**S.A.L.T. PARASHAT VAERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vaera provides some details about Moshe’s family, including information about the children of his brother, Aharon. We read that Aharon’s third son, Elazar, married “one of the daughters of Putiel” (6:25). Rashi, citing the Gemara (Sota 43a), explains this to mean that Elazar’s wife descended from two prominent figures: Yosef and Yitro. Yosef is called Putiel, the Gemara explains, because “*pitpeit be-yitzro*,” which Rashi (in his commentary to Masekhet Sota) interprets to mean that he disregarded and paid no heed to his sinful inclinations. When faced with the temptation presented by Potifar’s wife, Yosef ignored his passions and remained committed to his values. Yitro is called by this name, the Gemara comments, because “*piteim agalim la-avoda zara*” – he at one point had the practice of fattening cows in preparation for pagan sacrifices. Yitro had been a pagan priest before embracing monotheism and joining *Am Yisrael*, and so he was named “Putiel” which alludes to the pagan sacrifices he used to bring.

*Chazal*’s incorporation of these two personalities into the same context, and even into the same name, perhaps challenges us to identify the point of comparison between them. In truth, this comparison is not difficult to identify. Both Yosef and Yitro thrived as foreigners, joining the nobility of a different nation and receiving great honor and prestige. Yosef, a foreign slave in Egypt, rose to the second highest position in the country, serving just under the king. Yitro, a native Midyanite, joined *Am Yisrael* when they encamped at Mount Sinai, where he was welcomed with a grand display of honor, and he was the father-in-law of their leader, Moshe. Intriguingly, both Yosef and Yitro offered unsolicited advice to the foreign nation’s ruler, which was emphatically accepted and implemented. Yosef advised Pharaoh to appoint an official to oversee the storage of grain during the seven years of surplus, and Yitro urged Moshe to appoint a network of judges to assist him in governing the people. These two men thus serve as inspiring examples of adaptability, showing us that people are capable of succeeding and making important contributions in different settings and contexts. Even when people find themselves uprooted from their familiar surroundings and thrust into an alien environment, they should not despair, but should instead have the confidence to utilize their talents wherever they can and to the best of their ability, trusting that they can make a meaningful impact wherever they are.

There is, however, an important difference between Yitro and Yosef, which is perhaps underscored by the ways in which *Chazal* associate their names with the name “Putiel.” Although Yosef succeeded in adapting himself in Egypt, he nevertheless remained steadfastly committed to the values and principles which he imbibed as a youngster. This was most starkly displayed by his refusal to yield to Potifar’s wife, determined as he was to remain loyal to the standards of morality he learned from Yaakov rather than embrace the decadent culture of ancient Egypt. Yitro, however, did just the opposite. His adaptability was manifest primarily through his rejection of the beliefs and customs which he had previously held so dear. As the Gemara describes, Yitro did not merely offer sacrifices to pagan gods, but incurred the expense and went through the trouble to fatten the animals, signifying his passion and emotional investment in these practices. And yet, he later succeeded in turning his back on his devoutly pagan past and embracing the faith which he was shown to be true.

Reflecting on the stories of Yosef and Yitro, then, we learn about the delicate nature of change and adaptability. As we go through life, and enter new circumstances and learn new information which prompts us to grow and change, we need to carefully discern between the aspects of our past which we should steadfastly retain, and those which need to be relinquished. Yosef is our model of adapting to new circumstances without changing our principles, whereas Yitro is our model of adopting new principles upon recognizing the fallacy of previously-held beliefs. Together, they teach us of the need for constant, dynamic growth, and to carefully determine which aspects of our life require change and which ought to be stubbornly preserved.

Sunday

Parashat Vaera begins with God commanding Moshe to return to *Benei Yisrael* and assure them that He would be freeing them from Egypt. After Moshe’s initial meeting with Pharaoh resulted in the king’s increasing the workload and intensifying the people’s suffering, they were angry at and resentful of Moshe (5:20-21), but God now sent him to reiterate His promise of redemption. We read that the people did not listen to Moshe due to their agony and despair. Afterward, God told Moshe to return to Pharaoh to demand that he free *Benei Yisrael*.

Curiously, God introduces this new command with the proclamation, “*Ani Hashem*” – “I am the Lord” (6:29). Rashi explains this to mean, “I am worthy of sending you and of you fulfilling My mission.” It seems that according to Rashi, God was impressing upon Moshe that God is “worthy” of issuing this command and of being obeyed. At first glance, this explanation appears very peculiar. Did Moshe have any doubts that God is “worthy” of commanding and being obeyed? Why would this point need to be emphasized?

The answer, perhaps, has to do with Moshe’s own feelings of uncertainty. As we know from an earlier verse (6:12), Moshe was very skeptical about returning to Pharaoh. The people saw their hopes shattered and were now angry at Moshe, and there was nothing to suggest that Pharaoh would yield. God was now sending Moshe on the very same mission that had failed so bitterly the first time around. Understandably, Moshe could not help but wonder why he should repeat the same action and expect a different result.

For this reason, it would seem, God assured him, “*Kedai ani le-shaleichakha u-le’kayeim divrei shelichuti*” – that it is always worthwhile and valuable to fulfill God’s will. Even though Moshe, from his limited human perspective, could not see the value or benefit in returning to Pharaoh, this is what God was telling him to do, and so, by definition, it was a valuable and beneficial undertaking.

Not always do we see the benefits of the good things we do. We oftentimes wonder whether our efforts are paying off, or if they are perhaps invested without yielding any returns. Rashi therefore reminds us, “*Kedai ani le-shaleichakha u-le’kayeim divrei shelichuti*.” As long as we are fulfilling our Creator’s will, living our lives the way He commanded us, and making a concentrated effort to always make the right choices and act the right way, we can feel gratified and assured that our efforts are valuable and significant.

Monday

Parashat Vaera begins with God commanding Moshe to return to *Benei Yisrael*, whose workload and suffering were intensified after Moshe’s initial meeting with Pharaoh, and to reassure them of their redemption. God makes several promises to *Benei Yisrael* in this prophecy, including, “*Ve-lakachti etkhem li le-am*” – “I shall take you to Me as a nation” (6:7).

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba*, 14) draws a curious association between this promise and a verse in Sefer Bereishit (18:4) which tells of Avraham’s invitation extended to three wayfarers. Avraham offered to bring the travelers water to wash their feet – “*Yukach na me’at mayim*” – and the Midrash comments that in reward for this offer, which was made with the word “*yukach*,” God promised Avraham’s descendants, “*Ve-lakachti etkhem li le-am*.” As Avraham “took” water for his guests, God “took” his descendants as His cherished nation.

How might we explain the connection between these two contexts?

Possibly, the Midrash seeks to compare God’s coming to Egypt to free *Benei Yisrael* from slavery to somebody offering water to a weary, dirty traveler. Yechezkel (20) depicts *Benei Yisrael* as immersed in the “impurity” of pagan worship during the period of bondage in Egypt, a depiction that forms the basis of the famous Kabbalistic notion that *Benei Yisrael* fell to the “forty-ninth gate of impurity” at this time. *Benei Yisrael* were proverbially covered with filth, and God came to offer them water, as it were, initiating the process of spiritual cleansing so they could be worthy of building a special relationship with Him. And thus *Chazal* associate the promise, “I shall take you to Me as a nation” with Avraham’s offer of water to the travelers so they could bathe. God came to *Benei Yisrael* and offered them “water,” the opportunity and potential to “cleanse” themselves of the spiritual “filth” that had accumulated over the course of their stay in Egypt, so they could become His special nation.

It is customary in many communities to observe the six weeks during which the first six portions of Sefer Shemot are read as a period (called “*Shovavim*”)of special introspection and repentance, particularly for sins associated with impurity and contamination (namely, sins of a sexual nature). The connection between this process and Sefer Shemot, as many have suggested, may lie in the “cleansing” aspect of the Exodus. Yechezkel, in the aforementioned prophecy, states clearly that the people were unworthy of redemption, but God nevertheless came to extricate them from their state of impurity. Despite their “contaminated” condition, God came to assist *Benei Yisrael* and trigger the process whereby they could rise from the spiritual depths to which they had plummeted and become His cherished nation. God’s initiating this process assures us that even when we fall into a state of “impurity,” even if we ever find ourselves mired in sin or trapped in an undesirable spiritual condition, God’s promise of “*Ve-lakachti etkhem*” still applies. At all times, He offers us the “water” we need to cleanse ourselves. Even if we are ever covered in “filth,” God will not forsake us and will still be prepared to lend us a hand, so-to-speak, in our efforts to grow and improve. Just as Avraham offered water to his guests for bathing, God likewise offers us the opportunity and capability to “cleanse” ourselves, regardless of how “soiled” we become.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vaera that when Moshe conveyed to *Benei Yisrael* God’s promises of redemption, after Pharaoh had intensified their workload in response to Moshe’s initial demand that he release the slaves, the people paid no attention to him. The Torah tells, “They did not listen to Moshe due to [their] shortness of spirit and intense labor” (6:9). God then spoke to Moshe once again, commanding him to approach Pharaoh a second time to demand that he allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave. Moshe replied, “See, the Israelites did not listen to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me?” (6:12). The simple reading of this verse, as Rashi explains, is that Moshe reasoned that if *Benei Yisrael* could not believe in the possibility of their redemption, then certainly Pharaoh would not believe in God’s ability to deliver them to freedom.

Many commentators noted the flaw in Moshe’s logic. The Torah made it very clear that *Benei Yisrael* paid no attention to Moshe’s prophecy because of the stress and anguish of slavery. Therefore, the fact that they rejected him did not necessarily mean that Pharaoh would react the same way. Why did Moshe presume it was more likely for *Benei Yisrael* to hear his message than Pharaoh, if, as the Torah explicitly states, they were incapable of doing so due to the pain and pressure of bondage?

The Tosafists, in *Da’at Zekeinim*, offer a number of possible answers, including the suggestion that Moshe did not understand the reason for the people’s rejection of his prophecy. The Torah informs us that they could not accept his prophecy of redemption because of their suffering and aggravation, but Moshe was not privy to this information. This approach is developed more elaborately by *Keli Yakar*, who explains that Moshe wrongly assumed that the people simply lacked faith. He thus figured that if *Benei Yisrael* did not have the faith to accept his message of redemption, then certainly Pharaoh, who rejected the belief in an omnipotent Creator altogether, would not heed Moshe’s call.

This explanation perhaps reminds us of the limits of our understanding of other people’s conduct and decisions. Even somebody as wise and incisive as Moshe Rabbenu did not fully understand the source of the people’s hostile response to his prophecy. Many times, there is a degree of “*kotzer ru’ach va-avoda kasha*” – of pain and adversity – that lead people to act as they do. We must train ourselves to be hesitant to cast judgment in the face of improper speech and conduct, recognizing that we rarely know the entire story, that all people carry their own share of “baggage” that could explain their inappropriate behavior. Just as Moshe did not correctly assess the people’s hostile reaction to his prophecy, we, too, often lack knowledge of other people’s circumstances and the struggles they face, and so we should be giving them the benefit of the doubt and judging them favorably.

Wednesday

Towards the beginning of Parashat Vaera (6:13), we read that God sent Moshe to confront Pharaoh and also to speak to *Benei Yisrael*. While the Torah does not specify what exactly Moshe was to communicate to *Benei Yisrael*, the Talmud Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashanah 3:5) explains, surprisingly, that Moshe conveyed to them the obligation to free indentured servants after six years of service. At the same time Moshe was commanded to confront Pharaoh and demand that he release his Israelite slaves, Moshe was commanded to instruct *Benei Yisrael* to release their servants – an obligation presented later at Mount Sinai (21:2). Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohen of Dvinsk, in his *Meshekh Chokhma*, explains that although *Benei Yisrael* were enslaved and oppressed in Egypt, they were arranged according to a hierarchical structure, such that certain groups had servants belonging to other groups. Before *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt, they were commanded to release their fellow Israelites from servitude.

The vital lesson conveyed by the Yerushalmi’s explanation of this verse is that we must look inward to address our own shortcomings even as we work to address external threats. Clearly, *Benei Yisrael*’s gravest problem at this time was the state of bondage imposed upon them for no fault of their own by the Egyptians. Moshe’s primary task at this point was to confront Pharaoh and communicate to him God’s command to release the slaves and His warning of the devastating consequences of defiance. Additionally, however, Moshe was sent to *Benei Yisrael* to demand their own compliance with this command. Although *Benei Yisrael* had certainly not fallen to anywhere near the moral abyss of Pharaoh and his people, who ruthlessly subjugated and persecuted an entire nation, they were not entirely innocent of the crime of oppression. And thus concurrent with Moshe’s confrontations with Pharaoh, he needed to lead *Benei Yisrael* to correct their own moral failings.

Identifying flaws and faults in others is easy; finding and addressing our own shortcomings is far more difficult. This is especially so when, as in *Benei Yisrael*’s situation in Egypt, the faults of others are truly glaring and horrific, and far exceed ours in severity. The Talmud Yerushalmi reminds us that at all times and in all circumstances, we must always be scrutinizing ourselves and working to improve. Even as we witness, or even, Heaven forbid, when we are victimized by, grave injustices perpetrated by others, we must never absolve ourselves of the need to introspect, to identify our own faults, and to strive to improve.

Thursday

Before the first of the ten plagues that God brought upon Egypt – the plague of blood – He instructed Moshe to approach Pharaoh and warn that if he did not release *Benei Yisrael*, “I will hereby strike the water that is in the river with my staff, and it will transform into blood” (7:17). Yet, when the time came for the plague to begin, God instructed Moshe to have Aharon strike the river to transform the water to blood (8:1). We might wonder, then, how God could have Moshe warn Pharaoh that he – Moshe – would strike the river, when in fact this miracle was wrought by Aharon.

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (99b) raises a similar question regarding God’s command to Moshe later, in Refidim, to strike a rock to produce water using “your stick with which you struck the river” (Shemot 17:5). God speaks of Moshe having struck the river – presumably referring to the plague of blood – even though it was actually Aharon who performed this act. The Gemara explains that God attributed this act to Moshe because he had Aharon perform this act. One who persuades somebody to perform a *mitzva*, the Gemara establishes, is credited with having personally performed that *mitzva*, and thus God speaks of Moshe as having fulfilled the mission of bringing the plague of blood even though this was actually done by Aharon.

Seemingly, we would apply the Gemara’s principle to explain the verse here in Parashat Vaera, as well. Moshe informs Pharaoh that he – Moshe – would be striking the river because he would be instructing Aharon to do so, and he would thus be credited with this act.

However, the Rogatchover Gaon (*Tzofnat Panei’ach*) questioned whether this concept – of attributing to somebody an action done by another person at his behest – is applicable in our context. *Tosafot*, in Masekhet Bava Batra (82a), discuss the case of a person who sent his *bikkurim* (first fruits, which must be brought to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*) to the Temple via a messenger, and the question arises as to whether he recites the *mikra bikkurim* declaration which normally accompanies the *mitzva bikkurim*. Citing the Talmud Yerushalmi, *Tosafot* claim that the owner of the fruit does not recite *mikra bikkurim* in such a case, as he cannot say the phrase, “I have now brought the first fruits of the land.” Since he did not actually bring the fruits to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, he cannot speak of himself as doing so. Apparently, despite the Gemara’s comment that a person is credited with an action he sent somebody else to do, a person cannot speak of himself as performing an action performed by somebody else, even though it was done at his behest. Others can attribute the action to him, as God spoke of Moshe as having brought the plague of blood, but one cannot speak of himself in these terms. Although the Rashbam (there in Bava Batra) does not follow this view, and maintains that an individual who sent his *bikkurim* with a messenger may recite this text, the question arises according to *Tosafot* as to how Moshe could speak of himself striking the river.

The Rogatchover Gaon answers that in truth, Moshe himself struck the river. He likely refers to a passage in the Midrash (*Sechel Tov*, cited in *Torah Sheleima*, 81\*) which describes how Moshe and Aharon together brought the plague of blood upon the Egyptians, through a joint action.

Leaving aside the technical issue as to how precisely this occurred, it is perhaps worth reflecting upon this distinction between how a person describes himself and how he is described by others. As we have seen, a person can be spoken of by a third party as performing an action he commissioned, but one cannot speak of himself of performing an action done at his behest. Underlying this distinction, perhaps, is the message that we should be indulging more in praising other people than in praising ourselves. When we speak of others, we should try to give them as much credit as we can, and to praise them even for achievements for which they only indirectly facilitated. When we speak of ourselves, however, we ought to be more discerning. We may certainly take credit for and feel pride over our accomplishments, but we must avoid indulging in self-praise. Crediting ourselves too much leads us to arrogance and complacency, and thus we should be far more liberal in our praise and compliments of other people than we are in commending ourselves.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted Moshe’s warning to Pharaoh before the onset of the plague of blood, “I will hereby strike the water that is in the river with my staff, and it will transform into blood” (7:17). Moshe’s wording seems difficult in light of the fact that, as we read several verses later (8:1), it was Aharon, and not Moshe, who struck the river with his staff to change the water into blood. While we might at first explain that Moshe attributed this action to himself as Aharon performed the act at his behest, this explanation would need to be reconciled with the view of *Tosafot* (Bava Batra 82a) regarding the case of one who sends his *bikkurim* to the Temple through a messenger. *Tosafot* maintain that the person in this case does not recite the *mikra bikkurim* declaration that is normally recited when one brings his first fruits to the *Mikdash*, because he cannot recite the phrase, “I have now brought the first fruits of the land.” This seems to imply that a person cannot speak of himself as having performed an act which he commissioned somebody else to perform on his behalf. How, then, could Moshe announce to Pharaoh that he – Moshe – would be striking the waters of Egypt to bring about the plague of blood?

Rav Chaim Leib Eisenstein, in his [*Peninim Mi-bei Midresha* (Parashat Vaera)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48330&st=&pgnum=48), suggests distinguishing in this regard between *bikkurim* and other contexts. He cites Rav Meir Dan Platzky’s discussion in his *Keli Chemda* (*Kuntrus Ha-milu’im*, Yitro 4) about *Tosafot*’s position, in which he proposes a novel explanation for why one cannot speak of himself bringing *bikkurim* if this was done by somebody else on his behalf. Rav Platzky notes that the Torah specifically commands one to hand his first fruits to the *kohen* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*: “The *kohen* shall take the basket [of *bikkurim*]from your hands” (Devarim 26:4). Possibly, Rav Platzky writes, the Torah established *bikkurim* as a *mitzva* that must be performed with one’s body, similar to placing *tefillin* on one’s head and arm, in contrast to *mitzvot* which require achieving a specific result, like charity or other obligatory donations to *kohanim*. As such, one who sends *bikkurim* to the *kohen* performs only one aspect of the *mitzva* – transferring the *bikkurim* to the *kohen*, but does not fulfill the requirement to physically hand the *bikkurim* to the *kohen*. For this reason, he is incapable of speaking of himself as having brought the fruits to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, as his *mitzva* is deficient. If so, Rav Eisenstein notes, then *Tosafot*’s ruling is limited to the narrow context of *bikkurim*, and does not affect other areas. Hence, we can easily understand why Moshe can speak of himself as bringing the plague of blood, which was done by his brother at his behest.

Rav Eisenstein further notes that the *Tur*, in his commentary, presents two simple solutions to the question of why Moshe described himself as bringing the plague of blood. First, he writes, some suggest that this verse was written in a kind of shorthand, as we find in many places in the Biblical text, and in truth Moshe said to Pharaoh that he would be appointing somebody to strike the waters of Egypt. The *Tur* himself explains differently, noting that Aharon was Moshe’s “spokesperson” who communicated Moshe’s warnings and predictions to Pharaoh. It was therefore accurate for Moshe to say, “I will hereby strike the water that is in the river with my staff,” as these words were actually spoken to Pharaoh by Aharon, the one who indeed struck the water.

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