# "And You Shall Know / And Egypt Shall Know That I Am God:"

# The Dual Cause and Purpose of the Exodus

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# The story of Moshe and Aharon's mission to Bnei Yisrael and to Pharaoh gives rise to a number of questions. For example, in his attempts to evade the mission assigned to him by God, Moshe claimed, inter alia, that he is "heavy of speech and heavy of tongue." How are we to understand his behavior when he repeats this claim ("I am of uncircumcised lips," 6:12, 6:30) even after he has already appeared before Pharaoh and has even spoken before him for the first time (chapter 5)? And how are we to understand what Moshe means when he speaks to Bnei Yisrael at the beginning of parashat Vaera (6:6-8), and what significant innovation he introduces in comparison to what was already said in chapter 3:15-16? After all, there too mention was made of the forefathers, of the future Exodus and of the promised entry into the land.

# This leads us to yet another question. The Jews' initial response to Moshe was positive, "And the nation believed and they listened" (4:31), just as God had promised: "And they shall listen to your voice" (3:18). Why, then, in chapter 6 do we find that "they did not listen to Moshe"? Although it would seem that the answer is given explicitly – "for lack of spirit and because of their hard labor," this seems insufficient, since it appears that their reaction is related to the content of Moshe's message to them, which they refuse to receive.

# It is also difficult to understand Moshe's behavior when he first appears before Pharaoh. Although he is commanded, "See all the signs which I have placed in your hand; you shall perform them before Pharaoh" (4:21), he does not actually perform them (see 5:1), but from 7:8 onwards the signs are performed. Moreover, Moshe opens with the command, "Let my people go" (5:1), but then scales down his demands in the wake of Pharaoh's reaction (ibid. 2), saying, "The Lord of the Hebrews has called upon us…" (ibid. 3). This latter speech is closer to what he was originally commanded to say (3:18), so we must ask what caused him initially to present his case differently.

# A study of these questions and others leads us to propose that Moshe's mission to Israel and to Pharaoh had dual significance – one purpose being mentioned in chapter 3, and the other in chapter 6.

# THE MISSION TO ISRAEL

# Chapter 3 emphasizes the theme of the Exodus and entering the Promised Land, starting with the introduction: "God, the Lord of your forefathers, appeared to me – the God of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov, saying…" (ibid. 16). The content of the mission is as follows. God remembers His promise to the forefathers, "And afterwards they shall come out with great wealth… and the fourth generation shall return here" (Bereishit 15:14, 16), and He wants to fulfill it – i.e., to bring the nation out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Therefore God refers to Himself as "the God of your forefathers" (see also 2:24). This parasha also mentions the great wealth (ibid. 21-22) foretold in Bereishit.

# In chapter 6, by contrast, while the promise to the forefathers does feature in the background (verses 3-4), a different dimension is added. Concerning the forefathers, "My Name YKVK I did not make known to them" (3), but to the children - "Tell Bnei Yisrael: I am YKVK." This serves as a key expression in this parasha. The content of the mission as expressed in these verses is: God will take the nation of Israel out of Egypt and bring them to the land, not only because of His promise to the forefathers, but also because Israel is God's nation ("I am YKVK"). Therefore the order here is first the Exodus – "I shall take them to Me as a people… and you shall know that I am YKVK your God" (6:7), and only afterwards, when Israel has become God's nation and they have knowledge of Him, will they be fit and ready to enter the land – by virtue of being God's nation, and not only because they are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov.

# In this parasha, Am Yisrael is informed for the first time that YKVK is the God of Israel, and that on this basis He has chosen them as His nation, and they will merit to enter the land. This auspicious parasha, ringing with God's glory, is meant to fall upon eager ears. But in a time of "short-spiritedness and hard labor," the hearts were not ready to hear this prophecy, despite – or perhaps because of – its startling message. The message in chapter 3, on the other hand – God's promise to the forefathers – was something that was known to Am Yisrael and with which they were quite familiar; hence it was easier for them to accept this. Indeed, God's promise in chapter 3 – "they shall listen to your voice" – is fulfilled in chapter 4: "And the nation believed and they listened…."

# THE MISSIONS TO PHARAOH

# The emphasis on the difference between the two missions to Pharaoh involves a distinction between "the God of the Hebrews" and "I am YKVK." In the first mission, Moshe speaks of the "God of the Hebrews," Who is unique to this ethnic group that came from beyond the river. It is as though He has no control over other nations; He does not command them. From Pharaoh's point of view, He may be categorized together with the other gods of Egypt and other nations: each has jurisdiction only over one specific nation. But "I am YKVK" implies a Being Who rules over everything, and Who may also command Pharaoh. This Being Who rules over everything also has a special connection to the nation of Israel: "Israel is My first-born son."

# "And you and the elders of Israel shall come to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him: YKVK, the God of the Hebrews, has appeared to us. Now let us go, we pray, on a journey of three days into the wilderness that we may offer sacrifices to YKVK our God." (3:18)

# Attention should be paid to the fact that in this verse there is no command whatsoever addressed to Pharaoh concerning the freeing of Bnei Yisrael. The revelation is to Bnei Yisrael alone ("…called upon us"), and the request is addressed BY ISRAEL TO PHARAOH: "Now let us go, we pray…." Since they speak of the God of the Hebrews Whose power is limited, as it were, to the nation of Israel, there can be no Divine command here to Pharaoh. Admittedly, there is also mention of YKVK in this verse, but it is no more than a hint to Pharaoh that the "God of the Hebrews" is also "YKVK" Who rules over everything. This Name is mentioned only from the perspective of the final plan. The essence of the message here is: The God of the Hebrews has told His nation to offer sacrifices to Him, and the nation requests of the king of Egypt that He allow them to fulfill this command (just as Yosef had previously asked an earlier king's permission to fulfill his father's last wish – to be buried in Eretz Yisrael).

# But Moshe, appearing before Pharaoh, adopts a different style of address: "So says YKVK, God of Israel: Let My people go, that they may make a festival for Me in the wilderness" (5:1). This style deviates significantly from God's words to Moshe. The change would appear to be related to another mission to Pharaoh that was recorded previously: "And now, go, and I shall send you to Pharaoh; you shall take My nation, Bnei Yisrael, out of Egypt" (3:10). This is then expanded: "And you shall say to Pharaoh, So says YKVK: Israel is My first-born son… Behold, I shall kill your first-born son" (5:21-23). But it seems that the intention behind these declarations was to present the final aim of the mission; as we shall see presently, this was not meant to be accomplished immediately. Right now is not the time for conflict between Pharaoh and YKVK, between "My first-born" and "your first-born." The approach now is made to the king of Egypt, as ruler over the Hebrews, that he allow them to serve their God. Attention should be paid to the fact that this approach makes no mention of Pharaoh's name; he is referred to exclusively as "the king of Egypt" (3:18 and 5:4); likewise, the people speaking before the king are not messengers of God but rather representatives of the people: "And you and the ELDERS OF ISRAEL shall come to the KING OF EGYPT…." Even Moshe and Aharon come only as representatives of the people, to ask Pharaoh "Now let us go, we pray…."

# However, Moshe understands the mission at hand as an immediate one (perhaps this is prompted by his own desire for a quick redemption; see also 5:22 and Ramban ad loc.); therefore he comes to PHARAOH (5:1) rather than to the "king of Egypt." He comes as a messenger of God, not as a representative of the nation, and the hence the reason for the absence of the elders is clear (see Rashi ad loc.; we shall not elaborate here). He declares before Pharaoh: "So says YKVK, the God of Israel: Let My people go…." But upon hearing Pharaoh's reaction – "I do not know YKVK" – Moshe understands his "mistake." He changes his style and declares: "The God of the Hebrews has appeared to us…" (verse 3). On this occasion, he makes no mention of the name YKVK (compare 3:18), and in light of the circumstances, the reason for this is clear. Attention should be paid to the difference between "God has appeared" [3:18] and "God has called" [5:3].

# Pharaoh does not accept this appeal either: "And the king of Egypt said: Why do MOSHE AND AHARON disturb the nation from their work?" (5:4). He does not accept them as representatives of the people, and therefore the emphasis is on MOSHE AND AHARON as disturbing the PEOPLE. Since he regards their message as one spoken by messengers of God, his reaction is directed accordingly. From verse 5 onwards we find, "And PHARAOH said," rather than "and the king of Egypt said;" later on, he also says, "Idle, you are idle; therefore you say: Let us go and offer sacrifices to YKVK" (ibid. 17). Pharaoh understands that he is up against "YKVK," rather than "the God of the Hebrews."

# When we arrive, in chapter 6, at the execution of the second mission, we are talking about a new mission. In this mission, Moshe is commanded to come to Pharaoh as a messenger of God, and to come into direct conflict with Pharaoh. Therefore, Moshe's renewed attempts at evasion are understandable. When Moshe, as representative of the nation, comes before the king of Egypt, he may be permitted to be "of uncircumcised lips;" however, when Moshe appears as messenger of God, he may no longer be "of uncircumcised lips." The point of this mission to Pharaoh is, "that Egypt may know that I am YKVK." From this perspective, this is the first time that Moshe and Aharon are meant to appear before Pharaoh. Therefore the Torah notes (7:7) their age at the time of their audience with him, for until now they have been commanded only to address "the king of Egypt."

# Similarly, we can understand why the signs are performed only at this seemingly late stage: because only in a mission that involves knowledge of YKVK is there a need for miraculous signs. The sign mentioned here – casting the staff before Pharaoh and seeing it turn into a "tanin" (serpent or crocodile), as opposed to the sign mentioned as being performed before Bnei Yisrael – where the staff turns into a snake – hints, inter alia, at the confrontation between YKVK and Pharaoh, concerning whom the prophet Yehezkel says (29:3), "The great 'tanin' crouching in the midst of his river, who says – The river is mine; I created it." (The second sign – leprosy – is not mentioned here since its significance is relevant only to Israel; it is connected to "lashon ha-ra." The third sign – the water turning to blood – becomes the first of the ten plagues.)

# Hence, from this point the aim is to inform Egypt that "I am YKVK," and when this becomes clear, the Egyptians will have to let the "first-born son" of YKVK go – otherwise Pharaoh's own first-born son will die. Indeed, this describes the development of the plagues, in accordance with the well-known groupings of R. Yehuda, and as discussed by many commentators.

# The first set – blood, frogs, lice – are sent "in order that you will know that there is none like the Lord our God:" i.e., the existence of Divine power. Indeed, during the plague of lice, Pharaoh's magicians admit, "It is the finger of God."

# The next set – wild beasts, plague, boils – are calculated to show that "I am God in the midst of the land." God's Providence "in the land" finds expression in the discrimination between Israel and Egypt: "And I shall set aside… the land of Goshen where My people dwells… in order that you may know that I am God in the midst of the land" (8:18, and see also 9:4).

# The final triad – hail, locusts, darkness – demonstrates God's comprehensive rule and Providence, not only over the nation of Israel, but over the entire world: "In order that you may know that there is none like Me IN ALL THE EARTH." For the first time, in the plague of hail Pharaoh commands that the cattle be gathered from the fields, and those who fear God's word do so. For the first time Pharaoh declares, "I have sinned this time; God is righteous, and I and my nation have done wrong" (see also 10:7 and 10:16-17).

# Attention should also be paid to the development from "Go, worship YKVK your God" (10:8) to "Go, worship YKVK" (verse 24 – with "your God" omitted). Once Pharaoh has been convinced that "I am YKVK," that "I am in the midst of the land" and that "there is none like Me in all the earth," God brings His final claim – "Israel is My first-born," leading to the death of the Egyptian first-born. Following this, Pharaoh arises and declares, "Go, worship YKVK as you have spoken."

# IN SUMMARY, what all of this means is that God wanted to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt by virtue of the promise made to Avraham (in the "covenant between the pieces"): "For your descendants shall be strangers… and the fourth generation shall return here… and thereafter they shall depart with great wealth." They are entitled to this by virtue of being descendants of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov – children of the family of Avraham the Hebrew. Therefore the God OF THE HEBREWS wants to take them out of Egypt. Hence the appeal to Pharaoh: "The God of the Hebrews has called upon us; now, let us go, we pray you." [Note that at the time of the "covenant between the pieces," Avraham was still named Avram, i.e. he was father to Aram but not yet to many nations.]

# However, God also wants to redeem Israel by virtue of their being His nation, for YKVK has chosen them to be His people: "And I shall take you to Me as a nation." This selection can be made by YKVK – the ultimate authority over everyone and everything; He may choose whichever group He desires. Hence the demand to Pharaoh: "YKVK" commands that Pharaoh let His first-born son go. Obviously, this demand, too, is connected to the forefathers, who represent the foundation of the nation of Israel – the basis for His selection. Indeed, at his circumcision (Bereishit 17), "Avram" becomes "Avraham" – "the father of many nations," and chosen by God "to be your God, and for your descendants after you." The root of the selection of Israel as God's people is revealed at the occasion of Avraham's circumcision: "We are your nation and You are our God."

# In light of this, we can understand the story of the circumcision of Moshe's son in the course of the journey to Egypt to fulfill his mission to Pharaoh (4:21-25). In the parasha where mention is made of "Israel is my first-born son," Israel is considered thus only through the fulfillment of the covenant of circumcision; it is unthinkable that Moshe could speak with Pharaoh about Israel as "My first-born son" while he himself is lacking in this regard. We also understand the location of this parasha prior to Moshe's descent to Egypt, even though the execution of the mission in this sense will take place only at a later stage. For if Moshe would have postponed the circumcision of his son, a situation would be created whereby Moshe would be in Egypt with an uncircumcised son. The circumcision of his son, then, is the reason for the need to make mention of the other dimension of the mission even before the actual descent to Egypt takes place.

# May it be the will of God that we witness the fulfillment of the promise, "As in the days of your Exodus from Egypt shall I show My wonders" – speedily in our days, Amen.