

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Va'eira

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Howard *ben* Isadore *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Honored Pharaoh

Let us imagine for a moment that we were granted an opportunity to enter the Egyptian royal court some time during the Exodus saga.

We are in the midst of an imposing edifice, an exquisite and stately hall. An array of uniformed guards and important-looking personages fills the premises. Pharaoh himself, of course, occupies center stage in this regal scene. Resplendent in his royal garments, he sits elevated on his gilded throne, flanked all around by advisors and nobility. All eyes are turned toward him, and not a sound is to be heard from the entire audience as they await a signal from their monarch.

Suddenly, the solemn aura is interrupted; a curious noise emanates from the monarch – from his abdomen, specifically.

“Gribbit.”

The call is subsequently answered by another, this one coming from one of the officials. “Gribbit! Gribbit!” In moments, the whole room is croaking, moaning and groaning. With hands on their stomachs in a futile attempt to squash the noise and quell the pain caused by the amphibious invaders lodged in their intestines, the Mitzrim (Egyptians) squirm in agony as the hall erupts into a symphony of resounding ribbits.

Laughingstock

The scenario portrayed above is laid out by R' Leib Chasman (presented here with some minor stylistic variations) in his *sefer Or Yaheil* (vol. II); he describes the substantial denigration that was visited upon the Mitzrim as part of their overall retribution package.

This element seems to have been a significant factor in the Mitzrim's ordeal. When Hashem deemed that the time of the wicked ones' downfall had arrived, it was total. Not only were they presented with harsh punishment, but with shame and disgrace as well. And this aspect was to be noted and highlighted by the Jewish people. As the verse states:

וְלִמְעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי וְכוּ' בְּנֵךְ אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֵתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-אֹתֹתַי אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי בָם.

“In order that you relate in the ears of your son and your grandchild *that which I made mockery of Mitzrayim* and the signs which I set among them” (*Shemos 10:2*).

The Ramban (*ibid.*) goes even further in describing the pathetic state to which Pharaoh was reduced. After so many warnings and so many abuses, an element of Pharaoh's free will was diminished by Hashem; yet, he still suffered the consequences of his (now uncontrollable) obstinacy. Thus, Hashem hardened his heart, and he continued to refuse to free the Jews; and then he was battered for retaining them as his subjects. In effect,

Pharaoh – as a result of his long and evil record – had now become Hashem’s plaything. The Ramban ascribes the following verse to Pharaoh’s situation: “The One Who dwells in the Heavens will laugh; Hashem will heap scorn upon him” (*Tehillim 2:4*).

Reb Mordechai Pesach Poderevsky of Kobrin merited to attend to the Chofetz Chaim toward the end of the sage’s life. Late one Friday night, at around midnight, Reb Mordechai was walking past the Chofetz Chaim’s house, when the sweet sound of Torah learning grabbed his attention. The temptation to view the tzaddik “in action” was too great, and so the attendant drew close to the window and peered inside.

He saw the Chofetz Chaim reviewing the weekly parshah (which happened to be this week’s parshah – Va’eira). Immersed in the material, the Chofetz Chaim would emit a note of astonishment as he went through each of the makkos: “Ai! Ai!” At one point, Reb Mordechai witnessed a reaction no one had ever seen before: in the middle of the plague of boils (when the magicians were so stricken they could not even come to court), the Chofetz Chaim was literally laughing out loud! (Sichos HaChofetz Chaim)

With All Due Respect

Yet, in the midst of this monumental enterprise of humiliating retribution, Moshe and Aharon are given a directive from Hashem that is most unexpected in its nature. The verse in this week’s *parshah* states:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן וַיִּצְוֶם אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל-פְּרֹעֶה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם...

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon, and He commanded them concerning B’nei Yisrael and concerning Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (*Shemos 6:13*).

What was the nature of this “commandment... concerning Pharaoh”? What exactly were Moshe and Aharon supposed to do? Rashi clarifies the details: “Hashem instructed them that their conversations with Pharaoh should be carried out respectfully.” In other words, at the same time that Pharaoh and his countrymen were being subjected to degradation of astronomical proportions, Moshe and Aharon were charged with preserving the due honor of the monarchy and speaking with deference to the embattled ruler!

And so they did. Directly prior to the Plague of the Firstborn, Moshe predicts to Pharaoh that in its wake, the Jews will practically be begged to leave: “And all of these ministers of yours will come down to me and prostrate before me, saying, ‘Go out!’” (*ibid.*, 11:8). Rashi points out that the intended target of this rebuke was really Pharaoh himself, as it was he who ended up seeking out Moshe and not any of his servants. But Moshe purposefully phrased it in this way – “these ministers of yours will come down to me” – as a show of royal respect, so as not to explicitly mention the degradation to the king.

R’ Leib Chasman (*ibid.*) articulates the obvious lesson to be gleaned from this episode. How much the more so must we be cautious and respectful in our dealings with our fellow! For aren’t all Jews royalty as well? As the Mishnah in Avos (3:14) states:

חֲבִיבֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁנִקְרָאוּ בָּנִים לְמִקּוֹם... שְׁנִצְאָמַר בָּנִים אִתָּם לֵה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

“Beloved is Yisrael, for they are referred to as ‘Hashem’s children’... as it says (*Devarim 14:1*): ‘You are sons to Hashem, your G-d.’”