

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Va'era)

In January of 1942, Reinhard Heydrich, at the behest of his boss, Heinrich Himmler, convened a conference in a Villa in Wansee, a suburb of Berlin. Some of the top hierarchy of the Nazi party and the SS were invited, including Adolf Eichmann. They had finally concluded that there was nowhere to send all the Jews.

When Hitler began his war of domination, he initially had not intended, it seems, to annihilate the Jews; he simply wanted them out of Europe. In fact, the Nazis may have planned to fund their Nazi War machine by ransoming off their Jews.

As an example, the St. Louis, which was the last boat full of German refugees to set sail before the war began, sailed in June of 1939. Bound for Cuba, there were approximately 960 German Jewish refugees aboard, with visas for Cuba. Passage on board cost five hundred dollars, an enormous sum, equivalent today to more than eleven thousand dollars. And the Cubans had demanded an additional sum of two hundred and fifty dollars for an entry visa.

But when the boat finally got to Cuba, they were refused entry and the visas were ignored. Food riots had broken out on the Cuban docks when news of the ship's arrival, full of Jewish refugees had surfaced; food and jobs were scarce, and the government, fearful that the riots would spread, turned the Jews away. For weeks the ship plied the seas in search of safe haven, but no-one wanted them. A special sub-committee of the United States Congress deliberated the matter for three days while the ship weighed anchor off the coast of Florida, but they were denied entry as Roosevelt's quota for Jews had been met. Eventually they were forced back to Europe where ultimately many of them would be murdered in Auschwitz.

*In 1938, the Allies on the initiative of the United States, convened a famous conference in Evian, in as yet unoccupied France, to discuss the 'world refugee problem' which everyone present understood as a euphemism for the Jews. The Nazis had taken over Austria and it was clear the Jews had to get out, but no-one wanted them. Country after country expounded on why they could not take in anymore 'refugees'. **Chaim Weizmann**, one of the leaders of the Zionist movement, who would one day be the first President of the nascent State of Israel, understood this as early as 1936, saying:*

"There are now two sorts of countries in the world: those that want to expel the Jews, and those that don't want to admit them."

So Adolf Hitler understood he needed a Final Solution to this, the Jewish problem. There was a practical side to this 'problem'. The Nazis were obsessed with how to create the most efficient and productive type of society. Hence, only the most productive would survive. Included in this monstrous philosophy was the idea that many were simply 'unworthy of life'.

In fact, this was not a philosophy that appeared from nowhere. In the early twentieth century, many European and North Americans subscribed to Eugenics, which suggested that human progress depended on the genetic engineering of society whereby only 'healthy' people are allowed to reproduce. Hitler simply took this to its natural conclusion; the Nazis made this a State Policy. One of

the first laws the Nazis passed in 1933 made it legal for a doctor to sterilize a patient without consent. By 1939, over 300,000 people had been forcibly sterilized.

*Then, during World War II, Hitler decided that Germany should no longer care for 'useless eaters', such as the disabled; all resources were needed for the war effort. So the Nazis, in 1939, embarked on their first mass murder program, code-named action T-4 (after the address of its headquarters in Berlin, 4 Tiergarten. Doctors and nurses murdered their disabled patients using gas chambers built in asylums in places like Hartheim Castle and Sonnenstein. **Ilse Geuze** was such an example; there is a haunting photo of her on display at the **Museum of Jewish Heritage** in lower Manhattan.*

In the 1930's, Ilse left her parents' farm in Austria to attend a school for children with disabilities. In December of 1940, her parents received a letter from the director of Hartheim castle informing them that Ilse had been admitted to the institution but that visits and phone calls were no longer allowed under the war provisions of the ministry of defense. In January of 1941, her parents received an Urn holding the ashes of eleven-year-old Ilse. An entire society had gone mad, and it happened quite logically; it was only a matter of time before people were being burned in ovens, and their body fat used for fat; their hair for pillows...

This week, we read the portion of *Vaera*, which seems to be a rather strange bridge between last week's portion of *Shemot*, and next week's portion of *Bo*.

Shemot, the beginning of the book of Exodus, sees the chilling rise of anti-Semitism in ancient Egypt as the Jews multiply and are forced into bondage and servitude and unmitigated suffering. And next week with the plague of the Firstborn, Pharaoh finally lets the Jews go and we read of the great Exodus from Egypt. But this week is all about the plagues; month after month, Moshe on Hashem (G-d)'s command, inflicts plague after plague on the Egyptians, yet Pharaoh ignores the devastation of his country refusing to free the Jewish people.

What is the message of this portion? Why does the portion end after seven plagues rather than reaching its natural conclusion as we will see next week? What is it that happens in these seven plagues that needs to stand alone as a message, in the context of the bigger picture of the Exodus from Egypt? And most challenging of all, why is there a need for all these plagues in the first place? Is G-d really at war with Pharaoh? With Egypt? If G-d is omnipotent, why not simply whisk the Jews out of Egypt straight to Israel? And if indeed there was a need for retribution, why not simply start and end with the tenth plague, the death of the first born, or simply destroy all of Egypt? Instead of just splitting the sea, why didn't Hashem simply send a tidal wave to obliterate ancient Egypt?

There are two interesting details in the story of the exodus that suggest a possible response to these questions.

The second, it is worth noting, occurs in next week's portion when the Jews finally go forth from Egyptian bondage, they are actually rich. Hashem engineers a 'payback' of sorts in next week's portion, when the Jews (*Shemot* (Exodus) 11:2) ask of their Egyptian 'neighbors' for their gold and silver. In fact Rashi, quoting the Midrash (ibid. 10:22), suggests that the Jews used the plague of darkness to search the Egyptians' homes, so that when they actually came to ask for their riches they (the Egyptians) would not be able to claim poverty. Such a strange episode! Why don't the Jews just take what they want? Especially if they were already seeing all the wealth, with the Egyptians incapacitated during the

plague of darkness!? Indeed, this idea that the Jews would one day be freed from their bondage and leave Egypt with great wealth was actually a prophecy; part of Hashem's covenant with Abraham!

"... and after, they will exit with great wealth." (Bereishit (Genesis) 15:14)

The second interesting detail occurs during the sixth plague (of boils or *shechin*). Something happens to Pharaoh during this plague: Up until this point, Pharaoh will not listen to Moshe and his advisors and hardens his heart, refusing to let the Jewish people go. But after the sixth plague, of boils, the verse tells us that "*Hashem hardens Pharaoh's heart*" (Shemot 9:12). Indeed, from this point on, Hashem (G-d) hardens Pharaoh's heart; no longer can Pharaoh choose to deny the Jewish people their right to freedom; Hashem has to force him to say no!

Further, Pharaoh's advisors can no longer stand before Pharaoh (ibid.): there is an inescapable logic, it seems to Moshe's position that Pharaoh can no longer escape; Hashem has to force him to ignore it!

Indeed, the Torah tells us that specifically in the plague of hail, Pharaoh finally realizes he is wrong!

"Hashem (G-d) is the righteous one, and I and my people are wicked" (ibid. 9:27) and yet, Hashem refuses to let Pharaoh set the people free! Why? What is going on?

In truth, this has always been part of the plan and is very clear to see, if we just took a closer look at the original Covenant Hashem made with Avraham hundreds of years earlier:

*"And also I will **judge** the nation that they were enslaved by and after, they will exit with great wealth." (Bereishit (Genesis) 15:14)*

Think about it: if G-d had simply vanquished Egypt, the world would have learned that might makes right; it would simply have supported the theory that might makes right, and that the strong survive. Indeed, because the Jewish G-d was 'stronger' it makes sense that now the Jews will conquer their own land and expel the Canaanites, because whoever is stronger; whoever is most *useful* for society must prevail. Sound familiar? This, suggests the Torah cannot be the conclusion of the Exodus; something better has to happen; the world has to discover *Justice*: it has to discover *Din*.

The Jews must leave Egypt with wealth because they must be given their *wages*! And wages are not stolen, nor are they given as a gift; they are *earned*.

Ancient Egypt believed that the ends justify the means, and that the strong survive, and the weak are there to be subjugated. So babies that do not serve the purpose of supporting the monarchy, can be tossed in the Nile, or used as bricks for mortar.

Indeed, what justified worship was whether nature served the purposes of man, hence they worshipped the Nile, which overflowed its banks and supported the entire Egyptian economy.

So the plagues begin to demonstrate, one by one, that if wealth and power are not the foundation of society, it must be justice. And the Nile, the god of Egypt, turns to blood, to signify its death. And the frogs take over until eventually they are all killed and their stench fills Egypt, because, as any ancient Egyptian immediately recognized, the Frog was the Egyptian god of fertility.

And the lice which visit this message on man himself, are taken from the earth, which is the agricultural foundation of the Egyptian economy, fed by the Nile.

And then the cattle are destroyed; the same cattle which represent wealth become meaningless. So what happens in the plague of boils? Moshe takes ash from the furnace and uses it to visit destruction on all of Egypt; the same furnaces that create the bricks, the foundation of Egyptian industry and its 'modern' technology. Their own technological advances become the vehicle of their destruction. Sound familiar?

And even the wise men of Egypt can no longer stand before the obvious absurdity of ignoring his new reality, but the message is not clear enough yet; so, the story must continue.

Then comes the hail, when nature itself no longer makes sense: fire and water mix together! And the stronger water, which always extinguishes the fire, does not! The ultimate source of power: the waters of the Nile, are no longer all powerful, and might does not necessarily make right: the logical conclusion is inescapable, and Pharaoh knows he has been wrong all along!

And that is the purpose of the portion of *Vaera*: for the world to change for the better, people must learn on their own that they are mistaken; we must learn one day, as an entire society that there is something better than *might*, and that is the pursuit of what is *right*.

Egypt cannot simply be vanquished; it must be judged. And the Jews cannot simply be freed by force; they must find freedom because it is right, and true, and just: that all men are created equal...

Interestingly, in its greatest moments, when the Allies won World War II, they did not repeat their mistake of WWI: no longer a Paris peace conference of 1919 humiliating the vanquished Germans and demonstrating that the mighty shall rule. This time, a **Marshal Plan** that rehabilitated Germany and suggested that all Nations deserve to live in peace and prosperity, which is earned. And, as well, the **Nuremberg trials** that demonstrated that there must be justice; a reckoning of sorts. Evil cannot go unpunished, else good will never truly prevail.

Something to think about.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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