

Parshas Vaeira

WHY WAS PAROH SO RESILIENT?

Throughout the story of Egypt, we find that Paroh's heart is hardened, after which he resisted overtures to release the Jews. How could Paroh have his free will compromised?

The question of Paroh's free will is based on the presumption that Hashem hardened it – but this is not entirely accurate. The Seforno explains that there are two verbs used in relation to Paroh – כבד, heaviness, and חזק, strength. Being described as חזק, strong, is not a bad thing by any stretch! A careful reading will show that – for the first seven plagues – all uses of כבד are in reference to Paroh acting in such a way. Where Hashem is acting directly, there is only חיזוק – Hashem gave him the strength to continue – but why

To understand what the story is truly about, ask yourself, what was the point of it all? To obliterate the Egyptians? Or to extract the Jews? Both events happened, but lots of other things happened too. Miracles are always as simple as possible, so why the extravagance of plagues that didn't produce free Jews or defeated Egyptians? Why extend the Egyptian's suffering

Hashem is very clear why, but it slips right under the radar. Hashem explicitly states the purpose of what is to come to Moshe, foreshadowing the first plague

וְיָדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי ה', בְּנִטְוֵי אֶת-גְּדֵי עַל-מִצְרַיִם; וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִתּוֹכָם – Egypt will know that I am the Lord, when I stretch my my hand over Egypt, and extract the Jews from among them. (7: 17)

Hashem announces that this is about making something known. Consider that Hashem's power to this point was entirely unknown. What miracles had been performed that more than ten people saw? People knew about the God of their fathers, but there had never been "outstretched hand" type miracles in history – yet. Egypt – and the world – would know soon enough

This is why Paroh needed the חיזוק – he could not release the Jews because of the beating Egypt was taking; he could not give in for the wrong reasons. He needed חיזוק as he grew to understand the nature of what he was up against.

But after the 7th plague, the task is seemingly complete; Paroh concedes, completely:

יִשְׁלַח פְּרָעָה, וַיִּקְרָא לְמוֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם, חֲטָאתִי הַפָּעַם: הֵן, הִצַּדִּיקָהּ, וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי, הָרָשָׁעִים. הִעֲתִירוּ, אֵל-ה', וְרַב, מִהִית

קלת אלהים וברד ; ואשלחה אתכם , ולא תספון לעמד – Paroh sent for Moshe and Ahron, and said to them, “Now I have sinned. Hashem is righteous; my people and I are guilty. Beseech Hashem, and bring an end to this fiery hail; I will release you, you will be here no more...” (9: 27,28)

Egypt now knows, but the education is not complete. The subject changes subtly:

ולמען תספר באזני בנך ובן-בנך, את אשר התעללתי במצרים, ואת-אתתי, אשר-שמתי בם ; וידעתם, כי-אני ה – So that you tell over to your sons and daughters, how I toyed with Egypt, with my wonders that I placed in them, and you will know that I am the Lord. (10: 2)

Now it is about the Jews. The Jews needed to understand what Hashem would do for them. A generation of slaves could scarcely fathom what was taking place – see the troubles they gave Moshe even after all this – Hashem wanted to show His care to the Jews.

This is where stubbornness comes in. Once Paroh had conceded and submitted to God, he needed stubbornness to resist anew. This had nothing to do with his free will – Egypt’s understanding is not referred to again.

This is וְלַמְעַן תִּסְפַּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבֶן-בְּנֶךָ – for us to internalise how incredible the events were, how much Hashem did and does for us.

PRIORITIES

During the Exile in Babylon, three sages were condemned to be burnt to death because they refused to bow in submission to Nebuchadnezzar: Chananya, Misha’el, and Azaria.

Chazal understand that their knowledge and surety of self-sacrifice came from the plague of frogs, which resisted the natural instinct of self-preservation, and jumped into ovens and furnaces.

But what is the comparison drawn? Frogs were explicitly sent into Egyptian ovens:

וְשָׂרָץ הַיָּאֵר צָפְרָדַיִם וְעָלוּ וּבָאוּ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְחֹדֶר מְשֻׁכָּבְךָ וְעַל מִטְתְּךָ וּבְבֵית עַבְדְּךָ וּבְעַמֻּדָה וּבְמִשְׁאָרוֹתֶיךָ – The Nile will swarm with frogs; they will go up and come into your house, into your bedroom, upon your bed, into the house of your servants, into your people, into your ovens, and into your kneading troughs. (7: 28)

What conclusions could the sages have drawn? The frogs received specific instruction, and the sages did not. What then, did they learn from the frogs?

The command to jump into ovens was a general instruction to the species of frog that were to plague Egypt. However, each individual frog could have shirked the duty, relying on other frogs to live up to the expectations. No particular frog would then need to overcome the natural instinct to survive, and none would do so! And yet they did. This is what the Sages learnt from the frogs.

A great person does not shirk the opportunity or responsibility for self-sacrifice. On the contrary, greatness is precisely the opposite – taking advantage of such an opportunity. The quality of “self-sacrifice” doesn’t require literally putting your life at risk though. It’s as simple as putting other people and priorities first – sacrificing your sense of self.

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

When Moshe started out, things did not go how he thought they would. Paroh was more cruel than he had been before Moshe appeared on the scene. He lamented this to God:

וַיִּשָׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל-ה', וַיֹּאמֶר: אֲדֹנָי, לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה-לָּמָּה זֶה, שְׁלַחְתָּנִי. וַיִּמָּאֵז בְּאֵתֵי אֶל-פְּרַעֲהוּ, לְדַבֵּר בְּשִׁמְךָ, הֲרַע, לְעַם הַזֶּה; וְהַצֵּל לֹא-הָצִילָתָּ, אֶת-עַמְּךָ – Moshe replied to God, saying, “Master, why is more evil befalling this people; why have You sent me to do this? Since I came to Paroh to speak in Your name, he has been even worse to the people; and You have not saved them!” (5: 22, 23)

To which he receives the reply:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה; וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, אֲנִי ה'. וַאֲבְרָאָה, אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אֶל-יִצְחָק וְאֶל-יַעֲקֹב-בְּאֵל שְׂדֵי; וְשָׁמִי ה', לֹא נֹדַעְתִּי לָהֶם – God said to Moshe, “I am The Lord. I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov as The Almighty, but with my name “The Lord”, I was not know to them.” (6-1,2)

Moshe receives reassurances that God has heard the Jews cries of suffering and plans to act.

The use of different names means to say that the Patriarchs understood that God existed, and that He had expectations of mankind, which they tried to live out. But they did not know God's true name; or in other words, His abilities to help them. We do not find that the Torah records explicit miracles for them at any point – mankind had to reach out, and they were the first to do so. At no point in history yet had God directly interceded and interfered with the seemingly natural order of events for people. By revealing this to Moshe, everything was about to change.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin records that God gave Moshe examples of the challenges the Patriarchs faced, yet did not question G-d. When Avraham sought to bury Sarah, he could not bury her until he bought a plot of land for an extortionate price from Efron. Similarly, Yitzchak sought to use wells his father had dug, and was not allowed to until he paid off the people who had taken it. When Yakov was on the run, he had to pay people to pitch a tent in a field of theirs for the night.

The common thread is that they all got ripped off by people charging them for land they already owned.

These are the examples used of Moshe's ancestors not questioning the nature of God. But these seem like terrible examples of faith! Tell how Avraham, finally blessed with a child in old age, was requested to sacrifice his son and heir, and was willing to carry it out. Tell how Yitzchak wasn't told anything, yet did not question his father's motives, and instructed him to bind his hands so he would not resist. Tell how Yakov reacted to the incident with Yosef! The stories are all ordinary, mundane stories, about business disputes. Why are these selected as the paradigms of faith?

The Sefer haChinuch says that mankind should know, and internalise, that anything that happens to him, from good to bad, is intended to happen to him. Crucially, no human being can harm him without it being God's will. This is recorded in the laws pertaining to revenge.

What that means is that a person who works on themselves can understand that when they stub their toe on a table, it was “meant to be” and not get angry. But it seems quite different if your neighbour smashes your window!

It's relatively easier to accept that all things come from God when you're being contemplative. But when something happens involving a person exercising their free choice to harm you or your property, it doesn't look like the hand

of God so clearly any more.

That's precisely why these examples were selected.

When Avraham thinks his test is over, he gets home only to find his beloved wife has died of the news at where her husband had taken her son. Then, mourning, when he attempts to bury her, he gets ripped off by Efron. Yitzchak, thirsty, can't use wells his own father dug because a shepherd cartel see an opportunity to rip off a wealthy businessman. Yakov is on the run, and some people see fit to take advantage of him.

These mundane examples show how much faith they truly had. Under test conditions, it's fairly straightforward put on the best display of effort possible. But when the test is over, do we stand by it still? These examples proved that under everyday conditions, they had the same faith they showed in their big tests.

These were examples to tell Moshe to believe that everything was under control.

ALL ABOUT LEVI – WERE ALL THE JEWS ENSLAVED IN EGYPT?

Not all Jews were enslaved. When Paroh wants to be rid of Moshe and Ahron, leaders of Levi:

ויאמר אלהם מלך מצרים למה משה ואהרן תפריעו את העם ממעשיו לכו לסבלתיכם – The king of Egypt said to them, “Moshe and Aharon, why do you disturb the people from its work? Go to your own burdens”. (5: 4)

Rashi quotes a Midrash that the tribe of Levi were not enslaved, which was why they had their own burdens to go to.

Why were Levi exempt?

Ramban explains how every culture has elders and wise men to teach their respective laws. Paroh left Levi alone in order to allow them their role. R' Simcha Ziesel Broide notes that if Paroh could understand the importance of spiritual guides and scholars, it shouldn't be too hard for us.

Daas Zkeinim explains that the Egyptians slowly manipulated the Jews into working, rather than suddenly forcing them into slavery, which could provoke a revolution. The Jews who participated at first were then coerced to continue against their will. Yet the people from Levi, knowing that they were destined to serve Hashem, refused to compromise and cooperate. They did not participate on the first day, and never submitted.

Maharal notes that although Hashem told Avraham his descendants would be enslaved, Levi would not be included in the prophecy of slavery, as they are the “portion of Hashem,” dedicated to His service. Rabbeinu Bachye states that Levi was the “tithe” of the family.

Paroh was aware of the prophecy, and knew that the nation to enslave Avraham's offspring would be severely punished. He interpreted that if he were not to enslave the entire Jewish nation, he would be free of the ramifications. His mistake was that Levi are not counted among the rest of the Jews, meaning that he did in fact fulfil the terms of the prophesy, and was punished.

The Mishneh L'Melech proves that the people who had land in earned it through slavery in Egypt. Those without a portion need not be enslaved. Levi, who were in the service of all Jews, could not privately hold land, so experiencing

slavery would be pointless.

Maharil Diskin notes that the prophecy to Avraham was that the slavery would start when his offspring would be “strangers in a land not their own.” The land of Goshen, where the Jews in Egypt initially lived, was originally given to Sarah as a gift by Pharaoh. The Jews there could not be “strangers” in Goshen. When the Jews multiplied, and did not want to remain isolated in Goshen, they branched out into the rest of Egypt and became involved in their society. In leaving Goshen, they fulfilled their part of the prophecy for their own enslavement. Levi, however, stayed in Goshen.

The Maharil Diskin explains that the Zohar states that enslavement occurred only to those not already “enslaved”- to Torah. The Gemara in Sanhedrin says that every person was created to toil, work, and sweat. The Mishna in Avos says that “Whoever accepts the yoke of Torah, has the yoke of the government removed.” By toiling in Torah, it satisfies the requirement of effort. My Rebbe and Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Daniel Lehrfield says that proof of this is that Levi was not enslaved. Instead, they were able to study and teach the Torah they had from their fathers.

In a similar vein, Panim Yafos says that Levi learned Torah and kept the mitzvah of bris milah, whereas the rest of the Jewish nation did neither. Levi’s merits protected them.

Finally, the Maskil L’David learns that the people of Levi were not fully enslaved due to Pharaoh’s own daughter’s intervention. In raising Moshe as her own, Basya had an affinity towards him and asked of her father to exclude Moshe’s kin, Levi.

This is particularly fascinating for it implies that up until Basya took the initiative, Levi too was oppressed. The Maskil L’David explicitly writes that Levi was subjugated even after Basya’s intervention, the only difference being the intensity of the work. While the rest of the Jews worked unimaginably hard, Levi only had to perform regular labor.

This would answer a bothersome question. If Levi were not oppressed at all, on Pesach, why would Kohanim and Leviim sit and say, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt...”?

The simple explanation that one could say according to the opinions that Levi was truly exempt from all labor, is that since most of the Jews went through what they did, therefore the Jews as a whole (including Levi) need to recognize and relive this on the Seder night. Another possibility, as the Chasam Sofer writes, is that there were two exiles happening in Egypt. One was physical, the other was spiritual; Bnei Yisrael had reached the 49th level of spiritual impurity due to their Egyptian surroundings and influences. If so, we can suggest that even if Levi was not enslaved physically, they certainly could have been affected and “enslaved” by Pharaoh in the spiritual sense. This would explain why Kohanim and Leviim say “Avadim hayinu”; spiritual slaves.

According to the Maskil L’David, however, new light is shed on the matter. Levi too were physically enslaved to Pharaoh.

Even according to the other opinions, that Levi were truly free from enslavement, this does not imply that living in Egypt was a walk in the park for them. Although they may not have been enslaved or worked to death, their lives were still in danger. This is clear as we see that Moshe’s father, Amrom, went so far as to divorce his wife, because of the futility in childbirth due to the law that all male newborns be thrown into the Nile. Even after being convinced to take her back, after which they had their third child Moshe, there came a point when Yocheved could no longer hide Moshe. She was forced to abandon him on a little barge in the Nile. All this notwithstanding that their family was from Levi.

Furthermore, the Meshech Chochma proves that Moshe, concerned that the Jewish People would not believe his claims of imminent redemption, decided to bring his family to Egypt. If Levi were completely safe, what proof of divine agency would it be for Moshe to bring his family there?

Furthermore, Yalkut Shimoni says that when Aharon met Moshe on the latter's way down to Egypt, and saw him bringing his family, he said to him, "We are pained by the distress of those Jews already in Egypt, and you want to bring in more!?" Maharal points out that from this we see that clearly life was bitter for Levi as well.

After being bothered by this question of why Kohanim and Leviim say the Haggada, I was shown the Chida's commentary to the Haggada. כל המרבה לספר ביציאת יצרים הרי זה משובך – "All who speak plentifully of story of the exodus are praiseworthy". The Chida writes that "כל" – "All" includes Kohanim and Leviim . Further, כל has the same initials as כהן לוי. Even they shall speak of the exodus, despite their not being oppressed. The Chida explains that although they were not oppressed, they were not able to move freely through Egypt of their own volition; so they too were freed by Hashem. Secondly, had the Jews stayed in Egypt but one more second than they did, they would have sunk to unimaginable lows and impurity which would have effected even Levi (similar to the Chasam Sofer quoted above). They too need to recognize and praise Hashem for His salvation. In fact, the Chida writes that he told this over to a Gadol, who replied that he too had thought of this interpretation, and added that converts too are included in "All." It is for this reason that the next item in the Haggada is the story with R' Eliezer, R' Yehoshua, R' Elazar Ben Azaria, R' Akiva and R' Tarfon who sat in Bnei Brak telling over the story of the exodus all night long. Rabi Yehoshua was a Levi, Rabi Elazar Ben Azaria and Rabi Tarfon were Kohanim, and Rabi Akiva came from converts.

From a somewhat historical standpoint, R Yaakov Kaminetzky explains at length all these goings-on regarding Levi. It was all Yosef's doing. Yosef had a particular wisdom – that of how to stay alive spiritually in a foreign environment. He learned this from Yaakov, who in turn learned it from Shem and Ever in order to survive living with Lavan. This wisdom enabled Yosef to recognize that to insure the spiritual (not to mention physical) survival of the Jewish People, he needed to take measures to isolate and protect Levi. This was in order that they in particular would continue to grow in Hashem's service uninhibited by anything or anyone, to be a beacon and source of guidance to the rest of the nation. It was Yosef who established the law in Egypt that clergy were to be excluded from taxes and other governmental rules and regulations. Due to Yosef's foresight, Levi played the essential role in the Jewish People's survival.

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