

PHARAOH UNDERESTIMATED MOSHE'S EMPATHY FOR HIS BRETHREN

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vaera

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 665, Checking Out Families for Shidduchim. Good Shabbos!

Pharaoh Underestimated Moshe's Empathy For His Brethren

The parshiyos at the beginning of the book of Shemos all recount the terrible enslavement the Jewish people endured in Egypt. The enslavement was so intense that even when Moshe came to Klal Yisrael to announce their impending redemption, the pasuk [verse] informs us that "They were unable to listen to him out of shortness of spirit and hard work." [Shemos 6:9]

Rav Yonasan Eibeshutz [Tiferes Yonasan] asks why Pharaoh excused the entire Tribe of Levy from servitude. It seems uncharacteristic of the ruthless ruler to give such a dispensation. Rav Yonasan Eibeshutz answers that Pharaoh saw through his astrologers that the eventual redeemer of Israel would come from this tribe. Pharaoh reasoned that a person who was not part of the pain and suffering of the people would never be able to redeem them. Simply, he would not be able politically to rally the people behind him. The masses would discount his ability to lead them by virtue of the fact that he was not one with them during their time of suffering.

This indeed is how Rav Yonasan Eibeshutz interprets the above referenced pasuk. The people were not able to listen to Moshe because of the fact that they had experienced shortness of spirit and hard work - and he never had. Moshe lived in the lap of luxury. They were not ready to listen to him or to let him become their redeemer!

Pharaoh's logic seemed very reasonable. So where did he go wrong? His error was that he underestimated what the Torah highlights as the most prominent character trait of Moshe Rabbeinu. If we look back in Parshas Shemos, we notice that there is very little we are told about Moshe Rabbeinu before he became the leader. We are told "Vayigdal Moshe" [Moshe grew up], which Rashi says means he became prominent in Pharaoh's household - he became a prince. He could have stayed in the luxury of the palace and sufficed with saying a few chapters of Tehillim for his

brethren. But Moshe Rabbeinu went out. He went out to see what was happening with his brothers and he saw their suffering. He risked his life by killing the Egyptian, thereby taking part in the misery and the drama of his brethren's enslavement. He identified not only with the "macro" suffering of his brothers, but with that of each individual, as indicated by his rescue of the unfortunate Jew being beaten by the Egyptian. Even when two Jews were fighting, he came to the rescue of the victim, again demonstrating his attribute of empathy and association for the burden of his fellow man (noseh b'ol chaveiro). In Midyan, he again came to the rescue of Yisro's daughters because his personality could not tolerate oppression. Finally, we are told that he watered the flocks.

In all these descriptions, the Torah emphasizes over and over again that Moshe demonstrated the character trait that Pharaoh thought he would never have - the attribute of empathy for the suffering of others. Logically, Pharaoh was right, but he underestimated Moshe's strength of character that despite the fact that he was not part of the enslavement, he did feel the pain as acutely as anyone who experienced it personally.

Giving Pharaoh His Due Respect

The pasuk says, "And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded them regarding the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of Egypt" [Shemos 6:13]. Rashi comments that Moshe was commanded to deal respectfully with Pharaoh, by virtue of his role as King. We derive from here that we are obligated to give honor to monarchy (malchus). Even though Moshe was called upon to warn, threaten, and rebuke Pharaoh, he was commanded to deliver all of these messages with respect and honor.

There are some pasukim at the end of the parsha that seem very strange. At the conclusion of the plague of hail, Moshe tells Pharaoh, "When I leave the city, I shall spread out my hands to Hashem, the thunder will cease and the hail will no longer be, so that you shall know that the earth is Hashem's..." [Shemos 9:29]. Then the Torah says, "The flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stalk. And the wheat and the spelt were not struck; for they ripen later. (They were softer and did not break from the force of the hail's impact.)" [Shemos 9: 31-32]

The insertion of these pesukim is quite strange. In the middle of the dialogue between Moshe Rabbeinu and Pharaoh, Pharaoh says, "Stop this. I can't take it." Moshe agrees and tells Pharaoh what he would have to do to stop the plague. The narration should have continued directly with pasuk 33 - "And Moshe went out from Pharaoh, from the city, and he stretched out his hands to Hashem, the thunder and hail ceased and rain did not reach the earth." At this point, when the plague was over, perhaps it would be appropriate to give us the damage assessment documenting the fact that the barley and flax were damaged and the wheat and spelt were not. Why, however, is this damage assessment stuck right in the middle of the dialogue between Moshe and Pharaoh, regarding cessation of the plague?

The Ramban asks this question. The Ramban quotes an answer in the name of Rav Sadiah Gaon that

pasukim 31-32 are in fact not the Torah's narrative of damage assessment, but are a continuation of Moshe's words to Pharaoh. Rav Sadiah explains that Moshe was informing Pharaoh that although he would be able to stop the plague, he was not able to undo the damage that was already done. Moshe told Pharaoh that it was too late to do anything about the ruined barley and flax crops, but that he could still salvage the wheat and spelt crops.

The Ramban is not satisfied with Rav Saidah Gaon's interpretation. The Ramban gives his own interpretation. However, I saw a very interesting interpretation in the Sefer Kometz HaMincha from Rav Chanoch Ehrentroy. Pasukim 31-32 are indeed the words of Moshe Rabbeinu and part of the dialog with Pharaoh. But, unlike the approach of Rav Sadiah Gaon, they are not meant as a "damage report". Moshe was sending Pharaoh a message.

The Gemara says [Tanis 20a]: A person should rather be soft like a reed than stiff like a cedar tree. In terms of personality and behavior, a person should be flexible, bendable like the reed. He should not be inflexible like the cedar. Why? When there is a windstorm with hail and driving winds, a reed that is flexible will bend and survive. The cedar will either stand up to the wind or will break in half.

Moshe could have been rude and told the King of Egypt: "Wake up and smell the coffee, Pharaoh. You are doomed! Look where your obstinacy has gotten you. You have ruined the country. Everyone is suffering because of you. Don't be such a stubborn idiot! Listen to Hashem already!"

That is how he could have talked to Pharaoh. However, mindful of G-d's exhortation regarding Kavod Malchus [honor due the King], Moshe delivered his message in a much more gentle fashion. Moshe politely told Pharaoh to look out his window and consider how the respective crops fared during the storm of hail. The flax and barley were broken because they were too inflexible. That is what happens when something is inflexible. The wheat and spelt on the other hand were flexible and they survived. The message was the same, but it was delivered in a more subtle fashion, out of respect for the monarchy. V'hamayven yavin. [And the one who understands will understand.]

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Va'eyra are provided below:

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