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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Vaeira

The Hand That Smites - Caressees

Flawlessly Reinstating the Spirituality of the Past

The *Torah* tells us that when *Moshe* returned to Egypt after G-d had commanded him to do so, he had not yet circumcised his youngest son. The *Torah* states, "It was on the way, in the lodging, that *Hashem* encountered him (*Moshe*) and sought to kill him." *Rashi* cites the *Gemara* in Tractate Nidarim that at the lodging place, *Moshe* was swallowed by a serpent first from his feet to his waist and then from his head to his waist.

When *Tzipporah* his wife saw this, she realized that the reason *Moshe* was vulnerable at that moment to be killed, was because he had not yet circumcised his son. She immediately took a rock and circumcised him. She then threw the foreskin before the snake and it retreated. Why had *Moshe* not circumcised his son?

Rashi cites the *Midrash* that explains, *Moshe* did not circumcise his son before he left *Midian* for Egypt because he was obligated to leave immediately to go

to Egypt to be the Redeemer. However, when they had reached their lodging location, rather than circumcising his son immediately, *Moshe* first attended to the family's lodging needs before circumcising his son. Thus, it was delayed for a moment. By giving priority to his lodging needs before the circumcision of his son, it caused him to be vulnerable to be killed. It was only due to his wife's intervention that he was not killed.

There is a positive commandment for a father to circumcise his son on the eighth day after his birth. If the father does not fulfill his obligation, he is not subject to the death penalty, because he had only violated a positive commandment. If so, why was *Moshe* subject to death for delaying the circumcision of his son?

In addition, *Chazal* tell us that *Moshe* was the only one qualified to be the redeemer of the Jewish people. Had *Moshe* been killed for hesitating to circumcise his son, the redemption of the Jewish people would not have taken place. Consequently, Jewish people

would not have come to Sinai to fulfill the objective of Creation, which is the receiving of the *Torah*. If so, why was *Moshe's* delay considered to be such a serious infraction that he deserved to die?

The *Midrash* states, "The Prophet says, 'They (the Jewish People) betrayed G-d and they fathered children who were alien to their heritage. Because of this, they will be consumed by 'chodesh.' They bore children and did not circumcise them. We learn from this that when *Yosef* passed away, the Jewish people nullified the mitzvah of circumcision. They said, 'We shall be like the Egyptians.' When G-d saw that they no longer wanted to identify themselves with Him, by nullifying the sign of the covenant, He nullified the love that the Egyptians had for the Jewish people. As it states, 'He changed their heart to despise His people...' Now they will be consumed by 'chadash.' As it states, 'A new king (*melech chadash*) arose over Egypt.' (Without vowels the word *chodesh* is read *chadash* 'new') The king that had arisen enacted new decrees to embitter their lives through the bondage."

Chazal tell us that the suspension of the *mitzvah* of circumcision precipitated the bondage and suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt. Since *Moshe* was chosen by G-d to be the Redeemer, who was to take them out of the bondage that had only come upon them due to their rejection of the covenant, which was circumcision, if he were to have any degree of deficiency in the performance of the *mitzvah* of circumcision, he would no longer qualify to be the redeemer. Thus, when *Moshe* tarried he became vulnerable to death due to the slight delay of the circumcision of his son.

Chofetz Chaim in the introduction of his work on forbidden speech cites the *Gemara* in Tractate *Yomah*, which states that the Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred among the Jews. He explains in the name of the commentators that in order to restore the Temple in our day, we must correct what was the cause of the Second Temple, which was baseless hatred. If baseless hatred was able to destroy the Temple which existed, there is no question that in order to reinstate it, the transgression of baseless hatred must be perfectly corrected.

It is not sufficient to make a semi-correction, but rather it must be a perfectly and fully corrected. We draw this from *Moshe*, the Redeemer of Israel. Although he was going to circumcise his son; nevertheless, for the

slightest delay (in this context) it was sufficient to put his life in jeopardy. Consequently, the Jewish people would have not been redeemed from Egypt. Thus, in order to reinstate the Temple, the Jewish people must totally eliminate baseless hatred among themselves, without any degree of deficiency.

Free Choice, Seeing G-d's Hand in Existence

The *Torah* describes in detail the dialogue that took place between G-d and *Moshe* at the burning bush. G-d said to *Moshe* that he was chosen to be the Redeemer of Israel. *Moshe* continuously tried to extricate himself from this task for many reasons. G-d responded to every one of his issues, thus finalizing that *Moshe* was qualified to be the Redeemer. One of *Moshe's* responses to G-d was, "Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words, not since yesterday, nor since the day before yesterday, nor since You first spoke to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech." G-d responded, "Who makes a mouth for man, or who makes one dumb or deaf...Is it not I, *Hashem*? So now go! I shall be with your mouth and teach you what you should say."

If *Moshe* was hesitant to accept to be the Redeemer because he did not want to offend his older brother Aaron, then it would have been a more rational response than the one that he had said to G-d. When *Moshe* experienced prophecy, he understood that there was nothing beyond G-d's abilities. If G-d, the One who is the Creator endowed man with all of his faculties and continuously wills existence said to *Moshe* that he would be the Redeemer, it is implicit within that directive that he would be able to speak. Seemingly, *Moshe's* response to G-d that he was not qualified due to his speech impediment is not only not rational, it is an affront to G-d.

Ramban explains that until G-d brought the ten plagues upon Egypt, His Presence in existence was within the context of nature, which is a concealed miracle. The plagues that came upon Egypt, on the other hand were all revealed miracles. G-d chooses to interact with existence in a concealed manner in order to maintain man's power of free choice. If G-d's Presence would be obvious in existence to a point that His relevance to creation would be undeniable, man would no longer have a choice to sin. G-d therefore, cloaks His Presence in nature.

At the time of the burning bush, *Moshe* was not aware that G-d had decided to reveal to the world in the most obvious manner that He is the One Who wills all aspects of existence. His Omnipotence could no longer be denied by mankind. When *Moshe* was told that he would be the Redeemer and would need to go to speak to Pharaoh, *Moshe* believed that G-d's Presence would continue to be concealed in nature in such a manner that man could choose to deny His existence.

The *Midrash* tells us that as a child in the house of Pharaoh, *Moshe* acquired his speech impediment as a result of a test that was presented to him by Bilaam, one of the advisors of Pharaoh. It was a test that involved hot coals. *Moshe* had taken the glowing coals as a young child and put them to his lips, resulting in severe burns and a serious speech impediment.

Moshe believed that if he were to appear before Pharaoh to address him as the Redeemer of Israel it must be in the most articulate and eloquent manner. If that would be so, it would be the equivalent of a revealed miracle. *Moshe*, understanding this, believed that this would be a reason to disqualify him to be the Redeemer. G-d responded to *Moshe* that he would be able to speak without difficulty. Meaning, going forward, G-d's manner of involvement in existence would no longer be on a concealed level but also it would be on an obvious and revealed level. The reason for this was to convince Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Jewish people that He is the Omnipotent Being in order to bring about the redemption. G-d thus reestablished His Presence in existence as the Omnipotent One who continuously wills all aspects of creation.

The Spiritualization of the Mind & Heart

The *Torah* tells us that after *Moshe* had informed the Jewish people that he would be the Redeemer who would take them out of Egypt, Pharaoh decreed that bondage should be intensified. He withdrew the straw subsidy that was being provided by the government. However, the quota of bricks that was produced by the Jewish people was not lessened. The bondage thus became overbearing.

After *Moshe* had seen that his presence in Egypt as the Redeemer had caused the bondage to intensify rather than being lessened, he said to G-d, "My L-rd, Why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me?..." G-d said to *Moshe*, "Now you will see what

I shall do to Pharaoh, for through a strong hand will he send them out..." G-d then commanded *Moshe* to go before the Jewish people and present them with the four expressions of redemption through which they would be extricated from bondage.

The *Torah* states, "Say to the Children of Israel: 'I am *Hashem*, and I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I shall be a G-d to you..." The *Torah* continues, "So *Moshe* spoke accordingly to the Children of Israel, but they did not listen to *Moshe* because of shortness of wind (*kotzeir ruach*) and hard work." Although *Moshe* had proven to the Jewish people through revealed miracles that he was truly the Redeemer, G-d's agent, to take them out of Egypt, they nevertheless did not have the capacity to internalize his words because they were overwhelmed with the quotas that were demanded of them by their taskmasters.

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains the term "*kotzeir ruach*" to mean "of limited capacity." He writes, "Since the Jewish people in Egypt did not engage in *Torah* study (except for the Tribe of *Levy*) they were limited in spirit. It is the *Torah* that broadens the heart of man." Although the Jewish people fully comprehended what *Moshe* had told them regarding their redemption; however, because they did not engage in *Torah* study, they did not have the broadness and depth of heart to internalize the value of what was at hand.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Taanis* states that if one sees a *Torah* sage reacting with anger when the *Torah* is being violated, he should be given the benefit of the doubt because it is the *Torah* that is "burning within him" that causes him to react. As the verse states, "My (G-d's) words (*Torah*) are like fire." *Rashi*, in his commentary, explains that because of the dimension of his *Torah* study, the *Torah* sage has a broadness of heart. He possesses a depth of understanding and sensitivity to fully appreciate the seriousness of what is being transgressed. This is the basis for his reaction. Therefore, one should not regard the *Torah* sage negatively when he reacts in this extreme manner. In contrast, one who does not engage in *Torah* study, his level of understanding is limited to the intellect. This individual cannot appreciate the seriousness and ramifications of the transgression.

The *Torah* states in the Shema, “You shall love *Hashem*, your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources. Let these matters that I command you today be upon your heart. Teach them thoroughly to your children (your students)...” The Duties of the Heart explains the verse to mean, that in order for one to be able to come upon the various levels of loving G-d with all of one’s heart, soul, and resources one must engage in *Torah* study.

It is the study of *Torah* that will spiritualize his mind, emotion, and being. As a result, he will have the capacity to have an appreciation for G-d, which will consequently bring about a level of love that one is willing to sacrifice his life and all that he has on behalf of G-d. The prerequisite for loving G-d is the study of *Torah*. One’s degree of love for G-d depends on the quality and level of dedication of one’s *Torah* study. Love is an emotion and not an intellectual understanding which is abstract. If one has sufficient love for G-d, one will be willing to sacrifice for Him, even on the most serious level.

We recite every day in the *Uva l’Tzion* prayer, “May He open our heart through His *Torah* and imbue our heart with love and awe of Him...” Again, we see that it is only through the study of *Torah* that one can internalize G-d’s specialness and have an appreciation of who He is. However, without the study the *Torah*, G-d is only something that is abstract, that cannot be understood or appreciated to have a sense of love.

Pharaoh’s Denial of the Obvious Truth

The *Torah* tells us that G-d told *Moshe* to go before Pharaoh and forewarn him that if he does not allow the Jewish people to leave Egypt, the Nile will be turned to blood. The *Torah* states regarding the first plague of blood, “So says G-d, ‘Through this you shall know that I am *Hashem*; behold with the staff that is in my hand I shall strike the waters that are in the River, and they shall change to blood. The fish-life that is in the water shall die and the River shall become foul (from the stench of the dead fish). Egypt will grow weary of trying to drink water from the River (no water will remain potable).”

The plague manifested itself exactly as *Moshe* had forewarned Pharaoh. The *Torah* tells us that the Nile turned to blood and the fish died. The *Torah* continues, “The necromancers of Egypt did the same by means

of their incantations; so Pharaoh’s heart was strong...” The sorcerers of Egypt transformed water into blood through their witchcraft and thus Pharaoh was not moved or affected in any way by the plague of blood because he attributed it to witchcraft. His heart was thus hardened and he did not heed the words of *Moshe* to send out the Jewish people from Egypt.

The *Torah* mentions two times that after the Nile would be turned to blood, the fish would die. This fact seems to be superfluous. If factually the Nile would be turned to blood, it is obvious that the fish would die. Why then was it necessary for the *Torah* to mention this fact? *Sforno* explains that witchcraft cannot change the essence of whatever it may be affecting. Therefore, if water is transformed into blood through witchcraft, although the water appears to be blood in all of its aspects (such as color, texture, and viscosity) the chemical makeup would remain the same. It would retain all the properties of water.

However, when G-d deems that water should be changed to blood, it is not only transformed in its appearance, its entire essence becomes blood. When *Moshe* communicated the coming plague to Pharaoh, in order to qualify it as an act of G-d the Creator, he needed to interject the fact that the fish would die in the Nile. When the plague actually took place, the *Torah* tells us that the fish died. Pharaoh, being the greatest sorcerer in Egypt understood that the plague of blood was not witchcraft. If so, why was he not impressed by the blatant difference between the water that was transformed by his sorcerers and the plague of blood that G-d brought about?

Chazal tell us that Pharaoh deified himself and thus made himself appear to the Egyptian people that he did not need to do bodily functions as an ordinary human being. Through his advanced and superior knowledge of sorcery, Pharaoh was able to conceal himself from everyone (including other sorcerers) when he needed to go to the Nile and do his bodily functions. Only *Moshe* was able to locate him at the Nile at that particular moment.

When *Moshe* located him, Pharaoh was amazed at *Moshe*’s ability and thus understood that there was nothing beyond his reach. If this was Pharaoh’s dimension of sorcery, how could he choose to ignore the plague of blood and not be moved by the fact that it was an act of G-d and not sorcery.

The *Torah* states at the time of the plague of lice, “The sorcerers did the same with their incantations to draw forth the lice, but they could not...The sorcerers said to Pharaoh, ‘It is the finger of G-d!’ but Pharaoh’s heart was strong and he did not heed them...” *Chazal* tell us that witchcraft cannot affect something that is less than a size of a lentil. Thus, the plague of lice could not be replicated through sorcery. Despite this compelling reality, Pharaoh chose to ignore the blatant truth.

The *Torah* tells us that after the miracle of the splitting of the Sea and the Egyptian armies were destroyed after it closed upon them, *Moshe* sang the song by the sea for the Jewish people. He articulated in this song how the nations of the world stood in awe and trembled by the miracles that G-d had performed on behalf of the Jewish people. The world had openly witnessed the Hand of G-d protecting the Jewish people as His own.

Nevertheless, a wandering people who did not fear G-d, the Amalekites, attacked the Jewish people without any hesitation. *Chazal* depict the Amalekites to be the equivalent of a “fool who jumped into a scalding bath. Although he is burnt by the hot water, he nevertheless cools down the bath for others.” As a consequence of the attack of Amalek (although they were defeated) the aura of the Jewish people in the eyes of the world was diminished. They were seen as an ordinary people.

King Solomon writes in Proverbs, “A deprecator (*letz*) you should smite...” The *Midrash* explains that “A deprecator you should smite” refers to the Amalekite people. One does not try to attempt to reason with a deprecator because he does not have the capacity to appreciate the position of the other. Thus, since he cannot be contended with, he must be destroyed. Therefore, the Jewish people have been commanded to obliterate Amalek from existence.

It is not that the Amalekites were not fully aware of what had occurred at the splitting of the Sea or were did not understand what G-d had done on behalf of the Jewish people, but rather, because they possess the characteristic of being deprecators, they do not have the capacity to internalize the truth. Thus, they acted as if nothing had happened. Although they had seen the Hand of G-d as obviously as the rest of the world, they behaved as though G-d did not exist and there is no Divine Retribution.

This innate characteristic of the Amalekites caused them to be oblivious to the truth of G-d and His

relationship with the Jewish people. When one has a conflict of interest, the truth does not resonate within him because he either evades it or puts it in another context. Pharaoh, understanding the consequences of acknowledging the Hand of G-d was something he could not accept. He had a conflict of interest.

If he were to acknowledge G-d as the Omnipotent One, he could not longer believe that he was a deity, but rather an ordinary human being. Pharaoh repeatedly witnessed revealed miracles that his own sorcerers could not replicate. These events could only be understood as the Hand of G-d. It was not only until the tenth plague of the killing of the first-born, that Pharaoh could no longer evade or ignore the truth.

Every person, due to his personal interests and needs, has an aspect of the characteristic of a deprecator. Because of one’s conflicts of interests, one becomes desensitized to the evil that he seeks to pursue. Although he may intellectually understand that his interest is inappropriate, the reality of that fact does not resonate within him to the degree that affect his actions.

King Solomon writes in Proverbs, “One should not rebuke a deprecator (*letz*) because he will hate you. However, when one rebukes a wise man (*chacham*) he will love you.” The *Mishna* in Ethics of our Fathers states, “Who is a wise man? One who learns from everyone.”

The wise man, because of his perspective and focus in life, which is to advance himself through knowledge, will appreciate rebuke if it has constructive value to correct himself where he has failed. Very often, the failing is attributed to a degree of insensitivity because of one’s personal conflict of interest, which is the characteristic of a deprecator. Thus, when one attempts to rebuke this individual, one must speak in a context that he is not addressing the deprecating aspect of the person, but rather the aspect of the wise man who is interested in making the correction.

Recognizing the Truth & Suppressing it

The *Torah* tells us that after Aaron had cast down the staff of *Moshe* it transformed into a snake. Pharaoh summoned his sorcerers who replicated what Aaron had done. They too cast down their staffs and they changed into snakes. Thus, Pharaoh was not impressed by what he had seen. Why was this so?

The *Torah* states, “Pharaoh hardened his heart and he did not heed them as *Hashem* had spoken.” After his sorcerers had replicated what Aaron had brought about, Pharaoh dismissed what had taken place as witchcraft. Seemingly, Pharaoh who was accustomed to performing and witnessing witchcraft, did not need to strengthen his heart to be able to dismiss what Aaron had brought about. If so, why did he need to strengthen his heart? One may conclude that had he not strengthened his heart, he would have been moved and impressed with what he witnessed. Pharaoh thus needed to suppress the truth so that he could be able to continue with his false belief that G-d did not exist and that he would not send out the Jewish people.

The *Torah* tells us that after the first five plagues had taken place, “G-d hardened the heart of Pharaoh.” Meaning, after witnessing all of the revealed miracles that had transpired, Pharaoh could no longer suppress the truth despite all of his efforts to harden his own heart. Pharaoh had come to the point where he could no longer evade the truth. He would have been overwhelmed by the obviousness of G-d, thus being compelled to send out the Jewish people. However, G-d interceded and hardened his heart so that he would be able to withstand the remaining five plagues without succumbing to *Moshe’s* demands to send out the Jewish people.

Rambam explains that a human being is able to see and understand the world within a rational context because of Divine Assistance. This is part of the gift of free choice that G-d has given to mankind. If however, after continuously seeing the obvious truth one chooses to ignore and dismiss it, G-d will withdraw one’s free choice. After the fifth plague, G-d withdrew Pharaoh’s ability to choose freely. If this is so, how could he be held culpable for his actions from that point forward? *Rambam* explains that it is because Pharaoh initially chose to ignore and evade the truth. Thus, he chose to

forfeit his own free choice through his own behavior.

If G-d withdrew Pharaoh’s power of free choice after the fifth plague, why does the *Torah* need to state after every subsequent plague, “G-d hardened the heart of Pharaoh...?” Why did G-d needed to continuously renew and supplement the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart?

Pharaoh’s heart was initially hardened by G-d at a certain level of revealed miracle, which was the fifth plague. With every subsequent plague, there was a more advanced dimension of revelation of G-d, thus making His Presence more obvious in every context. As the plagues increased, they assumed greater dimensions of value. They demonstrated that G-d has dominion over the terrestrial, atmospheric, and the celestial level. After witnessing all of the plagues, one would know on every level of existence that G-d is the Omnipotent Being. Therefore, with every increased dimension of revelation, G-d needed to withdraw Pharaoh’s ability to choose, since it had been previously withdrawn only at a lesser level of revelation.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Shabbos* states, “One who comes to purify himself, will be assisted. One who comes to contaminate himself, the way is open before him.” If one wishes to advance himself spiritually, G-d will provide him with Divine Assistance in order to achieve that objective. However, the one whose interest is in sinning, G-d does not assist him to do so, but rather, does not interfere with his choice. Seemingly, if one chooses to ignore the Word of G-d, He does not provide any assistance for the individual to pursue the path of evil; however, regarding Pharaoh’s choice to ignore the Word of G-d, his free choice was withdrawn by Divine Intervention, which is not so regarding the average person.



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