

The Greater Wrong

Dena Weiss – weiss@hadar.org

Parashat Bo 5779

Part of the drama and the frustration of the ten plagues is that, at least in theory, so many should not have been necessary. Just drinking blood instead of water, or being overtaken by a swarm of frogs, locusts, wild animals, or lice alone should have been enough. Yet Pharaoh does not relent. Occasionally, he appears to let the people go only to later retract his word and refuse to send them.¹ Even once he releases the people and they have left his land, Pharaoh decides to chase after the just freed slaves because God again “strengthened” his heart.² But what does this mean? What makes Pharaoh so stubborn and unwilling to free the Israelites? And how can we keep ourselves from becoming like him?

Pharaoh’s refusal to send the people is tied up with a surprising and noteworthy choice made by God in this week’s *parashah*. After the penultimate plague of darkness, and before the final blow of the death of the first-born, God instructs Moshe to tell the people to borrow valuables from the Egyptians:

שמות יא:ב-ג

דָּבַר נָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וְיִשְׁאַלּוּ אִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעוּתָהּ כְּלֵי כֶסֶף וְכֵלֵי זָהָב: וַיִּתֵּן ה' אֶת הַחַן הָעָם בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם גַּם הָאִישׁ מִשָּׁה גְדוֹל מְאֹד בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּעֵינֵי עַבְדֵי פַרְעֹה וּבְעֵינֵי הָעָם:

Shemot 11:2-3

Speak now in the ears of the people and they should request—each man from his neighbor and each woman from her neighbor—silver and gold utensils. And God made the people favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians. And even Moshe was considered great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people.

Benei Yisrael are not planning to return to Egypt and therefore have no way of returning the valuables that they take. Nevertheless, God tells them to borrow gold and silver from their

¹ See, for example, Shemot 10:20.

² Shemot 14:2-9.



neighbors rather than just taking them outright. This is perplexing and problematic for a number of reasons. The decision to have them borrow the property of the Egyptians seems unfair to the Israelite slaves: it robs them of the dignity of demanding compensation and forces them to beg for a loan instead. And, of course, this is also a lie. They are not planning to return this property. Why is God telling the Israelites to borrow something they will not return and turning them into thieves? Why not allow them to ask for and get what they want outright?

A close examination of the verses yields that this “trick” is consistent with the way that God communicates with Pharaoh throughout. God consistently has Moshe and Aharon request temporary freedom, when what God actually intends is a permanent emancipation. When God first appoints Moshe and Aharon, it is clear that His intention is to free His people entirely, in accordance with the promise He made to their ancestors Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’akov. It is also clear that God is going to instruct Moshe and Aharon to request a temporary, three-day holiday from Pharaoh and nothing more:

שמות ג:טז-כב

לָךְ וְאַסַּפְתָּ אֶת זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאַמַּרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם נִרְאָה אֵלַי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר פְּקֹד פְּקֹדֹתַי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת הַעֲשׂוֹי לָכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם: וְאָמַר אֲעֵלֶה אֶתְכֶם מִצְרַיִם אֶל אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי אֶל אֶרֶץ זְבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ: וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקִלְךָ וּבִאתָ אֵתָה וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְאַמַּרְתֶּם אֵלָיו ה' אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרָיִים נִקְרָה עָלֵינוּ וְעַתָּה נִלְכֶה נָא דֶרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָר וְנִזְבְּחָה לָהּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ: וְאָנֹכִי יִדְעֵתִי כִּי לֹא יִתֵּן אֶתְכֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהֵלֵךְ וְלֹא בִּיד חֲזָקָה: וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי אֶת יְדֵי וְהִפִּיתִי אֶת מִצְרַיִם בְּכָל נְפְלְאוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲעֱשֶׂה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַחֲרָיו כֵּן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם: וְנִתַּתִּי אֶת חֵן הַעַם הַזֶּה בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם וְהֵיךְ כִּי תִלְכּוּן לֹא תִלְכּוּ רִיקָם: וְשָׁאַלָה אִשָּׁה מִשְׁכַּנְתָּהּ וּמִגֵּרַת בֵּיתָהּ כָּל־כֶּסֶף וְכָל־זָהָב וְשִׁמְלֹת וְשִׁמְתֶם עַל בְּנֵיכֶם וְעַל בְּנֹתֵיכֶם וְנִצַּלְתֶּם אֶת מִצְרַיִם:

Shemot 3:16-22

“Go and gather the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘HaShem the God of your ancestors appeared to me, the God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’akov saying: I have remembered you and what has been done to you in Egypt. And I say that I will lift you out of the oppression of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizite, the Hivite, the Jebusite to a land flowing with milk and honey.’ And they will listen to your voice and you and the elders will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him, ‘HaShem the God of the Hebrews has appeared to us and now let us go a distance of three days in the wilderness and we will sacrifice to HaShem our God.’ And I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go, and even with a strong hand.³ And I will send out My hand and I will strike Egypt with all of the wonders that I will do in its midst, and afterwards he will send you out. I will cause this people to find grace in the eyes of Egypt and it will be that when you go,

³ The Hebrew literally reads, “and not with a strong hand.” The precise meaning is uncertain, but it implies that Pharaoh will not release the power without a display of God’s strength. Another interpretation is that Pharaoh himself is holding on to the Israelites with a strong hand.



you will not go empty-handed. Each woman will borrow from her neighbor and from the one who lives in her home silver and gold vessels and clothing. And you will place them on your sons and daughters and you will plunder Egypt.”

In God’s commandment to Moshe, we see that God intends to deceive Pharaoh from the beginning. He explains to Moshe that His plan is full deliverance of the people of Israel, but explicitly commands Moshe, Aharon, and the elders to ask Pharaoh only that they be permitted a brief and temporary holiday of a three days’ journey. God is similarly explicit when He says that the Israelite women should ask to borrow items that they will not return and thereby empty the Egyptian households. It is an integral part of God’s plan to ask less from Pharaoh than what He intends to take, and similarly to have His people ask only to borrow riches, which is less than what they plan to take. God’s plan incorporates a deliberate manipulation of the Egyptian leaders as well as the populace.

Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona⁴ addresses why this trickery was necessary for God to bring the appropriate retribution on to the Egyptians:

דרשות הר"ן יא

מאי טעמא לגנוב דעתו של פרעה כלל שייאמרו לו **אלהי עברים נקרא עלינו נלכה נא דרך שלשת ימים**... ולמה משה ואהרן שהיו שלוחי ה' לא יאמרו אל פרעה ביד רמה שהגיע קצם של ישראל ליגאל ושלא ישתעבד בהם עוד, **היד ה' תקצר** מהכניע לבו של פרעה להודות הדבר גם כי יאמרו אליו בפירוש?!

וזה באמת ענין סתום צריך להתבאר, ואפילו אם נדחוק בזה ונאמר שעשה כן כדי להראות קושי ערפו של פרעה שגם דבר הקל ימאן לשמוע בדבר הש"י, עדין נשאר לנו מקום ספק גדול באמרו **דבר נא באזני עם וישאלו**. וזה באמת יראה ענין זר או תימה מאד, שאע"פ שאנשי מצרים היו חייבים להם שכר שנשתעבדו בהם...לא היו ראויים לבא עליהם בעקבה ובדרכים של אנשי רמיה...כי אם לומר תנו לנו שכרנו שנשתעבדתם בנו כך וכך ממון...

אבל היתר אלו הקשרים הוא דבר אחד... רצה להביאם בענין שהם בבחירתם יכנסו במים וימותו שמה, ואלו הודיע משה לפרעה הענין בתחלה שהגיע קצם להגאל אין ספק שהיה מסכים בכך מתוקף המצוה ואל היה רודף אחריהם עוד, כי למה ירדפם אחרי שבעודם ברושתו פטרם ושלחם מאלו, לא רצה הש"י שיאמר משה לפרעה הענין כאשר הוא, אבל שיאמר שהם הולכים דרך שלשת ימים לזבוח שכאשר יגידו לו אחר כך **כי ברח העם** יחשוב פרעה מה שחשב... ולזאת הסבה עצמה **צוה וישאלו איש מאת רעהו**. שעם היות שממונם היה מותר להם ויכולין לקחתו, צוה שיבאו בעקבה, שאע"פ שיהיה זה לישראל דבר זר... וכאשר הוגד למלך מצרים ולעמו שישראל בורחים אין ספק שחשדום באנשי דמים ומרמה. שאל"כ למה יתנכלו אליהם בדברים האלה. וכל זה הגיעם בלי ספק לרדפם. שאלו אמר משה תחלה שישלחם ולא ירדפם עוד ושיתנו להם שכרם ג"כ, אין ספק שאחרי היות כן לא היו זזים ממקומם...

Derashot of the Ra"n 11

What is the reason for tricking Pharaoh at all, that they should say to him, **the God of the**

⁴ 1320-1376, Italy.



Hebrews has appeared to us and now let us go a distance of three days in the wilderness and we will sacrifice to HaShem our God. Why can't Moshe and Aharon, who were God's emissaries, not say explicitly⁵ that the time had come for Israel to be redeemed and that they will not be working them as slaves anymore? Is God's ability limited as far as convincing Pharaoh to acquiesce to this thing if they had said to to him explicitly?...

This is truly unclear⁶ and needs to be explained, for even if we were to offer the forced explanation and say that He did so in order to show Pharaoh's stubbornness that he would refuse to listen to God regarding even an easy request, the question would still remain regarding His saying, **Please speak in the ears of the people, and they should borrow.**

For indeed this seems very strange or shocking because even though the people of Egypt owed them wages for having enslaved them, [the Israelites] needn't have come to them through underhanded means and the ways of deceivers... rather they should have said, "Give us this amount of wages for your having forced us to work as slaves"...

However the single resolution of all these problems⁷ is that God wanted to bring [revenge] in that [the Egyptians] would enter into the water by choice and then die there and, if Moshe had notified Pharaoh initially that the time had come for [the Israelites] to be saved, he would certainly agree to this out of the strength of the command and he would no longer run after them. For why should he chase after them if he dismissed and sent them away from him when he was still in control? [Therefore] God did not want Moshe to tell Pharaoh what was meant explicitly and instead to say that they were going for a three days' journey to sacrifice and then, when they would tell Pharaoh that **the people had run away**, Pharaoh would think what he did think...

And for this reason He commanded that **each man should borrow from his neighbor.** For though it was the case that the Egyptians' money was permitted to them and they could just take it, God commanded that they should obtain it underhandedly, even though this was foreign to the Israelites... And when it was told to the king of Egypt and his people that Israel had fled there was no doubt that they would suspect them as being men of deceit and trickery, for if that were not the case why would [the Israelites] conspire against them in this way?

And all of this undoubtedly brought them to chase after [the Israelites]! And if Moshe had initially told [Pharaoh] that he should send them out, then he would not have chased after them, and also if he had told [the Egyptians] to give [the Israelites] their wages, there is no doubt that [the Egyptians] would not have moved from their place...

Rabbeinu Nissim acknowledges that asking to go on a brief vacation and to borrow some jewelry and clothing for the occasion were outright lies commanded by the God who promised to redeem His people completely and with great wealth. It is a ruse designed to bring the Egyptians to the Reed Sea where they will be brought to the justice that they

⁵ Literally, "with an outstretched arm," borrowed from Shemot 14:8.

⁶ Literally, "concealed" or "closed."

⁷ Literally, "the untying of all of these knots."



deserve.⁸ However, Moshe and the people did not lie in order to get something that was not theirs; they deserved freedom and they deserved to be compensated fairly for their labor. They lied only in order to make the Egyptians *think* that they didn't deserve it! If the people had phrased their request for silver and gold as the back pay that they were owed, the Egyptians would have seen the justice in that request and have given the money freely to their former slaves. But God wanted to manipulate the Egyptians into feeling that the Israelites were unlawfully escaping and taking with them property that was not theirs to take. The Egyptians were able to think that they were actually in the right in chasing down this newly created and long-beleaguered people!

These lies didn't only create occasions to display Pharaoh's stubbornness as he kept on refusing to free the people or agreeing to let them go and then changing his mind; they *created* Pharaoh's stubbornness. Because he thinks, or in fact knows, that he is being tricked, he is unwilling to let go and let God's people go. The inaccurate request that Moshe makes allows Pharaoh to think that he has been wronged and that he is completely within his rights to hold onto an unjustly enslaved people because they lied to him about the exact amount of freedom they deserved. In this moment, Pharaoh and the Egyptians actually think that they are the aggrieved parties!

In the course of conflict, people tend not to display their best behavior. And the ability to accurately say that both sides behaved badly can occasionally allow the person originally, and more accurately at fault, to excuse their own sins. Because you hit me back, I can nurse my own wounds and think of myself as a victim. I can allow your imperfect behavior to obscure the true wrongfulness of my own. I can refuse to apologize if you were not entirely blameless or refuse to forgive you if the apology wasn't just right. But we need to be better than Pharaoh and the Egyptians. We need to step out of our own hurt and look at the situation from a more abstract point of view. The person who you are in conflict with does not need to be perfect or perfectly in the right for you to acknowledge that you have harmed them and to take full responsibility for what you have done.

This is the problem that R. Tarfon articulated when he exclaimed that people do not know how to respond to criticism:

תלמוד בבלי ערכין טז:

א"ר טרפון תמיהני אני אם יש בדור הזה שמקבל תוכחה! אם אמר לו: טול קיסם מבין שיניך! אמר לו:
טול קורה מבין עיניך!

⁸ Rabbeinu Nissim does not quite adequately address why this is the way that the Egyptians need to die and why it would not suffice for them to see the Egyptians killed and brought to justice in Egypt itself.



Talmud Bavli Arakhin 16b

R. Tarfon said: I'd be shocked to find anyone in this generation who can accept rebuke! If he says to him, "Take out the toothpick from between your teeth," the other will say, "Take out the beam from between your eyes!"

The beam of lumber between the eyes of the rebuker that the person who is being reproved sees is actually the reflection in his own eyes of the toothpick, the little splinter of wood that the rebuker saw and is seeking to address. The one with the toothpick sees his own imperfection reflected in and magnified in the person who is noticing his flaw. In order for me to need to make amends with you, I need to acknowledge what I have done wrong and ignore what you have done wrong instead of embracing the human tendency to do just the opposite. Your imperfection does not render me perfect and a second wrong does not make the first wrong right. It's easy for us to slip into self-righteousness and we need to hold ourselves up to a higher standard. We need to constantly ask ourselves if we are truly acting justly or are justifying our actions. We need to look at what we have done wrong, not at what others have done to. We need to learn to be unlike the Egyptians who were so incensed at having been misled that they failed to see the magnitude of their own inexcusable behavior.

Wishing you a Shabbat of *tzedek* and *mishpat*, not self-justification and self-righteousness.

