

פרשת וארא

OVERVIEW

G-d confirms the promise of the approaching liberation. Following a brief review of Moshe's and Aharon's genealogy, the text reports G-d's order to them to go at once to see the master of Egypt. Their words before him will be given convincing emphasis though miraculous signs such as the staff turning into a crocodile and the water becoming blood.

The first appearance of the brothers brings no results. At that moment the awesome succession of plagues begin. Rivers and canals turn into blood; frogs inundate the land; vermin add to the suffering of men and beasts; wild animals attack the population; pestilence, a rash of blisters and hail intensify the despair of the people - but pharaoh continues his resistance.

COMMENTARY

Aharon and Moshe before Pharaoh

Moshe is handicapped by "heaviness of speech". Aharon will serve as his spokesman. The brothers are driven by a passionate, overpowering urge to carry out the divine command. They will not be discouraged by the failure of the plagues to sway Pharaoh's determination to resist. They discount the danger to their lives by the tyrant's expected furious reaction. Moshe and Aharon are deeply conscious of the importance of their undertaking on which the future of their people depends. It is this awareness that gives them the courage that sustained them throughout their lives.

The four stages of liberation

"I will bring you out from under the burden of Mitzrayim and I will rescue you from their bondage; I will redeem you with an outstretched arm.... I will take you to Myself as a people in order to be your G-d" (6: 6-7).

"I will bring you out": I will not remove the burden of work from you so that you will be able to rise on your own from your enslavement. The burden will remain. While you are under his crushing force, I will take hold of you and lead you out from under the heavy burden. You will

remain completely passive and have no initiative whatsoever in the epic events.

"I will rescue you". On your own you will have no chance to organize a rebellion. The hand of the oppressor lies heavily upon you. I will strike his arm until he will let go of his victim.

"I will redeem your". I will be your redeemer, the Only One. No one in Egypt will show any pity for you or sympathize with your sad lot. You have but one rescuer - G-d.

"I will take you". The rescue will be the first stage leading to the ultimate goal of "being a people unto Me". Yours will not be a religion, a new cult. You will become a national entity that, for the first time in the history of mankind, will rally around G-d, its King.

The Genealogy of Moshe

Surprisingly, the Sidrah's chronological account is suddenly interrupted by the genealogy of Moshe. It is at this crucial stage in the "careers" of Moshe and Aharon that it is important to understand their personalities and character. Notwithstanding the tremendous impact of their pivotal role in the history of our people, they were still human beings, with their assets and failings and that constituted their greatness. They could have claimed the honor of princely rulers, bathing in the adulation of their people - nothing of that. At the height of their triumph when the eyes of the frightened people were on them, the Torah takes pains to remind us of their modest origin and places them on the same level as the other descendants of Yaakov's sons.

Pharaoh's magicians

One often comes up against the difficulty of comprehending the ability of the Egyptian magicians to imitate Moshe's and Aharon's initial miraculous signs. Actually, it should not surprise us. Even the false prophets managed such feats on occasion as another way to test Israel's spiritual firmness (see Deut. 13:2 ff). Through their magic tricks the magicians

succeeded in strengthening Pharaoh's resistance to the demands of the Jewish leaders.

"I will harden the heart of Pharaoh"

Several questions arise in regard to the above quote from our Sidrah. How can G-d impose punitive measures on a man who is no longer in control of his own will? Why punish a man who has been deprived of his ability to act responsibly by divine intervention? Can one take an animal to account for its actions? By intensifying Pharaoh's resistance does not G-d's intervention serve to prolong the suffering?

There are several answers. G-d intended to accelerate the people's maturity by preparing it for its future as a nation of G-d. This required a number of miraculous signs which became necessary after Pharaoh's refusal to yield. Another explanation is based on the extent of Pharaoh's deep depravity that was so great that G-d resorted to the unusual measure of depriving him of the ability to do "Teshuva". He was kept in a state of such blind delusion that the plagues had to follow one after the other in a startling rhythm. Whatever the reason, it is certain that we witness here an extraordinary phase in the history of mankind, events which our Sages compare with the creation itself.

Blood, Locusts, Vermin

The plagues open the eyes of the Egyptians to a hitherto unknown reality: G-d's rulership over nature. They saw the forces of nature as incarnations of divinity. The Nile was not only the chief source of fertility but a rational power which decreed prosperity or famine at will. Thus the very first plague serves to expose the popular myth of the rivers supreme power.

The plagues also brought sudden reversals of nature's ways. The locust, normally docile creatures that avoid contact with humans, suddenly became aggressive. Vermin, which survives only under certain climatic conditions, proliferated to become a national scourge. Egypt's pride is mortally wounded. The stage is set for the coming cataclysm.

Beasts of the wilderness, Pestilence, Boils

Egypt's wealth, its sacred oxen, its cowshed and horses are the targets of the second

group of plagues. The nation, gripped by terror, experiences a veritable conspiracy by the raging elements. It suffers not only extremely painful economic blood-letting but there is general panic and total confusion accentuated by the fact that the Jewish population was left completely untouched by the plagues (although Egyptian property given to Jews for safekeeping was also destroyed).

The confusion is complete when the magicians, ridiculed and ineffective, refuse to appear before the king in the presence of Moshe. Their influence at the court has come to an end. The entire power structure of the mighty kingdom was shattered. In the midst of the chaos, the voices of Moshe and Aharon proclaim the categorical demand: "Let my son, My first-born, let Israel go".

Hail

"G-d caused hail to come down on the land of Egypt..." And Moshe told Pharaoh: "When I lift my hand up to G-d the hail will be no more, so that you may know that the earth is G-d's". Here, for the first time, the reference to the demonstration of divine might is not tied to the threat and subsequent act of the punitive measure but following the cessation of the upheaval. "The hail will cease and you will recognize that the earth is G-d's". True mastery is revealed when the designer of a machine knows how to limit its effectiveness at will and thereby gains the respect and admiration of the layman (viz. Goethe's "Sorcerer's apprentice"). Pharaoh responded only to the effect of brute force. The stupendous impact of this plague caused him finally to sense the infinite power of the G-d of the Jews. "Now I realize that G-d is in the right and we are in the wrong. Now I have seen that G-d is the Master over the land, and not we" (9:27-28).

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