

# PARSHAS VAERA

*by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff*

*Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Vaera, 5635*

The Sfas Emes begins by quoting a Medrash (Medrash Rabba, Shemos, 9:3). That Medrash, in turn, refers us to a Mishna in Berachos (5:1): "Ein omdim lehispalet elah mitoch coved rosh." ("One should not begin to daven unless he/she is in a proper -- i.e., serious, sober -- frame of mind.")

Because a proper frame of mind is so essential for davening, the Mishna continues: "... A person may not interrupt his davening -- even if a serpent has coiled itself around his heel." Scorpions, however, are more dangerous than serpents. Thus, the Gemara states (Berachos 32b) that if a scorpion is targeting a person while he is davening, the person may interrupt his prayer to take appropriate measures.

The Sfas Emes comments that "nir'eh" ( "apparently "), the reason for our ancestors' descent to Egypt was to prepare them for living (afterwards) in Eretz Yisroel. In support of this interpretation, the Sfas Emes notes that when the Medrash (Parshas Shemos) lists the gifts from HaShem for whose acquisition, suffering was necessary, it includes Eretz Yisroel.

How did our experience in Egypt prepare us to live in Eretz Yisroel? The Sfas Emes's answer to this question may initially mystify us even more. He cites two maxims of Chazal, both of which seem -- even at second sight -- to be totally irrelevant to the present discussion. Thus: "Only He who has triumphed over the serpent shall marry the king's daughter." And: 'Not everyone who deems himself worthy is, in fact, worthy.'

A fair question at this point is: what is going on here?

We start by noting the following: First, the "serpent" to which the Medrash refers is the power of sexuality and its potential for abuse. The Sfas Emes makes this connection clear by an allusion to the "serpent" who got Ahdam and Chava into trouble in Gan Eden. Second, Egypt was well known as a place where promiscuous behavior was the norm. (See, e.g., Yechezkel, 23:20.) Hence, Egypt was, so to speak, the ideal training ground for experience in learning how to deal with that "serpent."

Why did Bnai Yisroel need that special training? Because Eretz Kena'an, the land to which they were going, is also a place in which the "serpent" is unusually strong.. Thus the Zohar even refers to 'Kena'an ' as a "serpent." The Zohar is especially concerned with our limited capacity to handle the 'serpent's' seductive power.

This concern shows itself in an unexpected way. At one point (Shemos, 6, 4 ), the Torah refers to Eretz Yisroel as "eret megureihem". The pshat poshut -- the simple meaning -- of this phrase is ; "the land in which they -- -the Patriarchs -- had sojourned.. " By contrast, the Sfas Emes reads the word 'megureihem ' as coming from the root g'u'r -- 'to fear; to be in awe'. This reading sees Eretz Yisroel as "the land of heightened awe of HaShem".

The Sfas Emes continues, telling us that the reason HaShem and our ancestors wanted us to be in Eretz Yisroel was that we accept HaShem's kingship there. Why so? I suggest the following answer. Chazal tell us that "kohl hagadol meichaveiro ... " ("The temptation to sin is greater for a person who is on a higher level of spirituality than for a person on a lower level of spirituality.") Apparently, a similar relationship prevails geographically. That is, Eretz Yisroel is a place where higher levels of kedusha, (sanctity) are feasible. Likewise, it presents a heightened susceptibility to go in the opposite direction. Hence, the need for an "immunization" process in Egypt.

Because Eretz Yisroel is a place of intense spirituality, its special benefits accrue only to people who are on a high madreiga (spiritual level). With this perspective in mind, we can now understand the relevance of the two maxims that the Sfas Emes cited above. Yes: 'Only he who has triumphed over the serpent shall marry the king's daughter.' And since living in Eretz Yisroel is a spiritual privilege, we know why: 'Not everyone who deems himself worthy is, in fact, worthy.' Basically, these two maxims encapsulate most of this whole ma'amar. We can be grateful to the Sfas Emes for taking the trouble of filling in the blank spaces.

Further, just as this logic was in operation at the national level, so, too, at the individual level. Clearly, we cannot do a good job of accepting HaShem's kingship if our minds are full of the "machshovos zoros" (alien thoughts) placed there by the "serpent". Therefore, to free our minds from such distractions, Chazal designed our Siddur to focus on our liberation from Egypt immediately preceding our core prayer, Shemoneh Esrei.

Good! Thanks to the Sfas Emes, we now have a better understanding of the role of the "serpent" -- and measures to deal with him -- both at the individual and at the national levels. What can we say about the 'scorpion'? We badly need help in understanding the 'scorpion', for, as we saw earlier, the 'scorpion' is even more dangerous than the 'serpent'.

(Before proceeding further, note some essential background information. A serpent's bite inflames the victim's body, and gives him high fever. By contrast, a scorpion's sting chills the victim, lowering his temperature. I suggest that the Sfas Emes had these basic facts in mind when he discussed the features of these two deadly creatures)

The Sfas Emes confronts the challenge of explanation head on. He does so by telling us that the "serpent" seeks to entice us to aveiros done with heat,. Presumably what the Sfas Emes has in mind here are aveiros of passion or of anger. By contrast, the Sfas Emes says, the 'scorpion' reflects mitzvos (!) done with "kerirus" -- i.e., coldly. I say mitzvos" because the Sfas Emes immediately refers

to "Amaleik, asher karcha ..." (homiletically, "who cooled you off..."). The problem with Amaleik is not that he entices us to do aveiros coolly, but rather, that he gets us to do mitzvos coolly. (How does Amaleik achieve this goal? Part of the story is reflected in a gematria: Amaleik == safeik (doubt).

The Sfas Emes states unambiguously that such "cool" behavior is "much worse" ("garu'a beyoseir") than the aveiros done with heat. In fact, the Sfas Emes says, our descent to Egypt was in order to enable us to escape. Escape from what? Escape from the 'coolness' with which Lavan -- like his colleagues Bil'am and Amaleik -- was trying to destroy us. Note: to view our enslavement in Egypt as an escape from an even greater catastrophe shows how ghastly is the state of kerirus.

And to make to make things even worse, we have no remedy for the spiritual sickness of kerirus. Indeed, the Sfas Emes concludes that we may not be able to treat this moral ailment until HaShem's name is complete; that is, until the coming of Moshiach.

In discussing the problem of kerirus, the Sfas Emes notes two features -- ahtzvus and ahtzlus. That is : depression and the closely related, lassitude ( inability to take initiative). The Sfas Emes does not mention a feature of kerirus that is very prominent today -- a desire to be "laid back" and "cool", i.e., emotionally and intellectually disengaged.

The reason for the Sfas Emes's omission of this feature may be simple. The ultimate in being "cool" and "laid back" is a corpse on a slab of ice in the dark of a municipal morgue. Consider the alternative option: a life lit with the light of mitzvos and warmed by the warmth of Torah. We now know a possible reason why the Sfas Emes did not mention the desire to be 'cool'. Because he thought that was not a option for any intelligent person.

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