

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Va'era)

One of the strangest dialogues in the entire Torah occurs in this week's portion: *Va'era*:

At the behest of G-d, Moshe shares with the Jewish people that their redemption is at hand.

But "... *they do not listen to Moshe from their despair and hard labor* " (Exodus 6:9)

Then, Hashem (G-d) tells Moshe to go to Pharaoh and tell him (again) to release the Jewish people from Egypt.

And Moshe struggles with this command. After all, he reasons: 'If the Jews did not listen to me, why should Pharaoh?' (6:12). It's a good question, which God does not seem to answer. Eventually, G-d repeats his command to Moshe to see an audience with Pharaoh, and again Moshe questions whether Pharaoh will listen to him (6:30), at which point (7:3) G-d repeats his command adding that he will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will not listen! (6:3-4)

Which makes one wonder what the point of this entire exercise is?

Why is Moshe being sent to Pharaoh at all, if G-d's plan is that Pharaoh will not set the Jewish people free?

This story actually reminds us of one of the first stories in the Torah, in the Garden of Eden.

G-d tells Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge, but they do. And the consequence of this tragic transgression is that Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden. Now, G-d knows they will eat from the tree, and so also knows they will be expelled from the garden; so why put them there in the first place? Just so they can disobey and be kicked out? Why would G-d place them in the Garden of Eden just in order that they are kicked out?

Obviously, we were meant to experience Eden, but we were never meant to stay there. And we were meant to see Moshe communicating to Pharaoh to let the Jews go, so we can see Pharaoh refuse and experience the resulting plagues. But the goal was never the immediate release of the Jewish people. So, what really was the point of all this?

We live in a world where it is all too easy to imagine that the mighty empires with their powerful armies dictate how the world should run. But Judaism says that is all an illusion.

I once heard a remarkable story: that apparently took place at West Point military academy. Every year, the third-year classmen spend a significant amount of time studying military strategy, learning how to engage a battle field in a variety of conditions. Part of their course entails regular exercises in which they are expected to find solutions to actual battlefield situations. On one particular day, to test their strategic thinking, they were broken up into groups and presented with a situation facing overwhelming odds.

Given a short amount of time to analyze the situation, one by one the groups reported back with the same solution: retreat; Sometimes part of successful strategy is knowing when to pull back. This time, however, all the groups were given a chance to reconsider and told there was a different solution, and one by one, they were unable to find an alternative solution. At which point they were ordered to the main assembly hall and joined by the base commander, who proceeded to share with them the following lesson:

'This morning, you were all given a challenge to find a strategy allowing you to overcome overwhelming odds on a particular battlefield and win the day. According to every rule of engagement you have been taught, there is no solution other than to retreat to the scenario you were given. With the number of forces at your disposal, outnumbered by a far superior enemy, the correct solution is an ordered retreat or possibly surrender.

But you have been studying the story of the Israeli army's 77th armor battalion on the Golan Heights in 1973, and somebody forgot to teach them the rules of engagement and military strategy. So they won this battle, on October 6, 1973. One battalion, with 25 tanks, facing an entire supported Syrian division of 650 tanks, with no air or artillery support to speak of; they held their ground for 24 hours and changed history.

What they did on that day, was impossible; Sometimes you have to believe in the impossible. "

Perhaps Moshe was not sent to speak with Pharaoh to get Pharaoh to listen; perhaps his mission was to teach the entire world a message. In a G-d-conscious world, the rules are all an illusion. Moshe was not asking Pharaoh to let the people go; he was telling him he would... soon.

Egypt was the mightiest empire on the face of the earth and its armies ruled the world. And that was how the world worked: the mightiest army rules the day. But G-d was about to show the world an entirely new set of rules, with a ragtag band of helpless slaves to make the point.

The Nile River, the great G-d of Egypt; source of life and sustenance; would turn to blood and become the source of death. Light would become darkness, fire and ice would live together in hail, and the world of nature would turn upside down. And eventually the entire Egyptian army would be destroyed at the Red Sea whilst the Jews did not even lift a finger. And then Pharaoh would let the Jewish people go.

By all odds, we should not be here, and the State of Israel should have never been born. But here we are. The great Exodus from Egypt teaches us to believe that the impossible can happen. Hashem (G-d) runs the world, and all we need to do is believe that all is not as it seems.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
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