

TIMELESS TORAH

VA'ERA: The Significance of a Sign

Signs of Confidence

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 -1914) was an American scientist, mathematician and logician, who is credited as one of the founders of the philosophical study of signs, known as semiotics. In Peirce's theory of signs, identifying the 'sign relation' is crucial, which encompasses the sign itself, the sign's subject matter, called its object, and the sign's meaning or ramification, called its interpretant.

One of the most conspicuous motifs throughout the *parshiyot* of the Exodus is the concept of a sign, which the Torah refers to as an *ot* (אוֹת). In the opening verses of Parshat Vaeira, Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon that He will harden Pharaoh's heart and perform a multitude of signs within Egypt (7:3), indicating that it is in order to bring the signs themselves that Pharaoh's heart will be hardened (see also 10:1-2, and elsewhere). However, while Moshe was given a series of signs, *otot*, to show the Jewish people, Pharaoh asks only for a *mofet*, a wonder, but does not mention *otot*, signs: '*Tenu lachem mofet* – Provide a wonder [to prove your words]' (7:9).

The Seforno (d.1549) explains the difference between these two terms. A *mofet* is a wondrous event that proves the existence and authenticity of the one who is sending the message; its purpose is to prove to the recipient of the *mofet* that it is fitting to listen to His voice. Pharaoh requested only a *mofet* because he questioned the existence of Hashem altogether. An *ot*, on the other hand, is intended as a testimony for the agent, and this is what the Jewish people required. Having cried out to Hashem, they had already demonstrated their belief in Him, and they also held fast to their tradition that they would eventually be redeemed. Nevertheless, Hashem

understood that signs were necessary for the Jewish people too. Regardless of their intellectual and instinctive recognition of what was happening, they needed signs to provide them with the confidence that the Redemption was indeed imminent and that it would be carried out by Moshe and Aharon.

Imminent Redemption

A magnificent verse in Parshat Vaetchanan summarises many of the central aspects of the Redemption from Egypt: 'Has any god been proclaimed as the one who takes a nation from within a nation, with heralds and signs and wonders and wars and a strong hand and an outstretched arm and exceedingly fearful deeds, as Hashem did for you in Egypt before your eyes' (Devarim 4:34). The Baal HaTurim (d.1340), in an uncharacteristically lengthy piece, mentions several mystical allusions found in this verse. Among them, he writes that this verse contains every letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and, using an alternative interpretation of the opening phrase, he explains that it is a reference to the fact that the Torah would have been given in Egypt had the Jewish people not had to have been 'tested' first. It is to this test that the Seforno refers: the acceptance of the signs as an assurance that the time for the Redemption had arrived.

Exploring this concept further, we find that such signs were necessary even for Moshe himself. In last week's parshah, Shemot, Hashem appeared to Moshe in the burning bush and informed him of his role in the coming Redemption. Moshe's first reaction, however, was to doubt that he could be the right person to take on this monumental role. To this, Hashem replied, 'This will be for you the sign that I have sent you - when you leave Egypt, you will serve Me on this mountain' (3:12). The commentators struggle to



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explain how this response addresses Moshe's question. The Ohr HaChaim (d.1743) explains that the essential answer to Moshe's question is found in the first phrase of the verse, which is distinct from the subsequent element regarding Har Sinai. 'This is for you the sign - that I have sent you'. In other words, Hashem was telling Moshe that if you are unsure of yourself, contemplate on the fact that I, Hashem, have sent you. There can be no greater assurance of one's abilities and suitability for any role than having been instructed to act by Hashem Himself.

With this interpretation, the Ohr HaChaim is echoing the lesson taught by the Seforno. The miracles that were wrought in Egypt were intended not only to teach Pharaoh and the Egyptians of Hashem's omnipotence, but also as signs to the Jewish people and even to the Jewish leadership. However deeply they may have believed in the truth that the Redemption would happen, they still needed the constant encouragement and self-confidence to know that they would in fact experience it imminently.

The Dynamic of Choice

In the final plague set out in this parshah, the plague of hail, there is a striking anomaly. Before any of the plagues began, Hashem told Moshe that He would harden Pharaoh's heart and not allow him to acquiesce to Moshe's requests. Clearly, though, this did not happen immediately; had Pharaoh really had no choice about his wicked deeds, there would have been no reason for him to be punished. Rather, in the first five plagues, the verses state that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart and did not allow himself to be impressed by the miracles he was witnessing. Only after he had demonstrated his wilfully iniquitous attitude did he forfeit the right to utilise his free will. Then, Hashem gave him the strength to withstand the

last five plagues without breaking. In the plague of hail, however, the verse (9:34-5) states that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, following the pattern of the first five plagues.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (d.1986) points out a further anomaly found in the plague of hail, which helps resolve the first one. This plague is unique among all the others in that Pharaoh showed a certain measure of repentance. Broken by the damage brought about by the hail, Pharaoh declared, 'I have sinned this time. Hashem is righteous and I and my people are wrong' (9:27). For this change of heart, Rabbi Feinstein explains, Pharaoh was rewarded with a small measure of free will. But he failed to use it correctly, and 'he made his [own] heart heavy' (9:34). At this point, he lost his right to free will once again, and throughout the rest of the plagues, Hashem strengthened his heart to prevent him from repenting.

Often, our own experience mirrors this dynamic. We sometimes become so entrenched in a certain way of thinking that we do not allow ourselves the space for choice. The story told in this week's parsha demonstrates two different ways in which this can play out. The Egyptians are trapped in their rigid way of viewing the world. They cannot see or understand the existence of Hashem, and they stubbornly refuse to accept the message of the *moftim* (wonders) that they have asked for. The Jewish people, on the other hand, also need signs, but having already absorbed the kernel of belief, they are able to take those signs as encouragement for the future and build upon them.

**Next Week - BO: FREEDOM TO LEAVE,
FREEDOM TO CHOOSE**