

HOW DID PHARAOH DO IT?

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Duh!

(or, How could the Egyptians be so stupid!)

(14:5-8) "Pharaoh was told that the nation had fled? He said, 'What have we done that we have sent away Israel?' The hearts of Pharaoh and the people were transformed. He harnessed his chariot, assembled his army, and chased after the fleeing Jews..."

How did Pharaoh do it? In the aftermath of the ten plagues, how did Pharaoh convince his nation to collectively commit suicide? Taking the Torah literally, Pharaoh himself may have had no choice because G-d had hardened his heart; but what about his nation? Hadn't they suffered enough? Hadn't they all just returned from burying their dead? Didn't their empty cupboards, hungry children, grumbling bellies, denuded fields, empty stables, collapsed economy, remind them that they were defeated? They had gambled against the might of the Creator and had lost! Were they all idiots? Did they think that the past year of ever increasing punishment, devastation and pain had been nothing more than a bad dream?

And what about their moments of lucidity, recognition, acceptance, and even repentance? (8:15) "It is the finger of G-d?" (9:20) "Those among the servants of Pharaoh who feared G-d?" (9:27) I have sinned, G-d is righteous and I and my nation are evil." (10:7) "And the servants of Pharaoh said to him? Do you not yett know that Egypt is lost?" (10:16-17) "I have sinned against G-d? bear my sin just one more time?" (12:31-33) Rise up, go out from among my people? go serve G-d? and bless me as well? Egypt hastened to send them from the land? We are all dying!"

Is it possible that in just three days (See Rashi 14:2) the shock and trauma of the past year and its culminating Death Of The First Born had worn off? What possessed the Egyptians to rush heedlessly after their leader into certain disaster?

Furthermore, what happened at the Yam Suf (Red Sea)? The Egyptians descended upon the hapless nation and were stopped by a miraculous cloud through which they could not see or penetrate. Plunged into total darkness the Egyptians did not back down! According to the Mechilta (Rashi 14:20-21) the Egyptians unsuccessfully attempted to fire missiles, arrows and spears at the Jews but the cloud-wall could not be penetrated; yet, they did not turn back!

Furthermore, at some point the cloud cover lifted and the Egyptians saw the astounding spectacle

of Kriyas Yam Suf (Parting of the Sea). Instead of turning heel and fleeing in abject terror of G-d's incomprehensible might and power they entered between the walls of water! Why? What possible rational could there have been to force them into the gaping jaws of certain destruction and death? Only as their chariots got bogged down in the mud did the dire certainty of their situation become clear to them. (14:25) "I shall flee before Israel for G-d is waging war for them against Egypt!" Duh!

(14:30-31) "On that day G-d saved the Jews? They believed in G-d and His servant Moshe."

After Moshe accepted the mission of representing G-d to Pharaoh, the Torah testifies, (4:31) "And the people believed? and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves." From that moment and on, except in the aftermath of Moshe's first failed meeting with Pharaoh (5:20-21) neither the Jewish people nor their leaders said a word. It is assumed that with the advent of the Ten Plagues and the cessation of forced servitude their belief in Moshe's mission was confirmed. Every subsequent plague deepened their belief in G-d and strengthened their trust in Moshe.

In last week's Parsha (12:28), the Jews listened to Moshe's instructions and took the god of Egypt and tied it to their bedposts. The moment (it was Shabbos) revealed how far the nation had grown in their trust of G-d and Moshe and is forever memorialized as "Shabbos Hagadol - The Great Shabbos!"

After the last plague, the Bnai Yisroel followed Moshe into the desert with minimal provisions and nothing more than a promise of a homeland. The nation of men, women, and children trustingly walked into the harsh and hostile wilderness of Sinai. It was a moment of such absolute and wondrous trust in G-d and Moshe that Yirmiyah recorded G-d's love and appreciation. (2:2) "So did G-d say, I remember the kindness of your youth? Your following after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown."

Pharaoh caught up to the "escaping" Jews camped at the edge of the Sea of Reeds. The Jews heard the thundering approach of the world's most powerful army and they were understandably frightened. The Torah records (14:10) that they immediately "cried out to G-d." They then turned to Moshe and expressed their fears to him. Note! First they turned to G-d and then they turned to Moshe. Moshe told them, (14:13) "Do not fear! Stand fast and see G-d's power? you are to remain silent!" They remained silent! They listened to Moshe! They trusted G-d!

What an amazing transformation! After 210 years of supposed abandonment by their G-d, the nation of slaves trusted G-d and Moshe enough to put their lives and the lives of their families in life-threatening danger. Even more so, following Nachshon Ben Aminadav's courageous jump into the sea (Shemos Rabbah 21:9) they walked through the towering walls of water with the Egyptians giving chase!

Toward morning Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea and the walls of water came crashing down. In one awesomely frightening yet elating moment the Egypt of old ceased to exist. What a year of miraculous revelations could not accomplish the sea accomplished in moments. "And they believed in G-d and in Moshe His servant."

Why? What happened in that moment that had not been confirmed over and over again in the course of the preceding year? Why did it take Kriyas Yam Suf to convince the Jews to trust in G-d and Moshe and why weren't the Egyptians convinced of G-d's absolute mastery of the universe before their headlong plunge into suicide?

Rashi (14:5) records the Mechilta that says that the Egyptians irrationally ignored reality because they wanted their money back! For the sake of money they ignored the evidence of inevitable and unavoidable destruction. In Rabbi's Notebook B'shalach 2001 I elaborated on this theme and it is important that we remember the irrational lengths some will go when it comes to dollars and cents.

The year of plagues not only devastated the Egyptians and their economy, it also revealed the absolute falsity and impotence of their many deities. The gods to whom the Egyptians prayed were worthless in face of the Jewish G-d's overwhelming onslaught. However, at the beginning of the Parsha the Torah states (14:2) that the Jews camped "before Baal Tziphon". Rashi referenced the Mechilta that explains the significance of this landmark. "It alone remained of all the gods of Egypt so that the Egyptians would say that G-d could not vanquish him and that is why the Jews were now camped before it."

The Mechilta offered a rational for why the Egyptians ignored the evidence of a year in favor of a momentary aberration. Being that all the other gods had been destroyed it was a wonder why Baal Tziphon still stood. Therefore, the Egyptians concluded that the entire year had been a devious but masterful plan on the part of Baal Tziphon to bring the Jews and their G-d to a spectacular and surprised ending. The year long suffering had been a divine sting operation. The Jews would think that they had won; their false confidence would entice them into the desert; they would find themselves between a rock and a hard place; then Ball Tziphon would destroy them and their G-d forever!

I would like to suggest a third approach. In last week's Darash Moshe my Grandfather Zt'l explained that the month of Sivan (#3), the month of Matan Torah, should have been the 1st month of the calendar. Matan Torah was the single greatest moment in human history and it deserved to be remembered always as the beginning; yet, it is the month of Nissan, the month of the Exodus that was designated as month #1. My Grandfather explained that Nissan is #1 because it was the preparation for Matan Torah. Without Nissan and the miracles of the Exodus the Jews would have never been ready to accept G-d's Torah; therefore, Nissan was chosen to be "Rosh Chadashim ? the first of all months." (Following that reasoning, can you imagine how G-d considers the time and money we spend on giving our children a Torah education?) In essence, my Grandfather explained that the importance of Nissan is related to Matan Torah no different than the actual month in which the Torah was given.

What was so unique about Matan Torah? All the commentaries note that the uniqueness of Matan Torah in contrast to the origins of all other religions is its setting. All other viable religions say that

their religions began with a single person having a divine revelation. The Torah states that Judaism began when G-d revealed Himself to an entire nation. The national quality of Matan Torah sets it apart from all other religions and cogently argues its divine authenticity.

The same can be said about Kriyas Yam Suf. The year of plagues and miracles emphasized G-d's mastery over nature. It proved to each and every discerning person that G-d truly existed; however, each and every plague was experienced as individuals, families, and groups. None of the plagues involved a single spectacular showing of divine might and mastery in the presence of an assembly of millions. When something happens to individuals or smaller groups it allows for those who experienced it or those who heard about it to offer rational explanations for the otherwise miraculous. It allows for the miracle to be explained away along with the obvious proof of G-d's existence. Not so with Kriyas Yam Suf.

The Parting of the Sea, like Matan Torah, was performed before a multitude numbering close to 4.5 million. (3 million Jews, 1 million Eruv Rav -a mixed multitude of non-Jews inspired by the year of events to join the escaping Jews in their destiny- and the entire Egyptian Army.) It was the international, public, setting of the miracle that made it indisputably an act of G-d. Therefore, as the Pasuk in Uz Yashir states, (15:2) "This is my G-d?" (see Rashi) The Jews could point their finger at the moment and say, "Look, can you not see Him!"

Until Kriyas Yam Suf the Egyptians could rationalize away the inevitable conclusion. However, once they all witnessed the revealed might of the Creator, they had no choice but to proclaim, (14:25) "I shall flee before Israel for G-d is waging war for them against Egypt!" But for them it was a little too late.

The Jews on the other hand collectively experienced a moment in history that catapulted them beyond intellectual limitations and rationalizations. They looked at each other, they looked at their children, their children looked at them, and they proclaimed in unison, "We believe in G-d and in Moshe His servant!"

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.