

Parashat Va'era, **Exodus 6:2-9:35**

SUMMARY

This week's Torah portion continues the story of the struggle to leave Egypt. The name for the portion comes from its second verse which reads: *Va'era el Avraham el Yitzhak v'el Ya'akov...* I appeared to Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob...Exodus 6:3). God is making a second appearance to Moses. God's first appearance to Moses was at the burning bush.

God reviews the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and then tells Moses, I have heard the cries of the Israelites and I will now fulfill my promise to them, to redeem them from slavery and bring them to the land which I promised their ancestors.

Moses tells the Israelites, but they will not listen. Moses appeals to God, telling God that if the Israelites won't listen to him how could he possibly convince Pharaoh? Moses reminds God that he is not a man of words. God tells Moses that Moses will rule over Pharaoh, and Aaron will be Moses' prophet serving as his spokesperson. God then tells Moses that though the signs and wonders will be many, Pharaoh will still refuse to allow the Israelites to go and worship in the wilderness. God will harden Pharaoh's heart.

In response to Pharaoh's refusal, the first two plagues descend on the Egyptians. The Nile is turned into blood and frogs invade the land. Pharaoh's magicians are able to duplicate these two plagues and Pharaoh remains unimpressed with the power of Moses. But with the third plague, lice, the magicians are unable to reproduce it and they tell Pharaoh that, "This is the finger of God (Exodus 8:15)." Still Pharaoh does not yield. With the fourth plague, the swarms of insects, Pharaoh reconsiders and states that the Israelites may worship God in the land of Egypt. As soon as the plague ends Pharaoh changes his mind. The plagues of cattle disease, boils, and hail quickly follow.

COMMENTARY

Moses mentions to God several times that his speech is impeded. The rabbis created a midrash, a story about a story in the Bible, that explains how Moses became slow of speech. Moses was saved by Pharaoh's daughter when she pulled the reed cradle from the Nile. While Moses was still a baby Pharaoh expressed the concern that one day Moses might replace him as ruler over Egypt. Pharaoh wanting to prevent that occurrence, announced that Moses should be put to death.

To save Moses' life, Pharaoh's daughter set up a test. She placed two items before Moses: Pharaoh's shiny gold crown and a bright hot coal from the fire. If Moses chose the crown, then yes he would replace Pharaoh, but if he grabbed the coal, Pharaoh had nothing to fear. Moses grabbed the coal saving his own life, but like many babies he put what was in his hand in his mouth, burning his tongue and affecting his speech for life.

DID YOU KNOW...

In this second encounter, God reminds Moses and the Israelites who will hear the message that God remembers the covenant and keeps all promises. God phrases the promise of redemption in five different ways:

- I will free you (from the burdens of the Egyptians)
- I will deliver you (from their bondage)
- I will redeem you (with an outstretched hand)
- I will take you to be My People
- I will bring you into the land I promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

In the Passover Haggadah, based on discussions from the Talmud, each of the first four phrases is connected to one of the four cups of wine drunk during the Passover Seder. But what about the fifth promise? There is some controversy as to whether that promise was fulfilled. The solution put forth by the Talmud was to place a fifth cup on the seder

table, but not to bless or drink it. The Talmud instructs that Elijah will one day return and answer all unanswered questions, including whether or not we should drink the fifth cup; thus we call this extra cup the cup of Elijah.

THE TEXT

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt."
(Exodus 7:3)

EXPLANATION

One of ten references in this *parashah* to either God hardening Pharaoh's heart or Pharaoh himself hardening his heart in response to the "signs and marvels" (plagues) God inflicted upon the Egyptians.

INTERPRETATION

The rabbis, in the midrash on Exodus, taught that God was destined to harden Pharaoh's heart in order to punish him for the cruel bondage he imposed on the Israelites. In response to this teaching, Rabbi Yochanan said, "This provides a pretext for the heretics (unbelievers) to say that God did not allow Pharaoh to repent."

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish disagreed with Rabbi Yochanan's conclusion. He observed that Pharaoh was warned prior to five of the plagues. Based on this Rabbi Shimon taught, "When God warns a person on three occasions and he does not turn from his ways (i.e. evil ways), God closes the door of repentance on him in order to punish him for his sin. Such was the case with wicked Pharaoh. (*Exodus Rabbah* 13:3)

Rashi pointed out that in response to five of the plagues described in this week's parasha, the text does not say, "The Eternal hardened Pharaoh's heart," but rather the text says Pharaoh's "heart was hardened," indicating that Pharaoh's heart was hardened by his own stubbornness. In the parasha, the Hebrew phrase for stubborn is "*kaved lev*." Everett Fox, in his translation of the Torah, translates "*kaved lev*" as "a heart heavy-with-stubbornness."

The pharaohs of ancient Egypt were considered to be gods. With each request to be allowed to go and worship Adonai, Moses and Aaron present signs of God's power to Pharaoh. Pharaoh's magicians are able to duplicate three of these wonders: turning their staffs into serpents as well as the plagues of blood and frogs. Since Pharaoh does not see anything unique in the displays presented by Moses and Aaron, he pays no attention to them or their request to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt in order to worship their own God.

S'forno in his commentary on the Torah taught that God did not want Pharaoh to let the Israelites go simply because he could not stand the plagues. God wanted Pharaoh to let the people go for the right reasons. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not crumble under the onslaught of the plagues but rather he would choose to endure them. God wanted Pharaoh to sincerely repent for the enslavement and harsh labor of the Israelites. God also wanted Pharaoh to understand and acknowledge the greatness of God and that the Israelites had a special relationship with Adonai. S'forno also taught that the Israelites needed to witness these signs and wonders and thus themselves be convinced of God's unique strength and deep love for them.

In this *parashah*, the basic beliefs of Pharaoh and the Egyptians are being called into question. Their world is being challenged by a force greater than themselves.

God speaks to Moses, confirming the covenant that was made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The pleas of the enslaved Israelites have been heard by the Eternal, and God instructs Moses to promise them redemption. God also commands Moses to speak to Pharaoh and demand that he liberate the people of Israel. Pharaoh refuses to release the slaves and God causes plagues on the Egyptians in order to change Pharaoh's mind. However, Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

At the beginning of our *sedra*, in the first *aliyah*, God *hears the moaning of the Israelites* (6:5) and makes the following promises: to free them from labors, deliver them from bondage, redeem them with an outstretched arm, take the Israelites to be God's people and ultimately to bring them to the Promised Land.

*But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses,
their spirits crushed by cruel bondage. (6:9)*

God's promises of redemption begin with the statement *I have now heard their cries*. By contrast, the Israelites would not to listen to Moses. The distinction between a God who hears and a people that refuses to listen is poignant. The verb *sh'ma* has multiple translations. When it is followed by the word *et*, it means hearing. When it is followed by *el*, as it is in this verse, it can be translated as acceptance. (*Be'er Yitzchak*) An alternate translation for the Hebrew *sh'ma* in our verse is "heed" (Alter) or "hearken" (Fox) implying attending to what is said, hearing and then responding.

What prevented the Israelites from hearing or heeding God's message? Our translation explains that *their spirits were crushed*, but the Hebrew *kotzer ruach* yields various translations. The word *ruach* can mean spirit or breath. Rashi (and Robert Alter, following Rashi's commentary) renders *shortness of breath*. The Israelites suffered from hard labor, made harder due to Moses' actions. They could not muster the strength to pay attention to Moses. The need to breathe takes precedence over all others. "As a result of the prepotency of physiological needs, an individual will deprioritize all other desires and capacities." ("Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," Wikipedia) The Israelites were physically winded from centuries of oppression, which precluded their attention to Moses' instructions.

Nahum Sarna (*Commentary on Exodus*) and Everett Fox translate *kotzer ruach* as *shortness of spirit*. The people had little spirit left in them. They had no more energy, no more fight. They had become conditioned to slavery, emotionally numb to the potential for freedom, psychologically incapable of accepting the challenge Moses placed in front of them. Like others before them and many others after them, the Israelites were more able to live with the idea of perpetual slavery than assume the risks associated with hoping for redemption. A commentary on Rashi corroborates this view, stating that the people did not hear because they did not believe Moses—they believed that no one could save them. (*Devek Tov*) In noting the Israelites' inability to hear Moses, we can better understand why, when communities are promised freedom, when organizations promise support, when tribunals promise judgment, the people cannot hear those promises. Their physical hearing may be fine but their psychological spirit has been so crushed that they cannot accept the words that have been spoken.

The people must ultimately learn to heed God. At Sinai, we see a distinct change. After hearing all of the commands of God through Moses, the people respond *na'aseh v'nishma*, *We will do and we will heed*. We continue to be bound by this promise. In Jewish tradition, listening with the proper intention is in itself a mitzvah as well as a *midah*, or virtue. For example, we are commanded to hear the call of the shofar. According the Jewish law, hearing a blessing said by an obligated person and responding "Amen" is the same as saying it oneself (there is no need to repeat it to fulfill the mitzvah).

The affirmation of our faith, the *Sh'ma*, requires that we first listen, or pay attention, directing our selves to the message at hand. Hearing is necessary for heeding, but not sufficient. Later in this *parashah*, Pharaoh hears the suffering of the Egyptians because of the plagues, but does not heed Moses' demand because of his hardened heart. Listening is more than a physical process. In order to truly listen in a way that we can respond, our hearts must be open and our spirits directed towards the message. Openness is a prerequisite for acceptance, a precondition for learning, and a necessary step in achieving repentance. There are times when each of us can be heard but are not heeded. Before we rush to judgment, we need to examine the spirit of the listener.