

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAERA

Liberating the Spirit of the Israelites by Rav Ezra Bick

I. The Text

The opening sections of parashat Vaera are very confusing, from the narrative point of view. The story seems to grind to a halt, as the Torah recounts a number of times that God commands Moshe, or Moshe and Aaron, to go to Par'o and free the Jews. There is clearly a great reluctance on Moshe's part, but it is unclear just what is happening, and why what seems to be more or less the same thing is retold three times. Let us first enumerate the different occurrences in the beginning of the parasha, without at this point deciding whether they constitute distinct events or not. It would be desirable to follow this list with an open Tanakh.

1. (6:1-8) God appears to Moshe, explains his promise to the avot, and instructs Moshe to tell the Jewish people that He will deliver them from Egypt.
2. (6:9) Moshe speaks to the nation, but they do not pay attention.
3. (6:10-12) God tells Moshe to speak to Par'o and Moshe answers that if the Jewish people did not listen to him, why should Par'o; "and I am 'aral sefatayim."
4. (6:13) God speaks to Moshe and Aaron, commanding them concerning the nation and Par'o, "to take the children of Israel out of Egypt."
- [5. (6:14-27) The genealogy of Moshe and Aaron.]
6. (6:28-30) God tells Moshe to speak to Par'o and Moshe answers he is 'aral sefatayim,' so how will Par'o listen to him?
7. (7:1-5) God tells Moshe that Aaron will speak for him and sketches the pattern whereby Par'o will continually refuse until the final redemption.
8. (7:6) "Moshe and Aaron did as God commanded them, so they did."
9. (7:8-13) The story of the staff which changed into a crocodile (or a serpent, see Rashi).
10. (7:14 ff) The plagues begin.

God twice tells Moshe to speak to the nation, and three times to speak to Par'o, then a fourth time together with the sign of the crocodile, before finally beginning the plagues. Twice Moshe answers that he is aral sefatayim. What is the meaning of these repeated missions and what precisely is Moshe's point concerning his speech impediment? What is the relationship between the failure of Moshe in regards to the Jewish people and his fear of failure in regards to Par'o? In short, while the narrative seems to stall for two chapters, what is really going on?

II. The Mission to the Nation of Israel

Moshe has two different missions, one regarding Par'o and one regarding the his people. We know what he is supposed to do before Par'o - he will order him to free his brethren and then will perform the plagues until Par'o breaks down. But what is the nature or purpose of his mission to the Jewish people at this stage?

Notice that in parashat Shemot, God never tells Moshe to go to the Jews. First (3:10), God states, "And now, go, and I shall send you to Par'o, and take my people out of Egypt." Moshe seems to ASSUME that he has a message for his people, asking, "For I am to come to the children of Israel and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you; and they will say to me, what is His name - what shall I say to them?" God, in turn, answers this question; but nowhere has He actually given Moshe a mission to go to the Jews. He does order Moshe to gather the ELDERS (3:16), in order to take them with him when he goes to Par'o. In response, Moshe again refers to his anticipated problems convincing the his brethren - "But they shall not believe me, and shall not listen to me, for they shall say, God has not appeared to you" (4:1). Only in response to this and subsequent complaints of Moshe does God say, "He (Aaron) shall speak for you to the people... (4:16)." When Moshe gets his traveling orders (4:21-23), he is told, "Say to Par'o...", without any instructions concerning the Jews, though the first thing Moshe does when he gets to Egypt is to speak to the people (4:30-31), only afterwards (5:1 - "And afterwards...") going to Par'o. It appears that when God tells Moshe to go to Par'o, his main concern is always how to address the Jews first. Only after his failure with the Jews in the beginning of our parasha does Moshe begin to worry how to appear before Par'o. Only then do we find the verse, "God spoke to Moshe and Aaron and charged them (va-yitzaveim) concerning the CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, and concerning Par'o king of Egypt, to take the children of Israel out of Egypt" (6:13). What has happened here?

The answer, I believe, is that Moshe understands that his task entails more than merely informing the Jewish people that they are about to leave Egypt. While this may indeed be a nice thing to do - after all, it will cheer them up - that is not a MISSION. Aside from getting the Egyptians to let them go, Moshe must free the Jewish people from the psychological state of enslavement and dependency that they have sunk to. Last week, Rav Moshe Lichtenstein pointed out that Moshe, fresh from his life in the king's palace, was shocked by the apathy and resignation of the Jews he met. Moshe, upon being told by God that the Jews are to be freed, immediately shifts the center of gravity of the problem from how to convince Par'o to how to convince the Jews, not so much to agree to go a land of milk and honey as to liberate themselves spiritually, to act as free, responsible, autonomous individuals.

III. How Does One Change a Slave Mentality

Moshe's solution to the problem of the ingrained slave mentality of the Jews is to inspire them. He believes that if a gifted speaker, a man of inspiration and spiritual vision, will directly address the slaves, he can awaken the slumbering tzelem Elokim of human dignity within them. But, he argues, he is not that man. He lacks a golden tongue, the ability to unleash the

hidden powers latent in the human soul. It is this mission which worries Moshe, even as God sends him to Par'o. God's answer in parashat Shemot is to give him Aaron as a "mouth," even as Moshe plays the role of "elohim." And indeed, Moshe at first meets success. His encounter with the people results in belief, and they bow down. But what follows? Total disaster. The Jewish representatives attack Moshe, the situation is worse, the people totally disheartened. "Why have you worsened (the state) of this people, why have You sent me? For since I have come to Par'o to speak in Your name, it is worse for this people, and you have not at all saved Your people." Two things, Moshe says. One - it is worse for the people, and, at the same time, the physical redemption has not been advanced at all.

Here God tells Moshe to reassure the people that He will redeem them. Moshe does so, but the people are so sunk in the apathy of enslavement that they barely hear him. They are unable to absorb the message, it cannot lift their spirits. Is it any wonder that Moshe is depressed? If the Jews won't hear him, what can he, as an individual do to Par'o? Moshe has proof that he does not have the power to effect a change of heart in his listeners. Moshe believes his mission is to reach the hearts of his listeners, whether the Jews or Par'o, and this seems to be beyond his powers.

Here God explains the answer. God tells Moshe that indeed he has two missions. God charges Moshe to speak to both to the Par'o and the Jewish people, in both cases "to take the children of Israel out of Egypt." (6,13) There is a mission to the Jews, not only to keep them informed, but to take them out, to emancipate them. How will this be done? Here God's answer is different than Moshe's assumption. Moshe will directly act only in regard to Par'o. He will not persuade Par'o, by dint of the power of his possibility. "I shall harden Par'o's heart, and multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt" (7:3). Moshe is not going to persuade Par'o; God is going to crush Par'o, slowly, publicly. We do not find Moshe speaking to the Jews again about how they will be free, trying to inspire them. The liberation of the Jews will be accomplished by their witnessing the drawn-out victory of God over the power of Par'o, his magic and his gods. The destruction of Egyptian might, the humbling of the sources of its power, will liberate the spirits of the slaves. Moshe has a dual goal, but only one means. Practically, God tells Moshe always to go and speak to Par'o, but that act will have meaning on the one hand on the political level of Moshe vs. Par'o, and secondly on the socio-psychological level of the Jews vs. their masters.

"They were Aaron and Moshe, whom God had told, take the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt 'al tzivotam'. They were the ones who spoke to Par'o, to take the children of Israel out of Egypt, they were Moshe and Aaron." (6,26-27)

The double role is clearly evident here. What does "al tzivotam" mean? The phrase is repeated in parashat Bo in describing the exodus. "In that very selfsame day, God took out the children of Israel from the land of Egypt 'al tzivotam'" (12:51). One might be tempted to explain the verse in Bo

as merely describing the order in which they left. But why was that part of the original mission - to take them out 'al tzivotam'.

I believe that the phrase means 'in dignity', not as a horde of escapees, but as an ordered entity, with responsibilities, roles, acting with precision according to a plan. Moshe's role to the Jews is not just to move them, but to take them out of Egypt 'al tzivotam'; i.e., as free individuals, members in the host of God. "After four hundred and thirty years, on that very selfsame day, all the hosts of God left the land of Egypt" (12:41). After 430 years of enslavement, generations of abdication of personal responsibility, they left as the hosts of God. They didn't flee Egypt, they marched out.

IV. The Plagues and the Jews

This is the key to understanding the process of the ten plagues. In the beginning of Bo this is made clear. God has hardened the heart of Par'o, "so that you shall tell in the ears of your son and your son's son, all that I did in Egypt, and the signs which I put in them, and you shall know that I am God." The plagues are an exercise in public relations for the Jews. The basic formative experience of the Jewish people was to have been a helpless mass of slaves, without the power to raise their own heads in protest, and to have witnessed how their proud oppressors were humbled before God. This process is not completed until the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea, when "Israel sees the Egyptians dead on the shore." Only then are they really free of the enslavement of spirit, and only then can they continue to Har Chorev to receive the Torah.

In parashat Vaera, when reading the individual makot, it is worth noticing the emphasis placed on the publicity given to God's power and protection over the Jews. Many plagues explicitly are constructed so that the distinction between the Jews and the Egyptians is evident to all. The recurring theme of Moshe praying to God to stop the plague, and the statement that "God listened to Moshe," emphasizing that a Jew was the one to free Egypt from its problem, strengthen this effect. The Jews are passive bystanders, but not unaffected. What Moshe does to Egypt is the means of their inner liberation and not merely the means to their physical expulsion. It is only the former that requires such a long drawn-out contest between God and Par'o, so that the transformation of spirit can take place.

I think a very good question can be asked here. All too often, some clever expositor discovers a hidden meaning in a parasha, and then goes on to claim that it is the real and essential theme. But if that is true, why does God hide the central point? (Sometimes it seems that the only logical explanation is to keep us in business.) If Vaera is about the liberation of the Jews, why not state it a bit more clearly, instead of letting us think it is about the contest with Par'o?

The answer in this case is clear. The theme of the spiritual liberation of the Jews is a hidden theme because it is a hidden occurrence. If Moshe had liberated the Jews through a stirring speech or two, or through a self-liberation

workshop, I imagine we would have had a parasha describing it. The whole point is that the direct inspirational method will not work. The inner workings of the soul is a hidden process, responding to events in the outside world. In this case, it is the power of God overcoming the Egyptians which releases the Jews, and not the power of Moshe's personality. Hence, the Torah describes the outward event, and hints - rather clearly I think - at the corresponding inner process.

V. Physical Freedom and Spiritual Freedom

There is a common distinction between Pesach and Shavuot that summarizes their significance as follows: Yetziat Mitzraim is about the physical liberation of the Jews, Matan Torah about the spiritual liberation. Based on what we have seen today, that is overly simplistic. In order to receive the Torah, the Jews have to be free already, and not merely in the physical sense. Even a slave is obligated, according to halakha, in some mitzvot. The necessary prerequisite is that they be free in spirit, able to accept responsibilities (a slave has no personal responsibilities) and to make choices. This process begins at the exodus and achieves its minimum goal BEFORE the giving of the Torah. On a certain level, the rest of the history of the Jews in the desert (and perhaps afterwards as well) can be read as a continuation of the same process. On the one hand, one must be free to receive the Torah; on the other hand, the Torah itself emancipates, is the path to freedom. The forty years in the desert can also be understood as a long struggle with the slave mentality of the people. There are distinct phases in the process of liberation, beginning with the exodus (and especially the fall of Egypt), followed by receiving the Torah, and continuing with the special conditions of desert life (manna, clouds of glory, a closed camp, Moshe teaching, etc.). Presumably, we are still engaged in the process, through the application of Torah to our daily lives, on an individual and national level.

Peeking ahead, I would like to suggest that this is the key to understanding the laws of Pesach Mitzraim. Since the practices commanded by God for the Jews at the time of the exodus are not identical to the halakhot of the pesach celebrated afterwards, it must be understood as a distinct experience. After all, the Jews had not received the Torah and were therefore not obligated to observe Pesach.

I would suggest that the following details of Pesach Mitzraim should be understood as instrumental in liberation (rather than celebrating it): the blood on the doorposts (showing a distinction between the Jews and the Egyptians), the hurriedness (anticipation, planning for a future, the opposite of the celebrated laziness of a slave), the borrowing from the Egyptians (forcing an attitude change), the korban pesach (a free man's meal), al matzot u-merorim yokhluhu (eating, that is mastering, one's experience as a slave). I leave the details to you to work out.

One final point, concerning Moshe. The opening scenes of parashat Shemot describe a heroic Moshe, striking out against injustice and fighting for human dignity, whether it is a case of Egyptian vs. Jew, Jew vs. Jew, or

Midianite vs. Midianite. It would be fair to assume that these scenes describe the personality of one who will be the emancipator of Israel, the Liberator. I believe that the continuation of last week's parasha describes the failure of that theory - Moshe's heroic challenge results in further deepening of the slavery and the total collapse of the people's spirit. The liberation will take place with the name of God, the Tetragrammaton (6,2), meaning not the mysterious workings of God in nature, but the full-bodied glory of direct divine intervention. Moshe is immortalized as Moshe Rabbeinu, as a teacher, and not as a liberator. I believe that refers not only to his teaching Torah, but to his teaching freedom as well. He did not break the bonds of the Jews, God did that. But he did help the Jews understand the meaning of their freedom. He taught them freedom by performing the plagues. We do not thank Moshe for coffering freedom upon us, but for teaching us what it means.

VI. Reading the Text

To return to the order of the events in the beginning of the parasha (it will be extremely useful to follow this with a Tanakh open):

1. (6:1-8) God explains to Moshe that He, in His power, will liberate the Jewish people and Moshe need not worry about his inability to persuade Par'o.
2. (6:9) Moshe conveys this message to his brethren, but fails to move them.
3. (6:10-12) God sends Moshe to Par'o, but Moshe, still thinking he must be the one to persuade and inspire Par'o, objects that the mission is hopeless.
4. God commands Moshe (and Aaron) with a double mission, with one method for Par'o, and another, as a result of the first, for the Jews.
- 5,6,7. Moshe, still the Egyptian prince, raised in royalty and not in slavery, does not understand. He wants to impart his free spirit, his inherent dignity, to the Jews, and can see no way to do this. The Torah interjects the genealogy of Moshe and Aaron here, a section that has puzzled commentators for centuries. The following sections (6,7) repeat the conversation before this genealogy, according to nearly all commentators. The difference is that the genealogy stresses that Moshe is rooted in Jewish descent, is part of his people. "Hu Moshe ve-Aharon" - this person, listed as part of the sons of Yaakov, is the one whom God has commanded to the Jews, to lead them out of Egypt 'al tzivotam', and to Par'o, to lead the Jews out of Egypt. In Moshe's response this time (6:30 compared with 6:12), he does not repeat the argument from the fact that the Jews did not listen to him. Moshe, as a son of Amram rather than an Egyptian prince, understands that his speeches to the Jews are not the method to free them. He still wants to know how he will persuade Par'o, and this time God explains to him that Moshe will be "elohim" (= power) to Par'o, and Aaron will do the talking. Par'o will not listen, God says (7:3) but I, God, will put forth My hand over Egypt, and "I will take out my hosts (tzivotai), MY people the children of Israel, from Egypt, by great judgments (or punishments)" (7:4).
8. (7:6) "Moshe and Aaron did as God commanded..." This is not a statement of narrative fact, since they have not yet done anything. It means that they now understand the plan, and their roles, and so, from now on, they will fulfill the plan exactly.

9,10. The story of the liberation, as a public contest between God and Par'o, begins.

More points to think about:

1. Are there distinct educational points for different plagues? Why are some plagues followed by an act of Moshe to end them (prayer), while some just die off on their own? Why do some contain an explicit emphasis on the distinction between Jew and Egyptian, while others do not, at least not explicitly? Why do some plagues have a warning to Par'o beforehand, while others do not?
2. What, precisely, is the meaning of the story with the staff which turns into a crocodile (or a snake according to Rashi - the reason for Rashi's insistence on an unorthodox interpretation of the word "tanin" is verse 7:16; see the Netziv to 7,9)?
3. Notice that God and the Torah speak about "Bnei Yisrael," but when speaking to Par'o, God calls himself "elokei HA-IVRIM."
4. The midrash claims that from the commencement of the plagues, the Jews were not set to work. There is therefore a long period between actual slavery and freedom, during which the center stage is occupied by Moshe and Par'o.
5. Moshe speaks to the Jews a lot, in parashat Bo, about mitzvot. The end of Bo, immediately after the exodus (but before the crossing of the sea), includes a perfectly normative mitzva section of the Torah, the mitzvot of bechor and tefillin. How does this fit in with the theme of this week's shiur?
6. What is the purpose and meaning of 6,28. Notice this is the LAST verse of a parasha setuma (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban).