

TIMELESS∞TORAH

PARSHAT VA'ERA - Plagues & Perceptions: A Study in Alternate Realities

The Belief Paradox

The parshah opens with Moshe Rabbeinu's message of the four expressions of redemption and the inability of the Bnei Yisrael to acknowledge them. The verse tells us that the Jewish people did not listen to Moshe, *mikotzer ruach u'me'avodah kashah* — 'because of their shortness of breath and their harsh oppression' (Shemot 6:9). This reaction, though, is surprising when we bear in mind that just a few verses earlier, when Moshe first arrived in Egypt and spoke to the elders of the nation we are told that, '*vaya'amein ha'am*—the people believed'. What happened between then and now to produce such a drastic shift in the Jewish people's reaction?

It is possible, as suggested by the Rashbam (d.1158), that although the people initially believed that their redemption was near, they became disillusioned when Pharaoh increased their workload. When they suddenly found themselves in a much harder situation than they had previously been, they despaired of ever being free. Rabbi Yehudah Leib Chasman (d. 1931) was the spiritual leader of the Chevron Yeshiva during the horrific Hebron massacre of 1929, thrust into the role of somehow rebuilding a decimated institution that had seen 24 of its students murdered. He provides us with a magnificent insight that takes this to a far deeper level. The emotional capacity of a human being, he says, has no limits. This means that not only can a person experience unrestricted levels of emotion, but one can even have within them two completely opposing forces that affect him or her simultaneously. People exist with infinite questions yet also infinite belief, and the Bnei Yisrael in Egypt, while believing entirely in Moshe's prophecy, could not,

at the very same time, break out of their rut of despair. The late great Israeli military leader and politician Moshe Dayan (d. 1981) once defined freedom as, 'the oxygen of the soul'. It was this breath of freedom that they struggled to take in their enslaved state.

Delusive Realities

This understanding can provide an answer to a second question that arises from the parshah. When Hashem instructed Moshe to command Pharaoh to release the Jewish people, Moshe hesitated, arguing that if the Jews had not listened to him, Pharaoh would certainly not heed his words. But the difficulty here is that while the Jews were not able to internalise Moshe's encouragement due to their oppression, Pharaoh had no such impediment. What, then, was Moshe's reluctance?

The solution that Rav Shach (d. 2001) offers to this problem is stimulating and inspiring. Let us take a moment to understand Pharaoh's character and the mindset that governed the way he ruled. The prophet Yechezkel poetically describes Pharaoh as, 'the great serpent who crouches in his river, saying, "this is my river—I created it."' (Yechezkel 29:3). Pharaoh, no matter how self-contradictory this was, viewed himself as an all-powerful god. In fact, the verses repeat continuously that Moshe would meet Pharaoh in the morning on the banks of the Nile. Rashi explains that this was chosen as the meeting-point because Pharaoh, who claimed that he was a god and existed above the rules of nature, would go every morning to secretly perform his bodily functions in the river. Bizarre as it might sound, Pharaoh was convinced of the fact that he was not only the ruler of the mighty



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

Egyptian empire but was actually omnipotent and invincible.

This delusion, argues Rav Shach, was so great, and so firmly entrenched in the Egyptian psyche, that it was almost impossible for Pharaoh to break out of it and accept that a higher Power was commanding him to release his slaves. The claim of Pharaoh that he had 'created the river' was not simply the raving of a lunatic, but an expression of his perception of the absolute nature of his existence; he was unable to conceive of something outside of his control.

This, therefore, was Moshe's parallel to the Jewish people. They could not listen to his encouragement and his prophecies because they were bound in a self-made reality that they were slaves and would always be slaves. Pharaoh was not hampered by such obstacles, but Moshe understood that if the Bnei Yisrael could not break out of their current perception to envision a new reality, Pharaoh's vision would certainly be too narrow to accept the reality of Hashem's existence.

Restless Jews

These lessons of pre-disposed mindsets outline a prominent motif through these parshiyot. The plethora of miraculous signs that characterise the story of the Exodus were designed to demonstrate the reality of Hashem's absolute existence, and this was necessary for two principal reasons. Firstly, the open miracles were crucial to the redemption because they challenged the foundation of Egyptian culture and its belief system, which placed a great reliance on sorcery and witchcraft. Fascinatingly, the Hebrew word for a demon is *shed*, and is closely related to the

the word *shoded*, which connotes misappropriating and rearranging.

This was the speciality of the Egyptians: to realign the systems of nature with their magic, and Hashem's display of open miracles demonstrated His absolute existence unbound to the rules of the world as we know it. The second reason for the miracles was to show the Jewish people that they had hope of breaking free from their captivity. In their current slave mindset, they had no way of leaving the thankless lives they lived, but the miracles of the plagues showed them that one's personal experiences form only a subjective level of reality that is superseded by Hashem's sovereignty. The redemption of the Jewish people was not only from the physical experience of slavery but also from the dominant attitude of slavery which threatened to consume them.

In the same vein, Hashem promised the Jewish people that He would take them out from the '*sivlot Mitzrayim*' (Shemot 6:6). According to Rabbi Menachem Ben Tzion Zacks (d. 1987), although this term is normally translated as 'the burdens of Egypt', it can also be interpreted as 'the patience of Egypt'. The Jews had become so 'patient' and accustomed to their suffering that they were unable to fathom leaving it. A prerequisite of the redemption was that they should learn not to be content with their slavery. To be a Jew is to be restless - to strive for greatness in freedom, rather than survival in oppression. Only when they were able to feel the need to move out of their situation were they ready to be redeemed.

**Next Week: Parshat Bo:
First Moments of An Eternal
People**