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Parsha

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Parsha Perspectives

RABBI LEIBY BURNHAM

למתי אעתיר לך ולעבדיך ולעמך להכרית
הצפרדעים ממך ומבתוך

"For when shall I pray for you, for your servants, and for your people, to destroy the frogs from you and from your houses" (8:5)

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the Ten Plagues that were visited upon Egypt, due to their refusal of Moses' request to "Let My People Go." Of the ten plagues, the first seven are found in this week's portion, Va'eira. After most of the plagues, Moses went to Pharaoh and offered him the opportunity to stop the plagues, but ultimately, Pharaoh decided to stay the course, and waited until after the last of the plagues - the Death of the Firstborn - before finally sending the Jews out.

seems ludicrous. What would be the probability of such an onslaught of frogs being a natural occurrence?

This teaches us something powerful about the human psyche. People usually believe what they want to believe and then find justification, as opposed to simply making decisions based on facts. Pharaoh desperately wanted to believe that there was no G-d who could control him, and therefore would use any possible shred of misconstrued proof as evidence of what he was already looking for. This is why the very first dictum in Ethics of Our Fathers is "Be deliberate in judgment." If we can't see past our biases and we can't see how we're missing things, then we will be unable to access the value of all the other life enhancing ideas that follow in the rest of Ethics of Our Fathers.

Unfortunately, we see this level of intellectual dishonesty so clearly in the way the media presents the current war in Gaza. There is a preponderance of evidence indicating that Israel just wants to be left alone and would welcome peace. There is also a plethora of proof showing that Hamas is hiding behind innocent women and children whose lives they see as dispensable in their effort to wipe Israel off the map. It's a likewise established fact that Hamas is a terrorist organization that not only wants to kill every Jew, but also Americans, Europeans and anyone else who does not subscribe to their religion. While our heroes are risking their lives every minute to protect not only Israel's but even Gaza's civilians, Hamas places children on top of weapons caches. Nonetheless, the media hangs on to every bit of misconstrued evidence as a way of vilifying Israel. Let us all be thankful to those heroes who are risking their lives for our brothers and sisters, and let us also pray that just as G-d delivered us miraculously from Pharaoh, so too He should deliver our brothers and sisters in Israel from their current tribulations.

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We find a very interesting discussion between Moses and Pharaoh after the second plague. The Egyptians were suffering from billions of frogs invading every corner of their land. There were frogs in the people's bedrooms, ovens, stomachs, and every other imaginable place. After close to a week of this torture, Moses came to Pharaoh and offered respite. He told Pharaoh that he could end the plague by simply praying to G-d which would prove that G-d was running the show. Here is the dialogue:

"Pharaoh called for Moses and Aharon and said, 'Pray to G-d, and let Him remove the frogs from me and from my people, and I will send the people to sacrifice to G-d.' Moses said to Pharaoh, 'Glorify yourself at my expense. Exactly for when shall I pray for you, and for your servants and for your people, that the frogs be destroyed from you and from your houses, remaining only in the river?' Pharaoh said, 'By tomorrow.' Moses said, 'As you say. You will then know that there is none like Ad-noy, our G-d.'" (Exodus 8:4-6)

The simple question is that if Moses came to Pharaoh and offered to end this horrible plague as soon as he asked for it to stop, why in the

world would Pharaoh say that Moses should pray for it to stop tomorrow? Why not right now?

Ibn Ezra (Spain, 1092-1167) explains that Pharaoh suspected that the frogs were not miraculous but rather some sort of natural phenomenon that Moses was aware of through his use of science and astrology. He thought that Moses knew the phenomenon was about to end and therefore presented himself to Pharaoh immediately, expecting Pharaoh to ask for it to subside instantly and then, when it would, Moses would look like he had control over this natural phenomenon. Instead, Pharaoh said, "Pray for it to end tomorrow," thus upsetting Moses' ability to capitalize on the normal cessation, in the event that it was natural.

The fascinating thing about this is that it was already the second plague. The first one entailed all of Egypt's water turning into blood, including groundwater, well water, and even water already in pitchers in Egyptian homes. This was soon followed by billions of swarming frogs, many of whom hopped into burning ovens, something which is clearly supernatural. Yet Pharaoh still held out hope that it just all might be natural. It

Please pray for a speedy recovery for Bracha Elisheva bas Kayla

Parsha POINTERS

Talking Points VA'EIRA

RABBI ELAZAR MEISELS

1. GETTING TO KNOW YOU

"I revealed Myself to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E-l Sha-dai, but My Name Ad-nyoy I did not make known to them." 6:3

My Name Ad-nyoy I did not make known to them – "Lo Hodaati" is not written here (I did not make known), but, rather "Lo Nodaati" (I did not become known) meaning: "I was not recognized by them by My attribute of keeping My word, the reason for which My Name is called Ad-nyoy, which denotes that I can be trusted to keep My promises. For I made promises but I have not yet fulfilled them." - Rashi

Certainly the Almighty appeared to them using this Name of His numerous times, but as Rashi explained, this Name is the one that connotes His trustworthiness and until this point, the Almighty had not yet fulfilled His promise to them. Thus, their perception of this Name of His was incomplete. Now, with the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, they would finally witness the fulfillment of His promise and appreciate His trait of truthfulness.

It should be noted that since the Almighty works on a different timetable than humans who are severely limited in their scope, it can often appear as if He has [G-d forbid] forgotten a promise or failed to abide by one. He, however, is unconstrained by time and space, and can take long periods of time before bringing a matter to its promised conclusion. The Patriarchs, up until this point, trusted that He would keep His word to them and never doubted that for an instant, but only now would fully understand that His promises could take generations to occur in precisely the right moment, and under the ideal circumstances.

2. THE UNPOPULAR CROCS

"Aharon extended his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frog emerged and covered the land of Egypt." 8:2

The frog emerged - There was only one frog and as they struck at it, it split apart into various teeming swarms. That is the verses'

midrashic explanation. But as to its plain meaning, it may be said that the swarming of the frogs is referred to in the singular [and there were many frogs that emerged from the water initially... - Rashi

The Frog – Tzfardeah does not mean frog, but crocodile. The Egyptians worshipped a crocodile god. Therefore, in keeping with the purpose of the plagues - which was not only to punish but also to educate them about the truth of G-d's existence - the Egyptians were attacked by their very own god. Furthermore, the verse in Psalms [78:45] says that G-d sent "wild animals which consumed them, and tzfardeah which destroyed them." Frogs are not generally instruments of destruction, whereas crocodiles are. – Abarbanel al HaTo-rah

If the frog continued to reproduce each time it was struck, why didn't the Egyptians realize that they were only making matters worse by striking it, and refrain from continuing to do so? Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky Shlit"a explains in the name of his father, Rabbi Yisroel Yaakov (of blessed memory), that their illogical behavior demonstrates the incredibly destructive power of anger. When the Egyptians saw the tzfardeah, they grew frightened and angry and began to hit it. When they saw that it multiplied, they grew even angrier. Their anger prevented them from rational thinking that would have told them stop their counterattack. Often, a person who is verbally attacked is tempted to respond in kind. What he doesn't stop to consider is that an angry response will only generate more venomous attacks and make the problem even worse than it had previously been. Sometimes the best response to an attack is to remain calm and wait for it to pass. Damage will be done, no doubt, but far less than if one responds in anger.

3. IF YOU CAN'T TAKE THE HEAT

"And Hashem did as Moses requested, and He removed the wild beasts from Pharaoh, and his servants and from his nation; there did not remain even one." 8:27

Removed the wild beasts – They did not die

as did the frogs, for had they died the Egyptians would have benefitted from the skins. – Rashi

"And G-d did as Moses requested and the frogs perished from the houses, the courtyards, and the fields." – Shemos 8:9

The question remains why the frogs perished and weren't removed just as the wild beasts were? Kli Yakar (Rabbi Ephraim Lunshintz, 1550-1619) explains that herein lies a powerful message about the power of mesiras nefesh [sacrificing one's life for the sake of G-d.] Although the verse seems to indicate that all of the frogs died, in reality, a careful analysis of the verse reveals that there was one group of frogs that was not included in the list of deceased frogs: the ones that jumped into the ovens. They, the ones who consigned themselves to an almost certain death in an effort to carry out the will of the Almighty, were the only frogs who did not perish at the conclusion of the plague. All the others who sought other more cushy and safe havens from which to pester the Egyptians, died, except for the frogs that willingly sacrificed their life. The lesson derived from here is that refraining from offering ones life for the Almighty is no guarantee of life. To the contrary, sometimes only those who do, merit life.

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PartnerTALK

LESS IS MORE

RABBI REUVEN DRUCKER

Dear Rabbi,

My mentor and I just started the second chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers and we learned that a person should be just as careful to perform what appears to be an easy mitzvah as a stringent one, since we do not know the reward for any of the mitzvos. In my experience, however, I sometimes hear people in my synagogue saying that we don't really need to do a particular mitzvah, because it is just a custom or was only established by the Rabbi. This doesn't seem to me to conform with the Mishnah I just learned! How come I hear people minimizing the importance of some Mitzvos?

Confused,
Nancy G.

Dear Nancy,

I agree it is discouraging to hear people speak this way, but we shouldn't let the weaknesses of others deter us from doing what we believe is correct—and most certainly after we've learned that statement you cited from the Ethics of the Fathers. I believe that we sometimes hear the expressions you mentioned because it is an insidious aspect of human nature that we need to learn how to overcome.

Let me illustrate this point with a passage from last week's Torah portion. The Egyptians were beset by a very severe famine, as we read in the Torah portion several weeks ago. They were saved from starvation by Joseph, who had predicted the famine based on Pharaoh's dreams, and had devised a remedy that would allow the people to survive. When the Torah describes the new Pharaoh who replaced the old monarch and planned on promulgating many harsh decrees against the Jews, it states that this Pharaoh "did not know Joseph." Rashi comments that, "Pharaoh pretended he didn't know Joseph." It is unthinkable that someone in the upper echelons of Egyptian culture would not have heard about Joseph, for he had been

their savior. However, Pharaoh was in a psychological bind, since it would have been absolutely impossible for the new leader of the Egyptians to both embrace the gratitude he and the rest of his people had for Joseph on the one hand, and decree a series of punishing and persecuting edicts against Joseph's family on the other. The new Pharaoh was unable to simultaneously feel gratitude and disdain for the Jews. The only way he could make the Jews' life miserable was by pretending that he had never heard of Joseph.

Psychologists call this phenomenon "cognitive dissonance" and the case of Pharaoh is a perfect example. The human mind finds it too difficult to hold two contradictory notions at the same time. One way to relieve the tension is by disregarding one of the notions. For example, it is too difficult to rob someone who saved your child's life. If, however, one is able to convince himself that his child would have survived the threatening circumstances without intervention, then it becomes easier to perpetrate evil against such a person. Ingratitude in Hebrew is expressed by the combination of two words, "*kafoi tova*," literally, one who denies the good. By reinterpreting what appears to be good as

coming from some other source, one relieves himself of any responsibility to the person who brought about the good.

Similarly, we find this principle at work in people who minimize the importance of certain mitzvos. If these people truly felt that these mitzvos were so important, they would be unable to disregard their responsibility to perform them. As a result, they minimize their importance to gain for themselves what they believe is "freedom." This technique is the counsel of the *Yetzer Hara*—the inclination to do wrong—and we need to protect ourselves from such a mindset. From the above analysis, however, we have discovered a method to overcome such foolish thinking. We need to periodically review the fact that G-d placed us in this world to earn Eternal reward, not to gain "freedom." And it is through our efforts to observe the mitzvos, each one with equal importance, that we will be successful in fulfilling our purpose here on Earth.

All the best to you Nancy,

Rabbi Reuven Drucker

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THE Back PAGE

Soul Talk

TABLE TALK

FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBOS TABLE
OZER ALPORT

א) If Hashem wanted the Jews to be freed from their bondage in Egypt, why did He harden Pharaoh's heart (7:3) so that he would refuse to free the Jewish people instead of causing him to agree to allow the Jews to leave so that they could receive their freedom and the Torah that much sooner? (Rabbi Chaim Friedlander quoted in Peninim Vol. 8)

ב) Why was Pharaoh deserving of punishment for enslaving the Jewish people when he was only fulfilling Hashem's decree to Abraham (Genesis 15:13) that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, where they would be oppressed as slaves, for 400 years? (Rambam and Raavad Hilchos Teshuvah 6:5)

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The Rambam stated that Pharaoh was a living embodiment of the evil inclination, the *yetzer hara*. Thus, in order for us to avoid the *yetzer hara's* traps, we must learn from Pharaoh the ways in which we must not behave. We should study what he did, and do the opposite.

If Pharaoh demonstrated false humility and submission to Hashem, but reverted back to his evil ways once the crisis passed, we must do the opposite. Even after we have experienced a salvation, we must maintain the thoughts we had and the resolutions we made during our crisis, as well as the closeness with Hashem we felt in our time of distress.

How can this be accomplished? One way is to make sure that what we have accepted and agreed to is realistic. Many masters of *mussar* (ethical teachings) instruct us that changing habits must be a gradual process, and that we must be careful not to accept upon ourselves anything that might be more than we can handle. This is because the *yetzer hara* is ever ready to fight spiritual change "tooth and nail." Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe once said that in order to be successful against the *yetzer hara*, we must implement small changes that cannot be detected. If we grow slowly and gradually, the *yetzer hara* is caught off-guard when, after a while, significant change is attained.

In addition, Rabbi Wolbe explains that taking on too much is counterproductive because we set ourselves up for a likely failure. After we fail the first time, we are frustrated and depressed, and often discontinue our resolutions.

Another vital element in preserving resolutions is to appreciate even small acts of improvement. The following story, and especially the comments of the Chofetz Chaim, convey this message.

The Chofetz Chaim was approached by someone who asked him with great concern: "The *Zohar* states that any *mitzvah* performed without fear and love of Hashem is not accepted in Heaven. Who can say that

we perform the *mitzvos* with the required amount of *ahavas* (love) and *yiras* (awe) Hashem?"

The Chofetz Chaim replied, "Before the World War (WWI), I met a baker and asked him how his business was going. He replied, 'I wish I could say that business was good, but the truth is that I have been hearing only complaints. One customer says the rolls are over baked, another complains that the bread isn't baked enough. As hard as I try, I manage to sell only about 600 loaves in the morning, and another 400 I have to sell in the afternoon as animal food for a very cheap price. As a result, I lose a great deal of my profits. Rabbi, can you please give me a blessing that my situation should improve?'"

"I blessed him and then we parted.

"Shortly afterward, the war broke out and we met once again. This time the baker seemed very content, which surprised me, since everyone else was depressed because of the war. When I asked him how his business was doing, he exclaimed, 'It's just wonderful!'"

"'But it's wartime! How can it be so good?' I asked.

"'That's just it,' replied the baker. 'During a war, people will take any bread and rolls that they can get.'"

The Chofetz Chaim continued, "That is how Hashem feels about our generation. We are all involved in a tremendous war with the *yetzer hara*, and the temptations and tests for every person are astounding. Yet, people perform *mitzvos* and manage to study Torah. How wonderful! Hashem is ready to accept any of our *mitzvos*, even if they have not been fulfilled with the highest level of *ahavas* and *yiras* Hashem."

There are many components involved in maintaining one's repentance and resolutions, but growing gradually and appreciating small victories are two important aspects that can help a person to remain on course.

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