us that anything is possible. We were at the lowest of the low in Egypt and, nonetheless, Hashem was able to redeem us, turn us into a nation, and bring us into Israel. By remembering Yetziat Mitzrayim, we remember that Hashem is able to redeem us from any situation.

For similar reasons, in davening, we say Shema right before Shemoneh Esrei. The end of Shema recounts our redemption from Egypt. This way, we enter Shemoneh Esrei with a mindset that Hashem can assist us with any challenge in life, just as He took the Jews out of Egypt. The mindset helps us to understand that if God is involved, anything is possible.

Natural Revelation

Adina Hirsch ('19)

It is a commonly-known idea that God has a multitude of names, each representing one of the many aspects of God that He wishes to reveal. This parsha begins with God appearing to Moshe and explaining how He appeared to the Avot in the past. God reveals himself as *El Shaddai* to the Avot, specifically telling Moshe that the Avot did not know his name *Hashem*, which is revealed to Moshe.

Rashi explains that when God tells Moshe that He did not appear with the name Hashem to the Avot, it implies that God was not known to the Avot with the name Hashem. It's not that God didn't reveal himself to the Avot, rather, it is that the Avot did not recognize the name Hashem. Instead, they knew Hashem as *El Shaddai*.

The Ramban explains that the name *El Shaddai* describes God as performing miracles that do not deviate from nature. Through famines, war victories, and business success, the Avot were able to experience and recognize God. Despite all being miracles, none of these actually defied the laws of nature. Therefore, the Avot were only able to see God as *El Shaddai*: master over the natural.

Moshe, however, would soon witness the incredible miracles that were beyond the scope of even Pharaoh's imagination, allowing him to see the name Hashem: master over the supernatural. Moshe's job was to prove the existence of Hashem, making it vitally important for him to see God's name in this form. There is no better way to show Hashem's existence other than seeing supernatural miracles that prove the existence of God. In fact, even the magicians were stumped by Hashem.

So too, today, Hashem performs miracles for us, but in the same way that He revealed himself to the Avot: *El Shaddai*, master over the natural. In this sense, it is less obvious when Hashem is performing miracles for us. Like the Avot, we have the challenge of recognizing Hashem's hand in the world despite the lack of supernatural miracles that Moshe got to witness.

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