

The Path To Follow

Va'era

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The Wickedness and Pride of Pharaoh: A Lack of Teshuvah

During the ten plagues, Pharaoh was obstinate and refused to send the Jewish people out of Egypt, as it is written: “Yet Pharaoh’s heart became obstinate” (Shemot 9:7). Nevertheless, his advisors stressed and implored him: “Send out the men, that they may serve Hashem their G-d! Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” (ibid. 10:7). Moreover, we know that at certain times it was G-d Himself Who strengthened the heart of Pharaoh, as we read: “Hashem strengthened the heart of Pharaoh” (ibid. 9:12).

Pharaoh’s obstinacy is surprising, since a blinding truth came upon him as he realized the supremacy of Hashem our G-d. In fact during the third plague (lice), his advisors were already telling him: “It is the finger of G-d” (Shemot 8:15). Likewise, when Egypt was struck by the plague of hail, Pharaoh’s servants begged him: “Send out the men, that they may serve Hashem their G-d! Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” Pharaoh finally grew fearful during the plague of wild beasts, for even the animals that he had “tamed” through magic and placed in front of his royal palace began to attack and devour his servants. At that point he found himself in danger. Thus he knew that his life was threatened, depending only upon the benevolent prayer that Moshe and Aaron would say for him. Under such conditions, how could Pharaoh have continued to be obstinate?

Furthermore, despite the fact that G-d Himself strengthened Pharaoh’s heart, he could have always repented if he really wanted to. In fact regarding Elisha ben Avuya, our Sages say that a celestial voice came forth and declared: “Return you backsliding children – except Acher” (Chagigah 15a). (Note: As a result of his complete denial of Torah, Elisha is called Acher in the Talmud.)

This text is difficult to understand. Can Hashem prevent someone from repenting? Clearly not! However He usually helps whoever begins the process of teshuvah. In the above case, the celestial voice declared that Elisha ben Avuya would not receive such help. All the same, if he had been prepared to summon all the strength required, the path of teshuvah would not have been closed to him.

In regards to Elazar ben Durdaya, our Sages recount that as he was with a harlot, “she blew forth breath and said: ‘As this breath will not return to its place, so will Eleazar ben Durdaya never be received in repentance.’” However he did not lose hope, and he went to sit between two mountains, placed his head between his knees, and wept to such a degree that his soul left his body. At that point a celestial voice was heard proclaiming, “Rabbi Eleazar ben Durdaya is destined for the life of the World to Come!” (Avodah Zarah 17a).

That being the case, Pharaoh (who was an extremely intelligent man and had proof of Hashem’s great power) should have been able to control his heart of stone. What’s more is that – being a firstborn himself, and after having seen all the warnings uttered by Moshe and Aaron at G-d’s command being fulfilled – Pharaoh should have been afraid to be among the first to die during the plague of the firstborn!

That’s not all. Following the plague of darkness, Pharaoh chased Moshe and Aaron from his presence, as it is written: “Go from me! Beware – do not see my face anymore, for on the day you see my face, you shall die!” (Shemot 10:28). Such a threat seems absurd, for Moshe was above nature, and if Pharaoh had been unable to kill him in the past, how could he do so now?

We may draw the following conclusions from this discussion: Pharaoh knew that Hashem our G-d has no equal, and yet he was unable to yield before Him and admit the truth. Why? Because he was proud and had made himself into a god, as we read: “Go to Pharaoh in the morning. Behold, he goes out to the water” (Shemot 7:15). (In other words, Pharaoh claimed to be a god by pretending that he did not need to relieve himself, which is why he rose early in the morning to secretly relieve himself in the Nile.) As long as he had not humbled himself before G-d and explicitly acknowledged that he was a simple man, not a god, all attempts to turn to the true G-d remained impossible for him. In fact his teshuvah depended only on his willingness to yield. Because Pharaoh still wanted to sin, however, it meant that he had not yet yielded to Hashem.

Further on, we note that Pharaoh finally seemed to repent, for he said: “Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked ones” (Shemot 9:27). Nevertheless, this realization was only superficial, for deep down Pharaoh was unable to compromise when it came to his honor, which is why he was able to risk his own life for it. In fact he knew that he was unable to kill Moshe and Aaron, and it was only for this reason that he did not try. Still, in order to protect his pride and honor before his servants, he adopted this foolish attitude of resistance. Despite all this, he eventually turned to G-d by ignoring his pride when he realized that there was no longer any need to risk it. Upon seeing the prince of Esav drowning, as well as his own cavalry and army, Pharaoh realized that chasing after honors was not worth it. He understood that pursuing honor, jealousy, and pride was useless, since everything in the world passes away, and he himself was on the verge of perishing. At that point he was drained of energy, having no more subjects to control or being able to honor him, since they had drowned. He retroactively understood that he should not have tried to resist G-d in Egypt, for it was the same G-d Who was now subjugating him.

Pharaoh finally attained the truth when he said, at the splitting of the sea: “Who is like You among the strong, Hashem?” (Shemot 15:11). Through force of will, he could have attained this truth in Egypt, since his life was in danger with each plague, as it was at the sea. In that case, he would not have arrived at such an extreme situation.

We must realize, therefore, that teshuvah was very difficult for Pharaoh, just as forgoing his self-declared status as a god to his servants was. Hence he preferred to risk his life (by resisting G-d) rather than to renounce his self-deification. This fear of revealing his true identity to his servants no longer existed when the sea split, for all his servants had died at that point. It was then that Pharaoh realized the immensity of his error, as well as his foolishness.



Lessons from an Arrest in the Soviet Union

After the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union, the “iron curtain” came down and doors sprang open. The gaon Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik of Zurich established a yeshiva in Moscow called Torat Chaim, designed to welcome youngsters in the Soviet Union. Numerous young Jews yearning to discover Torah flocked there.

Most of these youngsters did not come from a religious background, and even less came from a yeshiva background infused with Torah. Yet thanks to their steadfast willpower and brilliant abilities, they managed to grow in the study of Torah and the fear of Hashem. A good number of them also became prominent scholars and sages.

One day, a young man joined the Torat Chaim yeshiva armed with unshakable willpower and motivated by a great desire for Torah. Nevertheless, his efforts were not crowned with success, and he was unable to progress in his learning.

When the yeshiva directors realized that this young man had progressed as far as he could, regrettably without result, they questioned his presence at the yeshiva and decided to discuss the matter with him.

Upon being told that his future at the yeshiva was now in doubt, the young man burst into tears. When he regained his composure, he began to beg the directors: “Please keep me in yeshiva! All I want is to dwell in Hashem’s house, to cleave to Torah, and to find myself among those who study it!” He then added, “Please listen to the story of my life, and you’ll definitely understand my situation better.”

Here is his story: “During the difficult era of the communist regime in the USSR, daily life was stamped with incredible anxiety. The fear of the KGB [secret police] was felt by everyone in the country. People dared not speak openly about it, knowing that someone could be ‘listening’ regardless of time or place.

“One day, as I was sat down in a restaurant for a simple coffee, nothing more, three KGB cars suddenly pulled up and a number of agents emerged. In the space of a few minutes, all the clients in the restaurant were arrested and taken away in patrol cars. Of course, I too was taken away! They placed us behind bars along with other prisoners, including criminals and delinquents awaiting trial. I had no idea why I had been arrested.

“After a few days, I was brought into an interrogation room. I was tired, weak, and depressed. The interrogator sat down in front of me, and in a curt tone he asked me what I was doing in the restaurant. I told him that all I was doing was having a simple cup of coffee, nothing more, something that everyone can agree with is not an offence. Refusing to believe me, he used harsh and cruel pressure tactics in an attempt to make me admit the reason why I was there at that time. However I stuck to my position: ‘I didn’t do anything wrong, and I have no idea what other people could have been doing.’ Despite it all, the interrogator remained suspicious of me and sent me back to my cell.

“For long weeks, I was imprisoned in appalling conditions. As the days passed, I couldn’t handle the suffering any more. If there had been a good reason to jail me, I could have accepted it. However I knew that I was behind bars for something that I hadn’t done! My frustration was growing ever greater! What was my crime? What error did I commit, such that I was forced to live with criminals and delinquents?

“Thank G-d, I was released a few months later. However I still continue to experience the trauma of that terrible incident every single day.

“Later on, I learned why I had been arrested. Three people had been talking in that restaurant, and they spoke a little too loudly about their opposition to the regime. Someone overheard them and contacted the KGB, who decided to arrest everyone there. Why? It’s very simple: To the KGB, anyone near this group of people opposed to the regime, even by chance, invariably had ‘some’ connection to them. They therefore had to be arrested and interrogated.”

The yeshiva directors listed to the young man’s account, but could not understand what connection it had to the issue at hand.

The young man continued: “The day will come when the Jewish people will be delivered, at which point the verse will be fulfilled: ‘The earth will be filled with a knowledge of Hashem’ [Isaiah 11:9]. Who will have the right to a ‘place of honor’? Those who were well-educated in Torah and adhered to it. I want to be among them as well, but the guardian will not allow me through. He will make me pass an ‘entrance test.’ He will question me on a Torah subject, and I will remain silent. How will I be able to answer if I haven’t studied?

“Then, just before rejecting me, I will say to him: ‘Do you know that I was once jailed in a Soviet prison for several weeks? Do you know why? My only crime was that I was next to a group of men who opposed the regime. Personally, I never did anything illegal, but my mere proximity to them turned me into an accomplice!’

“I’ll continue to argue my point to the head of the celestial yeshiva: ‘Actually, I never had a chance to study Torah, but at least I lived near those who studied it. Their simple proximity allowed me to cleave to them, and I am deeply connected to them.’ What was acknowledged by the Soviet authorities will obviously be acknowledged above as well!”

After such a discourse, no one imagined that this young man should not be an integral part of the yeshiva.

Guard Your Tongue!

Even When it’s the Truth

Just as it is forbidden to believe Lashon Harah if we hear it from only a single person, we must also not believe it if we hear it from two or more people. Even if what they are saying is the truth – for example, that so-and-so acted badly – the speakers have transgressed the prohibition against spreading gossip, which also pertains to truthful statements. – Chafetz Chaim

Words of Mercy

It is written, “G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him, ‘I am Hashem’ ” (Shemot 6:2).

Let us reflect on this: Since the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to Moshe from the burning bush (as we read: “He said, ‘Moshe, Moshe’ ” [Shemot 3:4]), we count 16 expressions of power, but none of them employ the term *vayedaber*, which is a harsh expression. Rather, they all employ the term *vayomer*, which is a gentle expression. Nevertheless, as soon as Moshe told the Holy One, blessed be He: “You have not delivered Your people” (ibid. 5:23), the attribute of justice immediately began to accuse him, as it is written: “Elokim [G-d] *vayedaber* [spoke] to Moshe” (ibid. 6:2). This is similar to the verse, “The man, the lord of the land, *diber* [spoke] harshly to us” (Bereshith 42:30). Furthermore, the Name Elokim designates the attribute of justice.

The attribute of mercy finally spoke in Moshe’s favor, as it is written: “[G-d] said to him, ‘I am Hashem,’ ” Hashem being the Name that designates the attribute of mercy. – Lekach Tov

Enough!

It is written, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E - L Sh-dai” (Shemot 6:3).

What does E - L Sh-dai mean?

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “I am the One Who said to the heavens and the earth, ‘Dai’ [Enough!]” When G-d created the world, it continued to expand without end, until He said to it: “Enough!”

This is why He is called E - L Sh-dai. The One Who said “Enough!” to the universe will say “Enough!” to the misfortunes of Israel.

– Avot D’Rabbi Nathan 38

The Idols of Egypt

It is written, “They did not listen to Moshe because of broken spirit and harsh servitude” (Shemot 6:9).

Can anyone be given good news without rejoicing?

Can anyone be told, “You’ve just had a son” or “Your master has granted you freedom” and not rejoice? In that case, why does it say, “They did not listen to Moshe?”

It is because they found it difficult to separate themselves from idolatry. Hence the prophet Ezekiel exclaimed, “Every man, cast away the detestable [idols] of his eyes; do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt” (Ezekiel 20:7). – Mechilta

Nadav and Avihu

It is written, “She bore him Nadav and Avihu” (Shemot 6:23).

Nadav (“generous”): He pursued his natural sense of generosity [by offering an alien fire on the altar] without taking his teacher Moshe’s advice.

Avihu (“his father”): He said that his father Aaron was good as a father, but not as a giver of advice [i.e., he did not accept his authority].

– Midrash Sechel Tov

A Staff for the Generations

It is written, “Aaron cast his staff” (Shemot 7:10).

This was the staff of Jacob, as it is written: “For with my staff I passed over this Jordan” (Bereshith 32:11).

This was the staff of Judah, as it is written: “Your signet, your wrap, and your staff that is in your hand” (ibid. 38:18).

This was also the staff of Moshe, as it is written: “Take this staff into your hand” (Shemot 4:17).

This staff was now in Aaron’s possession, as it is written: “Aaron cast his staff.” – Midrash Yilamdeinu

The Number of Frogs

It is written, “I will strike all your borders with frogs. ... And the frogs died” (Shemot 7:27 – 8:9).

Why is the term “frogs” mentioned ten times in this section? It corresponds to the ten places where the frogs were found: (1) In Pharaoh’s house; (2) in his bedroom; (3) on his bed; (4) in the houses of his servants; (5) among his people; (6) in his ovens; (7) in his kneading bowls; (8) on Pharaoh’s body; (9) on the bodies of his people; and (10) on the bodies of all his servants. – Yalkut Ma’ayan Ganim

In the Light of the Parsha

Emulating the Holy Patriarchs

It is written, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E - L Sh-dai, but by My Name Hashem I was not known to them” (Shemot 6:3).

The Gemara states, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Alas for those who are gone and not to be found! For how many times did I reveal Myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the Name E - L Sh-dai, and they did not question My character or say to Me, ‘What is Your Name?’ I said to Abraham, ‘Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth, for I will give it to you’ [Bereshith 13:17]. Yet when he sought a place to bury Sarah, he did not find one, but had to purchase it for 400 silver shekels. However he still did not question My character. I said to Isaac, ‘Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and bless you’ [ibid. 26:3]. However his servants sought water to drink and did not find it without a dispute, as it is said: ‘The herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying: “The water is ours” ’ [v.20]. Still he did not question My character. I said to Jacob, ‘The ground upon which you are lying, to you will I give it and to your descendants’ [ibid. 28:13]. However when he sought a place to pitch his tent, he did not find one until he purchased it for 100 pieces of money. Still he did not question My character, nor did he say to Me: ‘What is Your Name?’ Yet now you say to Me, ‘Neither have You delivered Your people at all’ [Shemot 5:23]” (Sanhedrin 111a).

We may explain what Hashem wanted to tell Moshe by examining the term *va’eira* (“and I appeared”). In fact this term has the same numerical value as *achar* (“after”), and we find that the word *achar* appears in three places that describe the trials experienced by the Patriarchs. Concerning Abraham it is written, “It happened *achar* [after] these things that G-d tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham,’ and he replied, ‘Here I am’ ” (Bereshith 22:1). In the same parsha it is written, “Behold, a ram *achar* [behind] caught in the thicket by its horns” (ibid. 22:13).

Concerning Isaac it is written, “Sojourn [gur] in this land” (ibid. 26:3). Here the word *gur* has the same numerical value as *achar*. This is similar to the expression used by Jacob when he addressed Esav: “I have sojourned with Lavan *va’echar* [and delayed] until now” (ibid. 32:5). Concerning Joseph it is written, “May E - L Sh-dai grant you mercy before the man, that he may release your *acher* [other] brother to you” (ibid. 43:14).

Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, reprimanded Moshe by telling him: Although your forefathers endured trials before Me, they were content with little and accepted My decrees without doubting Me. You too should have demonstrated the same attitude and not doubted Me. You had no reason to demonstrate pride by accusing Me and trying to understand My ways. You should have emulated your forefathers, who did not try to understand My ways. In everything that I did to them, they were simple spectators who accepted everything I asked of them, like a servant who carries out the orders of his master: He does ask why, but immediately does what his master tells him to do.

This is *va’eira*, and it is why G-d told Moshe: “By My Name Hashem I was not known to them [the Patriarchs].” This is because the Patriarchs did not ask G-d for explanations, but did everything that He told them, immediately, without arguing or expressing doubts in Him.

A good Jew usually looks for opportunities to perform mitzvot, be they easy or difficult. Since nobody knows what the reward for mitzvot is, we look for every opportunity to perform them in order to have as many merits as possible. However there are some mitzvot that do not require much effort and are not very expensive, and although their reward is considerable, most people do not observe them.

For example, the Gemara recounts that Rabbi Yehudah ben Levi said: “A man should always rise early to go to synagogue, so that he may have the merit of being counted among the first ten. For if even a hundred come after him, he receives the reward of them all. ‘The reward of them all,’ you say? Say instead: He is given a reward equal to that of them all” (Berachot 47b). This is a Halachah given in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 90:14), namely that we must rise early to go to synagogue in order to be counted among the first ten.

The reason for this is given by Rabbeinu Yona: Each of the first ten receives a reward equal to those who come after them, for the Shechinah resides in synagogue when there is a minyan, as it is written: “G-d stands in the congregation of G-d” (Tehillim 82:1).

From here we learn that a person who causes the Shechinah to rest upon Israel receives a reward equal to that of everyone, and the first ten are those who make the Shechinah come into synagogue. Hence they receive a reward equal to that of everyone.

The Count

In a class given to avrechim in the Beit David kollel of Holon, the gaon Rabbi Messod ben Shimon Shlita examined the mitzvah of being among the first ten and its importance.

In this context, he cited tractate Berachot, according to which Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi told his sons: “Come early to synagogue and leave it late, that you may live long.” He also explained that Rabbi Yonatan was surprised to hear that there were old men in Babylon, since longevity is only merited in Eretz Israel, as it is written: “That your days may be lengthened, and the days of your children, upon the land that Hashem swore to your fathers to give them” (Devarim 11:21). When he was told that they came early to synagogue and left it late, he said: “That is what helps them” (Berachot 8a).

In his book Ben Yehoyada, the Ben Ish Hai makes some amazing remarks on these statements from tractate Berachot: “To merit being counted among the ten first, we must understand who is counting them, and where they are counted. We know that for every mitzvah that a person accomplishes below, an angel proclaims above: ‘Glorify So-and-so, who has done this thing,’ in order for the tzaddikim to hear and bless him. Conversely, when the wicked commit a sin, it is proclaimed in order for them to hear and curse them.

“Hence for such an important mitzvah, there is obviously a proclamation that because of the first ten men, the Shechinah will come and dwell. Thus for the first man it is proclaimed: ‘Glorify So-and-so, who was the first among the ten first,’ and likewise for the second, third, and so on, until the last of the ten. When the name of the second is proclaimed, the first is blessed at the same time, for if he had not preceded him as the first, he would not have been the second. Likewise for the next, meaning that he is counted with each of those who follow, for it is a like a proclamation regarding him.”

The amazing idea is also cited in the book Atarat Zekenim, where it is written: “We must always put an effort into arriving early at synagogue.” This book adds that even if we are not among the ten first, we must still arrive as early as possible. Why? Because whoever arrives early is closer to the source of holiness, whereas the last to arrive receive it in a much more indirect way.

One who has not merited to be among the first ten for Shacharit, writes Rav Zilberstein Shlita in his book Tuvcha Yabiu, must put an effort into doing so for Mincha or Arvit. Not only that, but even a person who has already accomplished this mitzvah for Shacharit has a mitzvah to be among the first ten for Mincha as well.

It is good to point out what Rabbi Chaim Falagi writes: “We must pay greater attention to this in regards to Mincha. Even if a shopkeeper can earn a little more money by not coming to synagogue early in order to be among the first ten, it is better for him to lose some money, for his reward will be even greater than those who rise early for Shacharit, a time when there is no likelihood of financial loss” (Kaf HaChaim 19:2).

There is a marvelous segula beginning from the time that ten men are present until the end of the prayer service, a segula that we can understand with a parable:

It is like a king who summons his ministers for a meeting of his cabinet, which consists of 20 ministers. If the king presents himself after the first ten ministers have arrived, they will wait for the remaining to arrive before starting the meeting. During that time, the ministers may speak with the king and ask him whatever they like, since in any case he will be with them until all the ministers have arrived, and the king is free to speak with everyone during this time.

The same applies to the King of kings, for when the Shechinah descends into synagogue with the arrival of the first ten, it is present and it is possible and desirable to make special requests before the prayer service begins.

I Am Prayer

An Opportunity to Honor Heaven

If someone wants to come to synagogue for the prayer service, but deliberately delays in coming so as not to have to wait a few moments [for the service to begin once he has arrived], or if he leaves in the middle of prayer, prior to its completion, because he does not have the patience to wait a few minutes, there is no greater way of scorning the service of Hashem! It is as if he does not believe that the Shechinah is in synagogue during the time of prayer, so how can his prayer be accepted?

It befits the honor of Heaven to wait a few moments before the prayer service begins. It is written, “If you had hearkened to My commandments” (Isaiah 48:18) [in commenting on Berachot 6a, Rashi explains this as a reference to waiting because of the commandments that G-d gave us], and the verse ends with “your peace would flow like a river and your righteousness like the waves of the sea, and your offspring would be like the sand” (vv.18-19).

– Orchof Yosher