

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality **From Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Va'era)

I recall an incredible series of coincidences that to me were nothing short of miraculous. A student had been desperate to speak with me, and we finally managed to connect in New York the day before I was scheduled to return to Israel.

There was a woman who had been going through a very difficult time for nearly eight years, as her husband had left her, but could not be found, leaving her unable to receive a 'Get' (a traditional Jewish divorce document). Such a woman is known in Jewish tradition as an Agunah, literally chained in her terrible set of circumstances, unable to remarry until she manages to gain a proper Jewish divorce.

Jewish tradition considers efforts to free a woman of such circumstances a mitzvah of the highest order, so naturally I said I would do everything I could, though having no idea how I would be able to make any headway under the circumstances. The husband was living in Israel, but had not been heard from in nearly five years.

However, based on the story, and the description of the individuals who might know where the husband was currently residing, I immediately thought of a fellow who might know one of the individuals who might be able to find this recalcitrant husband.

I had not seen the fellow I was thinking of in nearly fifteen years, since my army days, and had no idea how on earth I would find him, but I promised I would try.

The next day, as we were boarding the plane to Israel, I was shocked to see this very same fellow, with whom I had long since lost contact boarding my flight with his family!

I caught him just before we were about to board and told him I was amazed he was on my plane, as I had to speak with him, and he agreed to come to my seat once his kids were asleep. Between his kids, and my exhaustion, I finally found him about an hour before we were due to land, and told him my story, explaining that I thought he might know one of the fellows who might be able to find this husband. At which point he began to laugh. Because this very same fellow, as it turned out was also on this very same flight! So, he promised me he would come back to my seat and help me find this second fellow as soon as he finished helping his kids with their breakfasts.

So, imagine my surprise when, a few moments later, he found me in my seat and started laughing again, because this second fellow... was actually seated one row behind me! (In the end, when I put him in touch with the family of this woman, he was eventually able to help facilitate a Jewish divorce, freeing this woman to re-marry.)

Do we really have the freedom to choose and make our own decisions in life, or are we just pawns in some larger plan? Are we surrounded by miracles, or does nature simply take its course?

This question, perhaps, is one of the challenges of this week's portion, *Va'era*.

The story of the Exodus from Egypt is a classic that we all grew up with. Back then, it seems, it was so much simpler: there were the good guys and the bad guys, and when Moses and Aaron squared off against Pharaoh and the evil empire of Egypt, you never had any trouble with who you were supposed to be rooting for. After all, Pharaoh was the villain everyone loves to hate, right?

But a closer look suggests that the choices Pharaoh and the Egyptians made to enslave the Jewish people in the first place were not really their own free choice, because way back in the time of Abraham, G-d tells Abraham that he should know that:

“... Your offspring shall be strangers in a land that is not their own, and they will be enslaved, and made to suffer....” (Genesis 15:13)

So, Hashem (G-d) had already determined, far in advance, that the Jewish people would be enslaved in Egypt, so how could the Egyptians then be held accountable, for what they never chose to do? G-d chose it for them before they were even born!

Indeed, one wonders what the purpose of this entire exercise was in the first place, which is the strangest part of all, because the Torah actually tells us why Hashem hardens Pharaoh’s heart time after time:

“Ve’Hirbeti Et Ototai, Ve’Et Mofitai Be’Eretz Mitzraim....”

“And I will multiply my signs and miracles in the land of Egypt....” (7:3)

In other words, G-d wants to show off! And somehow, this whole process is to let everyone know how awesome G-d really is, and that He can ‘take’ or defeat the Egyptians time after time. But that is ridiculous! Is this crushing, as it were, of Egypt somehow meant to show that Hashem, G-d, is all-powerful and can defeat even Egypt, the mightiest empire the world had ever known? Are we somehow meant to view this story as a battle between Egypt (or Pharaoh) and Hashem? Could anything be more absurd?

Was there a battle here? How can anyone or anything do ‘battle’ with G-d, who is the source of all reality? Egypt can no more be G-d’s opponent than can my own pen begin to argue with the hand that holds it! Egypt is created by G-d, and serves Hashem’s purpose, so what is this all about?

Indeed, at the beginning of next week’s portion, (*Bo*), the Torah makes it abundantly clear:

*“...For I have hardened Pharaoh’s heart... in order to place my signs in him (in his heart). And in order that you will tell over in the ears of your sons and your sons’ sons, that which I have done (“**Hita’lalti**”) in Egypt, and the signs that I have placed in them, and you will know that I am G-d.”* (10:1-2)

Apparently then, all of this is in order that somehow everyone should see G-d’s miracles. Which leads us to wonder what the purpose of *that* really is?

What then was the purpose of all the plagues? Certainly, G-d does not need to get Pharaoh’s permission to let the Jewish people go? And if the point of the exercise was simply to free the Jewish people, then Hashem, in the blink of an eye, could simply transport the Jewish people out of Egypt! What need was there for the entire Exodus story to begin with?

And how could Pharaoh imagine that the Creator of Heaven and Earth, who can turn rivers into blood, and blot out the sun, and who, indeed, is all the source of all life, be ignored?

Indeed, Rashi (10:2) suggests that the word “**Hita’lalti**” does not mean that G-d performed miracles, but rather that through these signs G-d was actually ridiculing the Egyptians. (As in, for example, when Balaam suggests that his donkey is ridiculing him (“**Ki Hitalalt’ bi**”) in Numbers 22:29).

Indeed, it may be that the very perception that these are miracles at all is what is at the root of all of this ridicule.

We live, in the end, to a certain degree, in a world of illusion. Once you accept that Hashem is the source of all reality, indeed *is* all reality, then why are miracles such a big deal? After all, if G-d runs the world,

then the fact that He does miracles is only natural. And, more to the point, all of nature is really miraculous!

About two weeks after that remarkable incident allowing me to find that person on the plane, I happened to catch a ride with Rav Yehuda Amital, ztz"l, one of the great Torah scholars of our generation, (whose Yeshiva I was privileged to study in), and I told him this story. His response, which has stayed with me, was:

“Atah Mevi Li’ Ra’ayah She’HaKadosh Baruch Hu’ Manhig et Ha’Olam?”

“You are bringing me a proof that G-d runs the world?”

In other words, we seem to need such incredible stories to affirm that G-d is running the show, but in truth, every story, and indeed every moment of every day, is as much an affirmation of G-d as any other.

We think that there is nature, and then sometimes G-d performs miracles. But in truth, all of nature is miraculous, and one person’s natural occurrence is another person’s miracle.

In the end, the greatest choice we have is how we choose to look at the world. And that freedom is what the entire story of the Exodus from Egypt is all about.

In ten plagues, Hashem turns nature on its ear: water, the symbol of life in the Torah (and in which we immerse ourselves, in a Mikveh, or ritual bath, in response to contact with death) became blood, the symbol of death (hence the prohibition against partaking of the blood of even Kosher animals). Fire and Water are mixed together in the plague of hail, and light and darkness exist together in the same place and time.

Because nature is not a tool of G-d, rather, G-d is manifest in nature, indeed is the source of all of nature.

And in the end, if we could truly see Hashem everywhere in the world that we looked, then we would never have been able to enslave other human beings in the first place.

Hence the verses proclaim:

“And Egypt shall know that I am G-d” (7:5, 17; 8:19)

“In order that you (Egypt) shall know that there is none like me in the Land.” (9:14)

Ancient Egypt worshipped nature, as a tool of many gods. But Hashem meant to teach the world, that Nature is a manifestation of Hashem, if we could only learn to see.

And this is perhaps our greatest challenge. We live in a world where we are surrounded with a constant stream of contention that tends to forget who really runs the world. The papers and CNN regularly declare what America will do, if Iran will do whatever it will do, and how Israel will react.

But nowhere in the New York Times does it remember to suggest what **G-d** is doing.

Incredibly, even today, at the end of the bloodiest century in history, some people still view man as the pinnacle of creation.

Thirty-two hundred years ago, we were blessed to rediscover that in the end, our world depends first and foremost on how we choose to view it, and only then, on what we choose to do with it.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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