

Parashat Shemot, 5773, 2013:

“Now You Will See What I Will Do to Pharaoh...?”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

The officers of the children of Israel saw them in distress, saying, “Do not reduce [the number] of your bricks, the requirement of each day in its day.” They met Moses and Aaron standing before them when they came out from Pharaoh's presence. And they said to them, “May the L-rd look upon you and judge, for you have brought us into foul odor in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, to place a sword into their hand[s] to kill us.” So Moses returned to the L-rd and said, “O L-rd! Why have You harmed this people? Why have You sent me? Since I have come to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, and You have not saved Your people.” And the L-rd said to Moses, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a mighty hand he will send them out, and with a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.” (*Sefer Shemot* 5:19-23, 6:1, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The passage above is found at the end of our *parasha* (Torah portion). At first glance, it seems to narrate a fairly clear series of events:

1. Pharaoh sadistically demanded the same quota of bricks from our enslaved people, even though previous verses indicate that the Egyptians would no longer provide the straw that was an essential element in creating the bricks.
2. The officers of our people were enraged at Moshe and Aharon, whom they viewed as the causative agents of Pharaoh's latest decree, and asked G-d to judge them for what they had allegedly done.
3. In response to the officers' allegation, Moshe spoke to Hashem and asked Him two questions: “Why have You harmed this people?” and “Why have You sent me?”
4. Moshe then protested to G-d that matters had only gone from bad to worse since the onset of his having acted as His emissary (*shaliach*), and that G-d had failed to save His people.
5. G-d reassures Moshe that His promises will in fact be kept and that he will bear

witness to Pharaoh's ultimate downfall and the consequent redemption of our people.

As in all matters of Torah exegesis, however, there is far more here than meets the eye. In reality, there is a battle royal within the Midrash as to the proper way to interpret the final verse of our passage: "And the L-rd said to Moses, 'Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a mighty hand he will send them out, and with a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.'" *Midrash Sechel Tov* (Buber), *Sefer Shemot, Parashat Vayechi* 6, takes the following approach in its analysis:

And the L-rd said to Moses, "Now you will see..." The Promise that I have already pledged to Avraham: "And also the nation that they will serve will I judge, and afterwards they will go forth with great possessions," (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:14) [will be fulfilled.] Therefore, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh..." He said: "You [the Jewish people] are lax, just lax..." Therefore, [as a result of My] powerful hand he will send them out, and [as a result of My] powerful hand he will drive them out from his land.

Even though the above passage is Midrash, it seems to be *p'shat* (direct and straightforward analysis) in that "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh..." appears to be a direct continuation and fulfillment of Hashem's original promise to Avraham. In other words, there is no "story behind the story" motif being presented. Instead, we encounter an almost naturalistic flow of events from the ancient times of Avraham to the final days of Egyptian bondage.

Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 111a, nearly all other Midrashic sources, and Rashi (1040-1105), however, employ an entirely different mode of interpretation in their understanding of the phrase: "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh..." In their view, Hashem took Moshe to task and punished him for questioning His ways, and for

criticizing the results of his *shlichut* (i.e. Moshe's agency). Such "lack of faith" never was part of the *Avot's* (Patriarch's) repertoire of behavior, as is demonstrated in the following passage:

And for this Moses was punished, as it is said, "For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done evil to this people, neither have You delivered Your people at all."

Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him [Moshe], "Alas for those who are gone and no more to be found! For how many times did I reveal Myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the name of El Shad - dai, and they did not question my character, nor say to Me, What is Your name?"

I said to Abraham, "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it, for I will give it to you": yet when he sought a place to bury Sarah, he did not find one, but had to purchase it for four hundred silver shekels; and still he did not question My character.

I said to Isaac, "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you": yet his servants sought water to drink, and did not find it without its being disputed, as it is said, "And the herdsmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdsmen saying, 'The water is ours;'" still he did not question My character.

I said to Jacob, "The land whereon you lie, I will give to you, and to your future children": yet he sought a place to pitch his tent and did not find one until he purchased it for an hundred *kesitah*; nevertheless he did not question My character; nor did he say to me "What is Your Name?"

And now you [Moshe] say to Me, "Neither have You delivered Your people at all." [Therefore,] "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh...": "**You shall behold the war against Pharaoh, but not the war against the thirty-one kings [that will be fought by your student and protégé, Yehoshua, when he conquers the land.]**" (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 111a*, translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my bolding, brackets, and emendations)

This powerful and poignant Talmudic presentation provides us with an entirely new understanding of the greatness of the *Avot*. True, Moshe joined with Hashem in the *Makot* (punishments rendered against the Egyptians), the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the Exodus, and *Kabbalat HaTorah* (the Receiving of the Torah) - and he remains for all time the greatest prophet the world will ever know. Yet, it was the Patriarchs who

demonstrated the most unswerving devotion and loyalty to Hashem in the history of our people. In this sense, their unequaled spiritual leadership remains a beacon of light and hope in an often confusing world. Therefore, when we are faced with a depth-level challenge or existential crisis, we can authentically ask ourselves: “What would the *Avot* do?” as we struggle to find solutions to the daily and ongoing trials we so often encounter.

With Hashem’s help and guidance, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to emulate both the *Avot* and Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher Moshe), so that we, too, may be called “*Avdi*,” (“My servant”) as we faithfully strive to walk in our Creator’s path and follow His ways.

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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