**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHEMOT**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells of God’s revelation to Moshe at the burning bush, instructing him to return to Egypt and assume the mantle of leadership of *Benei Yisrael*. In response to Moshe’s concern that *Benei Yisrael* would not believe that God had spoken to him, and would thus not accept him as leader, God equipped Moshe with three miracles he would perform to prove he was authentic. The first of these miracles was the transformation of Moshe’s staff into a snake. God commanded Moshe to throw his staff onto the ground, whereupon it became a serpent, and He then commanded him to grab the serpent’s tail, whereupon it again became a staff (4:3-4).

Rashi, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, writes that this miracle was chosen because it also served to subtly criticize Moshe for his mistrust of the people. Moshe wrongly assumed that *Benei Yisrael* would not believe his prophecy, and God noted this wrongful suspicion by turning Moshe’s staff into a serpent, the symbol of evil speech.

Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman (the “Ponevizher Rav”), however, is cited as offering a much different explanation of this particular miracle, suggesting that God was conveying to Moshe a vital lesson regarding the leadership role which he would be assuming. If a leader tries teaching and guiding people by “throwing” them to the “ground,” by humiliating and degrading them, then it is all but certain that they will become a “serpent.” Anger and harsh censure, more often than not, have the opposite effect than the one desired. Those who are humiliated and insulted for their mistakes and shortcomings are likely to become worse, not better. Instead, Rav Kahaneman taught, leaders should lovingly extend their hand to a “snake,” to those who are on the “ground,” to people who have sunken to the depths, and take hold of them, and then they will gradually rise and turn back into a proud, strong “staff.” Right at the outset of Moshe’s career as the nation’s leader, he was shown that the proper approach to guiding the people is not through harsh criticism and embarrassment, but rather through warmth and love, affectionately extending his hand to lift them from the ground, rather than casting them onto the ground through angry, harsh words of condemnation.

Sunday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Shemot of Pharaoh’s enslavement of *Benei Yisrael*, forcing them to build the cities of Pitom and Ramses (1:11). The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:10), surprisingly, comments that *Benei Yisrael* were in truth forced to build just one city. According to one view, the city they built was named “Pitom,” but it was also referred to as “Ramses” because “*rishon rishon mitroseis*” – each time the city was built, it collapsed and needed to be built anew. According to another view, the city’s real name was “Ramses,” but it was also given the name “Pitom” because each time it was built, it fell into “*pi tehom*” – the “opening to the depths of the earth.” In other words, according to the Midrash, the Egyptians forced *Benei Yisrael* to build a city in a place that guaranteed the buildings’ imminent collapse, such that they would need to be built anew, repeatedly. (Some explain that these cities were situated on the moist ground of the Nile Delta region, which was unsuitable for large buildings.)

The Midrash’s comments are often understood to mean that the Egyptians intentionally forced *Benei Yisrael* to perform useless, unproductive labor in order to crush both their bodies and their spirits. If *Benei Yisrael* had actually built cities (as the simple meaning of the text implies), they would have at least derived some degree of satisfaction from seeing the fruits of their labor, an impressive final product in which to take some pride. The Egyptians sought to deny the slaves even this level of gratification, and so they forced them to not simply perform grueling labor, but perform futile grueling labor, that produced no results.

However, it has also been suggested that the Midrash here does not, in fact, describe entirely futile work. Rather, the Midrash means that the city repeatedly collapsed until, eventually, it was able to stand. The city fell down numerous times, but in the end, an enduring city was finally produced. According to this interpretation, the Midrash conveys the powerful lesson that efforts which at first appear futile are, in fact, valuable, as they bring us closer to our ultimate goal. So often in life, failure – and even repeated failure – is a stepping stone to success. Many goals which people achieve are reached only after numerous failed attempts, after they watched the products of their intensive labor “collapse” time and time again. The Midrash’s description of the city built by *Benei Yisrael* draws our attention to the fact that even when it seems our efforts have been invested in vain, they will, eventually, yield results if we remain determined and persistent. We must not be discouraged by the “collapse” of our efforts, and should instead recognize that the road to great success almost invariably passes through numerous moments of failure and disappointment.

Monday

We read in Parashat Shemot of Moshe’s experiences when he left the palace where he was raised, to observe *Benei Yisrael*’s plight as slaves. On the first day, the Torah tells, he encountered an Egyptian violently beating a slave, whereupon Moshe “turned this way and that way, saw there was no man, and he struck the Egyptian,” killing him (2:12). Pharaoh would later hear of what Moshe did, forcing Moshe to flee Egypt.

Rashi, based on the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:29), famously explains the phrase “he saw there was no man” to mean that Moshe prophetically foresaw that this Egyptian taskmaster would not beget any descendants who would join *Am Yisrael*. Whereas the simple meaning of the verse, clearly, is that Moshe looked around to ascertain that there would be no witnesses to his act, the Midrash explains that Moshe looked into the future, through his prophetic insight. Only after determining that no righteous person would ever emerge from the violent taskmaster’s descendants did Moshe proceed to strike him and rescue the beaten slave.

Taken at face value, the Midrash’s interpretation seems difficult to understand. It stands to reason that Moshe’s decision of how to respond to the scene he witnessed should not depend on prophetic factors, such as who the taskmaster’s descendants would be. If the immediate circumstances called for slaying the taskmaster in order to alleviate the pain of the Israelite slave, then this is what Moshe should have done even if it could be expected that the taskmaster would beget righteous descendants if he were allowed to live. This weighty decision, seemingly, should not have depended at all on the offspring that the culprit was destined to produce.

Perhaps a symbolic reading of the Midrash’s comment can be suggested, according to which it seeks to give us a perspective on the process of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* that was now unfolding.

Possibly, the Midrash viewed this incident as representative of the entire story of *Benei Yisrael*’s enslavement, and the process of the Exodus. A strong, powerful empire enslaved and oppressed a weak, helpless nation, in response to which God – through His agent, Moshe – responded with a harsh blow, devastating the empire in order to rescue the downtrodden slaves. In this sense, Moshe’s encounter with the taskmaster provides us with a microcosmic model of the entire story of *Benei Yisrael*’s bondage and redemption. *Chazal* here teach us that this decision to “kill” the “taskmaster,” to bring devastation upon the Egyptian Empire, was made because God foresaw that no good could possibly result from such a society. The empire had to be brought to its knees because a culture rooted in cruelty and oppression cannot produce any long-term benefit to the world. Societies with serious flaws can be improved and advanced from within, just as individuals with flaws can work to grow and improve. But God visited destruction upon ancient Egypt because its society was deeply entrenched in the philosophy of a God-given right to oppress and torment, and he deemed such a society wholly incapable of yielding any sort of benefit for mankind.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells the story of Moshe’s miraculous survival as an infant, his mother’s successful efforts to save her child from Pharaoh’s decree of death upon all newborn Israelite boys. She placed Moshe in a basket in the river, where he was discovered by none other than Pharaoh’s daughter. Moshe’s sister, Miriam, who was standing nearby and watched the princess lift Moshe from the water, offered to find an Israelite woman to nurse the adopted infant, and the princess agreed. Miriam promptly ran home and brought her mother to nurse Moshe (2:8-9).

Rashi, based on the Gemara (Sota 12b), famously writes that Miriam made this suggestion after the princess’ unsuccessful attempt to find an Egyptian nursemaid. She tried many different nursemaids, but Moshe refused to nurse from them. The Gemara explains that this foreshadowed Moshe’s unique prophetic stature, as the mouth which would speak directly to the Almighty would not drink milk as an infant from a woman who did not belong to his nation.

It has been suggested that this description of Moshe symbolically depicts the nature of *Am Yisrael*’s condition in exile. Like Moshe in the palace, our nation has, at various times, been forced to live in foreign quarters, in foreign surroundings, among foreign peoples. We, like Pharaoh, were dependent upon the grace of righteous gentiles – such as Pharaoh’s daughter – who welcomed us and enabled us to live, grow and prosper in their lands. Moshe’s refusal to drink milk – to receive his basic sustenance – from anybody but an Israelite woman symbolizes the need to look only to our roots and origins to receive our basic spiritual sustenance. Even as we participate in the host society, ensure to obey its laws, and respect and appreciate all the blessings it offers us, we must always insist on drawing our “milk” – our fundamental values, beliefs, principles and ideals – from our own “mother,” from our tradition. The fact that Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest leader, teacher and prophet our nation ever had, was raised in Pharaoh’s palace demonstrates that we can spiritually succeed and prosper even when we are “raised” on foreign soil and in foreign cultures. This depends, however, on our insistence on “drinking” only the “milk” of our ancestors, on looking only to our own sources and our own value system for our core ideals and principles.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells of God’s initial prophecy to Moshe at the burning bush, when he called out to Moshe and Moshe responded, “*Hineini*” – “Here I am” (3:4). God instructed Moshe not to come any further, and to remove his shoes out of respect for the sanctity of the site. Then God proceeded to command Moshe to return to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh release *Benei Yisrael*.

A startling Midrashic passage, cited by the Tosafists (in *Da’at Zekeinim*), finds fault in Moshe for using the word “*hineini*” in responding to God’s call. Citing the verse in Mishlei (25:6), “*u-vi’mkom gedolim al ta’amod*” (“…do not stand in the place of great ones”), the Midrash comments that God was angered by Moshe’s use of the word “*hineini*” – the same word that Avraham used when God called out to him before issuing the command of the *akeida* (to bind his son on the altar – Bereishit 22:1). The Midrash apparently found Moshe guilty of “standing in the place of great ones,” inappropriately using the response of a “great one” – Avraham – to a prophetic calling. As punishment, the Midrash continues, God announced to Moshe, “*Al tikrav halom*” (“Do not proceed any further”), which the Midrash explains to mean that Moshe was denied the privileges of the priesthood and kingship, the rights to which were given, respectively, to his brother (Aharon) and to the dynasty of King David. It seems that Moshe was too presumptuous by responding to God’s call with the same word with which Avraham had responded to a similar call, and so he was denied positions of distinction that had (evidently) been destined to be held by his descendants.

We might wonder why exactly the Midrash found it inappropriate for Moshe to use the word “*hineini*.” Even assuming he was aware that this was the word with which Avraham had responded to the prophetic call he received, why was this deemed an expression of arrogance?

One possible answer is that the problem lies not in the response of “*hineini*” per se, but in the discordance between this reply and the ensuing exchange between God and Moshe. The word “*hineini*” is often understood to mean not simply, “here I am,” but rather that one is fully committed to fulfill the other’s wishes. Avraham responded “*Hineini*” to God’s call as a way of expressing his preparedness to do anything God commanded – and sure enough, God proceeded to command him to do the unthinkable – to sacrifice his beloved son – and Avraham complied (until he was told to withdraw his sword). Likewise, when Yaakov called Yosef and asked him to travel to check on his brothers, Yosef replied, “*Hineini*” (Bereishit 37:13) despite knowing that his brothers despised him, and likely suspecting that they might seek to cause him harm. “*Hineini*” proclaims one’s absolute, unwavering obedience, and willingness to obey any command and comply with any request, no matter what might be entailed.

Moshe, however, after answering “*Hineini*,” tried to excuse himself from complying with God’s command. God instructed him to return to Egypt and lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom, and Moshe initially refused, giving several different reasons why he did not want to serve this role. Possibly, it is here where the Midrash found fault. Moshe spoke in very lofty terms, pronouncing his unbridled loyalty to God, but in practice, he was not – at this point – prepared to fully comply with the command. And this, perhaps, is why the Midrash found the response of “*Hineini*” inappropriate – because it was not backed by truly unlimited commitment to accept any challenge and fulfill any command.

If so, then the Midrash here warns against lofty, idealistic speech which is not followed up by action. It teaches us that is inappropriate to come across as something we are not, to give an impression of a stature that we have yet to achieve. If we present ourselves as though we’ve reached the lofty level of “*hineini*,” then we must be sure that this image is truly reflected by our actions, and not a vain attempt to earn respect and prestige.

Thursday

Upon hearing God’s command at the burning bush to return to Egypt and approach Pharaoh to demand that he allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave Egypt, Moshe initially refused, saying, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (3:11).

God then responded, “For I shall be with you; and this is the sign that I have sent you – when you bring the nation out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain” (3:12).

This verse is very difficult to understand, and indeed has been explained in many different ways by the various commentators. The first segment of God’s response – “For I shall be with you” – appears to be the answer to Moshe’s question. Moshe understandably wondered how he – a fugitive who was forced to run for his life after killing an Egyptian – could possibly confront Pharaoh and lead *Benei Yisrael* out of the country, and God assured him that he would receive special divine assistance to fulfill this task. The rest of God’s response, however, seems hard to explain. God speaks of a “sign that I sent you” – as though Moshe required or had asked for a “sign” to prove that God was sending him. And, God seems to identify as this “sign” the future event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai* – the nation assembling to “serve God” on Mount Sinai, the mountain where Moshe received the prophecy at the burning bush. To what exactly did this event serve as a “sign”?

Rashi takes two approaches to explaining this verse, the first of which is based on Rashi’s novel interpretation to the previous verse. Rashi had explained Moshe’s question as actually consisting of two separate concerns. Firstly, he felt incapable of approaching the Egyptian monarch to demand the release of *Benei Yisrael*, and, secondly, he felt that *Benei Yisrael* were not worthy of the miracles that would be needed for them to leave Egypt. In response to Moshe’s first concern, God assured him that He would grant him his assistance – “I shall be with you” – and then added, “and this is the sign that I have sent you.” According to Rashi, this refers to the remarkable sight which Moshe had witnessed – the sight of a bush that was ablaze yet was not consumed. This supernatural phenomenon served as a symbol of God’s guarantee to Moshe that no harm would befall him by approaching Pharaoh, just as the bush was not harmed by the flames which engulfed it. And as for Moshe’s concern that *Benei Yisrael* were unworthy of redemption, God informed Moshe of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, that *Benei Yisrael* were destined to forge a special covenant with God at Mount Sinai after leaving Egypt, and this alone rendered them worthy of being rescued from bondage.

This interpretation of the verse appears to stem from an understanding of the word “*zeh*” (“this”) mentioned by Rashi in several different contexts (most famously, perhaps, Shemot 15:2, commenting to this phrase “*zeh Keili ve-anveihu*”). Rashi asserts that this word denotes something which is visibly identifiable, as opposed to something abstract or that needs to be imagined. Thus, when God said to Moshe, “***zeh*** *lekha ha-ot*” (“**this** is the sign”), it refers to the burning bush, which Moshe saw with his own eyes.

In his second approach, Rashi explains the verse to mean that the success of Moshe’s mission would serve as a “sign” confirming the fulfillment of a second promise – that *Benei Yisrael* would then serve God at Mount Sinai. Meaning, in response to Moshe’s question, God promised that He would assure the success of his mission, and He then added that this success would indicate the fulfillment of the separate promise of the Revelation at Sinai.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that it requires a strained reading of the word “*zeh*” – “this,” as meaning, “the success of your mission.” Rashi implicitly acknowledges the difficulty in this reading, and therefore suggests drawing a prooftext supporting his explanation, citing a similar construction used by Yeshayahu in his prophecy during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. After prophesying the miraculous defeat of Assyria, Yeshayahu then pronounced to King Chizkiyahu, “*Ve-zeh lekha ha-ot akhol ha-shana safi’ach*…” – “This is the sign for you: eat this year what grows wildly…” (Melakhim II 19:29, Yeshayahu 37:30). Rashi explains this to mean that the fulfillment of the promise of Assyria’s defeat will serve as a sign of the fulfillment of another promise – the promise of material prosperity during the coming years, despite the colossal damage inflicted by the Assyrian assault. The word “*ve-zeh*” in that verse refers to the fulfillment of the preceding promise, which will then serve to confirm a separate promise which is now being made. Thus, at the burning bush, too, Rashi explains the phrase “*ve-zeh lekha ha-ot*” to mean that the fulfillment of the preceding promise – to assure Moshe’s success in leading *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt – would serve to confirm the subsequent promise of the nation’s arrival at Sinai to receive the Torah and forge an eternal covenant with God.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the difficult verse in Parashat Shemot in which God responds to Moshe’s claim that he was incapable of approaching Pharaoh to demand the release of *Benei Yisrael*. God replied, “For I shall be with you; and this is the sign that I have sent you – when you bring the nation out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain” (3:12). While the first portion of God’s response – “For I shall be with you” – seems clear, the rest of this verse, in which God speaks of a “sign” and foretells the event of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, seems difficult to understand.

The Rashbam, interestingly enough, introduces his commentary to this verse by expressing disdain at the approaches taken by earlier commentators, writing, “One who wishes to arrive at the true interpretation of these verses should study this commentary of mine, because my predecessors did not understand it at all.” (Presumably, he refers here even to the explanations offered by his grandfather, Rashi.) In his interpretation to this verse, the Rashbam advances a surprising theory regarding the entire process of the Exodus, the scheme through which God had Moshe persuade Pharaoh to release *Benei Yisrael*. According to the Rashbam, Moshe expressed two concerns about the mission to which he was assigned: how he would be able to enter the palace and stand before Pharaoh, and, even if he were to be granted an audience with Pharaoh, why Pharaoh would heed his demand. Addressing Moshe’s first concern, God assured him, “For I shall be with you, and this is the sign that I have sent you.” Following Rashi’s first approach to explaining this verse (as mentioned yesterday), the Rashbam writes that God pointed to the sight of the burning bush, which was engulfed in flames and yet remained intact, as a sign of the miraculous protection He would grant Moshe. Just as the bush was supernaturally shielded from the flames, so would Moshe be supernaturally shielded from harm as he entered the palace and spoke to the Egyptian king.

In the final segment of this verse, the Rashbam writes, which foretells the event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, God tells Moshe of the tactic he would use to lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom. Instead of demanding that Pharaoh release the slaves – a demand which there was no reason to expect Pharaoh to obey – Moshe was to appeal to Pharaoh to allow *Benei Yisrael* some time off to journey into the desert and offer sacrifices to God. As God explained later (verse 18), Moshe was to ask Pharaoh simply to allow *Benei Yisrael* to take a three-day journey into the wilderness. According to the Rashbam, this request was made “*derekh chokhma*” – as a trick. The plan was for *Benei Yisrael* to request a temporary “vacation” for the sake of serving God, indicating that they would then return, but this was merely a trick, as they would then continue traveling away from Egypt, toward the Land of Israel.

The Rashbam would likely understand on this basis the events that transpired after the Exodus, when, as we read in Parashat Beshalach (14:5), Pharaoh was informed “that the nation had fled,” and he promptly mobilized an army to pursue *Benei Yisrael*. At first glance, this verse seems very difficult to understand. After all, Pharaoh himself had driven *Benei Yisrael* out of the country. Why would he be surprised to hear that they “fled”? According to the Rashbam, the answer is clear: Pharaoh granted *Benei Yisrael* permission to leave temporarily, but he then learned that they were continuing to travel, and were not returning to Egypt.

A number of later commentators objected to the Rashbam’s understanding of the events. For example, Rabbeinu Chananel (to 3:18) writes, “Heaven forbid that this was a trick in order to escape.” In his view, it is inconceivable that God would have commanded Moshe to lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom by knowingly deceiving Pharaoh in this fashion. According to the Rashbam, however, this was precisely the tactic, already from the moment God first spoke to Moshe and ordered him to lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom.

(For a fuller discussion of this topic, see [Rabbi Menachem Leibtag’s essay, “Let My People Go – a Hoax or a Mission.”](https://tanach.org/shmot/shmot/shmots2.htm))

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