

THE RESUME OF MOSHE RABBEINU

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vaera

The Resume Of Moshe Rabbeinu

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #885 Davening Out Loud - A Good Idea? Good Shabbos!

The Parshiyos we are currently studying serve as Moshe Rabbeinu's introduction to Klal Yisrael. The narratives covered in these weekly Torah readings illuminate for us the attributes the Jewish people seek in choosing their leaders.

In describing the events of Moshe's early life, the Torah seems to be trying to make the case that Moshe is fit for his future position of leadership in the Jewish nation. Yet scant few "bullets" in Moshe's resume shed light on his qualifications for the job. Remember, when Moshe appeared before Pharaoh at the start of his mission of redemption, he was 80 years old! What kind of resume did he build during those first 80 years that would qualify him for becoming the chosen person to lead the Jewish people?

Rav Simcha Zissel (the 'Alter') from Kelm spends many chapters of his sefer discussing this idea. The Alter makes an elaborate case that we really only see one thing about Moshe Rabbeinu that qualified him for the job. There is one theme and quality, which begins in Parshas Shmos and continues in Parshas Vaera, which shows us why Moshe Rabbeinu was worthy of being chosen for this position. This quality is being "nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro" - the capacity that Moshe Rabbeinu had to feel the pain of his fellow Jew.

Rav Simcha Zissel documents this for us: We read in last week's parsha "...and he went out to his brethren and he saw their suffering..." [Shmos 2:11]. Moshe Rabbeinu was a prince. He was almost like a grandson of Pharaoh. He could have remained in the lap of luxury and done nothing. However, our Rabbis say, commenting on the above quoted pasuk, "He focused his eyes and heart to be distressed over them. He said 'I wish I could be in your place.'"

Moshe saw the Egyptian beating up the Jew. Moshe saved the Jew from the hand of the Egyptian. Is

that not a case of "nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro"? Again, the next day, when it was not a case of an Egyptian against a Jew but of Jew against Jew, what does Moshe Rabbeinu do? He does the same thing: Nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro. It costs him his entire secure position in the palace of Pharaoh. He becomes a fugitive of justice and must run away for his life from Egypt.

Then when Moshe went to Midyan, and he might have already 'learned his lesson' to keep himself out of other people's fights, he sees that the daughters of Midyan are being harassed and again he sticks up for the underdog and jumps in to save them.

Moshe bears the burden of his fellow man's suffering. This and this alone is the primary quality that Moshe possessed, which qualified him for the job of Jewish leadership. His resume contained the fact that he was a "nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro".

Rav Yonosan Eibeshutz, in his sefer Tiferes Yonosan, uses this idea to explain why Pharaoh excused the entire Tribe of Levi from the Egyptian bondage. According to our Rabbis, the Tribe of Levi was not enslaved the entire time of our sojourn in Egypt. Rav Eibeshutz offers an interesting theory why Pharaoh did this. He says that Pharaoh saw through his astrologers that the eventual savior of the Jewish people would be a descendant of the Tribe of Levi. Pharaoh figured, and shrewdly so, that a person who was never enslaved in the first place would not be the leader of a rebellion. How can a person who was not a victim of oppression turn around and take the oppressed class out of slavery? He never felt the pain so he would not risk his status quo to attempt to lead a revolt to overthrow the current situation.

It was a brilliant plan. Pharaoh was willing to give up the labor of the Tribe of Levi as a means of stifling the ability of any Levite to aspire to become the savior of his people! Even the Jewish people themselves were skeptical of Moshe's ability to lead them out of slavery, due to his lack of familiarity with their situation. "...And they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of wind and hard work." [Shmos 6:9]

Pharaoh underestimated the Tribe of Levi. He failed to realize that the Tribe of Levi in general and Moshe Rabbeinu in particular had an unbelievable ability to empathize with their fellow man. In spite of the fact that they were not the victims of the slavery, they had this capacity of putting themselves in someone else's shoes as if they themselves were the victim.

The Shaloh HaKadosh points out an anomaly in the Torah's pasukim [Shmos 6:14-19]: When the Torah introduces us to and tells us the genealogy of Moshe Rabbeinu, it begins with the Tribe of Reuven and lists the sons of Reuven. It then goes lists the sons of Shimon. There is similar syntax in both cases: "The sons of Reuven..." "And the sons of Shimeon..." We would expect to next find a parallel listing of Moshe Rabbeinu's tribe, beginning with the words "And the sons of Levi..." Instead, the Torah says, "And these ARE THE NAMES OF THE SONS OF LEVI..."

The Shaloh says an amazing idea. Levi prophetically realized that his sons and grandsons were not going to be victims of the enslavement in Egypt. He did not want them to forget about their cousins

who were slaves. Therefore, he took pains to name each of his sons with a name somehow connoting the enslavement in Egypt. Kehas (meaning dark) connotes the fact that "they blackened their teeth with the suffering of the enslavement." Merari (coming from the word Mar) connotes that they made their lives bitter. Gershon (coming from the word Ger) connotes being temporary sojourners in this land of our exile. Levi anticipated what was coming and he took pains to imbue in his children the sense of kinship and empathy with other members of the family. Levi wanted to ensure that his descendants would not be able to sleep well at night - even if they were not enslaved - as long as another member of the family was in pain.

Moshe Rabbeinu in particular possessed this attribute. He was the prime example of this capacity to be nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro.

Rav Simcha Zissel explains that Moshe Rabbeinu's statement at the end of last week's parsha "My Lord, why have You harmed this people, why have you sent me?" [Shmos 5:22] was a worse sin than what he did at Mei Meriva (when he hit the rock). Imagine the audacity to lecture the Almighty, as it were! The Medrash, in fact, states that at this very moment, the Attribute of Justice wanted to smite Moshe. However, G-d responded, "Leave him alone, he speaks this way only out of a sense of honor for the Jewish people."

Rav Matisyahu Solomon explains the Medrash: "Why did the Almighty say 'Let him be'? It was because it was not Moshe Rabbeinu talking. It was Klal Yisrael talking." Moshe Rabbeinu was so fused with the needs and suffering of the Jewish people, it was as if the Jewish people were talking through the voice box of Moshe. This expression of "Why have You harmed this people?" is what the people felt. Moshe Rabbeinu, as it were, was like a puppet who mouthed the words the people were feeling. For such speech, the Almighty said, one cannot be held accountable. The people could not be held accountable for such speech because "a person is not held accountable for what he says in his moment of anguish."

This then was the resume of Moshe Rabbeinu. He qualified for Jewish leadership because he had the preeminent quality required of a Jewish leader - the ability to empathize with the suffering of the Jewish people.

The Unique Lesson of the Plague of Frogs

The Kli Yakar makes an interesting inference in this week's parsha. After the conclusion of the Plague of Frogs, the Torah states: "...and the frogs died - from the houses, from the courtyards, and from the fields. They heaped them up into many piles, and the land became foul. Pharaoh saw that there had been a relief, and kept hardening his heart. He did not listen to them, as Hashem had spoken." [Shmos 8:9-11]

The Kli Yakar asks: Why is it only by the plague of Frogs that we have the expression "Pharaoh saw that there had been a relief" (vayaar Pharaoh ki haysa harvacha)? By definition, this was true of all the plagues - first there was the plague (be it blood, frogs, lice, etc.) and then the plague stopped and there was relief. What is unique here about Frogs that the Torah needs to call to our attention that Pharaoh took note of the fact that it let up?

The Kli Yakar makes an interesting point. With every other plague, when it was over it was over. When it stopped hailing, it stopped hailing. When the plague of Darkness finished, it was light outside. With the Frogs, there was a unique situation. Even after the frogs finally died, the Egyptians now had billions and billions of frogs sitting, rotting, and reeking. The Torah testifies to the fact that the land stank! Thus, even when it was "over", it was not really over! However the pasuk says that Pharaoh saw that there was some "harvacha" (literally "wide open spaces", the simple interpretation however is that the word in this context means "relief").

The Kli Yakar explains that if one has a large enough territory, one can escape the smell. It is only in a confined area that a foul odor is so offensive. The wider the area, the more the smell will dissipate. Therefore, the pasuk states that when Pharaoh saw that there was "harvacha" -- i.e. - wide open spaces in Egypt that he could escape to where it did not smell so bad -- his heart was hardened as before.

The lesson, says the Kli Yakar, is that as soon as Pharaoh saw there was the slightest let up, he felt "now I can go back to my old ways". With the other plagues, it is simple that this is what happened. When the hail stopped, Pharaoh went back to being the wicked Pharaoh. However, over here, one would have thought that it never really stopped and the aftermath should still give him pause from his evil ways. No! As long as he found a little wiggle room - of "harvacha" in the wide open spaces of Egypt - he immediately went back to being the old Pharaoh.

What is the lesson for us? This is the way we all are. When Heaven forbid we are confronted with trials and tribulations, we daven better, we act better, and we do all the things we are supposed to be doing. Then as soon as there is somewhat of a letup - "Okay, it's not so serious, we can go back to the way we were." Such is human nature. As soon as the pressure is off, we revert to our old patterns.

Pharaoh should remind us of this lesson: "And he saw that there was relief". Our challenge is that if we know how to daven properly "when things are bad" then how much more so we should be davening like that when things are good!

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 Vaera are provided below:

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