

Parshat Va'era

Are you Ready for Some Good News?: B'nai Yisrael's Struggle in Parshat Va'era Rabbanit Dalia Davis - Class of 2022

Parshat Va'era begins with a stirring promise. God has seen *B'nai Yisrael's* pain and heard their cries. The time has come for a multifaceted redemption.

וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהִצַּלְתִּי, וְגִאֲלְתִּי, וְלִקַּחְתִּי, וְהִבֵּאתִי...

“And will bring you out...and I will save you...and I will redeem you...and I will take you...and I will bring you.” (Exodus 6:6-8)

Surely, there could be no sweeter words for the long-suffering nation. Surely, the response should be shouts of joy and cries of relief and gratitude. However, the text makes abundantly clear that no such response is forthcoming. As the nation remains enslaved physically, so too are they enslaved emotionally and spiritually. They are, in all ways, stuck.

One might argue that *parshat Va'era*, for all of its overtures towards freedom, is actually a study in stuck-ness! We are stuck at the beginning of the *parsha* and still stuck at the end, arguably more so. God discharges plague after plague upon the Egyptians and Pharaoh retrenches with each salvo. If our ancestors felt closer to redemption after seven plagues, it is certainly unclear from the text.

How do we become stuck and why do we remain so?

Several answers are readily apparent in the text and commentaries:

...וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקִּצְרֵי רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדַת קָשָׁה:

They did not listen to Moshe due to shortness of breath and hard labor. (Shemot 6:9)

Rashi elaborates that shortness of breath is a physical result of stress or anguish. Shortness of breath goes hand in hand with a shortness of spirit. *B'nai Yisrael* were stuck and unable to even hear Moshe's message because of a physical and psychological reaction to the trauma of slavery.

Ramban understands this verse in more practical, less psychological terms.

וקוצר הרוח הוא פחדם שלא יהרגם פרעה בחרב כאשר אמרו שוטריהם אל משה, ועבודה קשה, הוא הדוחק שהיו הנוגשים אצים בהם ולא יתנום לשמוע דבר ולחשוב בו:

The “shortness of spirit” was their fear that Pharaoh would put them to death, as their officers said to Moses, and the “cruel bondage” was the pressure, for the taskmasters pressed upon them and hurried them which gave them no chance to hear anything and consider it.

B'nai Yisrael were deeply stuck and unable to hear Moshe's good news because of immediate practical considerations of life and death and unrelenting labor.

A third approach to understanding *B'nai Yisrael's* paralysis is to look for past precedent. *Maasei avot siman labanim* (the path of the forefathers is repeated by the children) is a popular Talmudic maxim. Applied here with a little twist - *Maasei imahot siman labanim* - we recognize that Sarah *Imeinu*, the first Jewish mother, was painfully stuck for nine decades!



She longed for a child and when at last the good news arrived from on high, Sarah laughed in disbelief.

Professor Vanessa Ochs relates Sarah's laughter to the concept of belated wish fulfillment. She writes: "Dreams that come belatedly true can be disconcerting. You are a different person now. You have different desires, different definitions of happiness and fulfillment. You may have resigned yourself to healing from the disappointment" (*Sarah Laughed* - Prof. Vanessa Ochs, 2004).

Perhaps the concept of belated wish fulfillment applies to Sarah's descendants in *parashat Va'era*. Their lack of response to God's promises suggests resignation. Either they had resigned themselves to misery or, at best, they aspired to nothing more than healing from endless disappointments. A life of liberty and contentment was incomprehensible, even alien. *B'nai Yisrael* just couldn't hear it.

To develop this idea further, I am drawn back to *parshat Va'era* last year when I had the incredible *beracha* of celebrating my daughter's Bat Mitzvah. In her *drasha* she connected the *parsha* to the story of Acher in Tractate Chagigah. Acher began his life as the esteemed Rabbi Elisha ben Avuya but transforms into the troubled personality of "Acher" following a perplexing mystical experience. Chagigah 15a describes how Acher's devoted student Rabbi Meir tries to stop him from sinning. Alas, Acher replies that it is too late for him to change his ways:

וְלֹא כָבֵר אֶמְרָתִי לָךְ כָּבֵר שְׁמַעְתִּי מֵאַחֲרַי הַפְּרֹגֵד: "שׁוּבוּ בְּנִים שׁוֹבְבִים" – חוּץ מֵאַחֵר!

Have I not already told you that I heard from behind the heavenly curtain, 'Return you wayward sons' - except for Acher! (Chagigah 15b)

R. Elisha ben Avuya/Acher presents as a tortured soul who believes he is beyond redemption. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains the tragic error in such thinking.

He had come to believe that he and Acher were one, and that he could thus not separate from Acher. What he heard was shaped by what was in his mind. ("The Rav on Shabbos Yom Kippur and Acher," as cited in *Torah Musings*)

Rav Soloveitchik believes that Acher can repent and return to his former self. However, by choosing to believe that he can never return, he succumbs to the life of Acher. No amount of pleading by Rabbi Meir could free R. Elisha ben Avuya from Acher if he did not act to free himself.

As the Talmud states:

אֵין חַבּוּשׁ מִתִּיר עַצְמוֹ מִבֵּית הָאֲסוּרִים

"A captive cannot free himself from prison"

(Berachot 5b). This statement appears as a reflection on an interaction between Rav Yochanan and who is visiting the sick Rabbi Chanina. In seeking to offer healing to Rabbi Chanina, Rav Yochanan extend his hand and says: הַב לִי יָדְךָ, give me your hand. However, unlike Acher, Rabbi Chanina is ready to be saved, יְהִב לִיהָ יָדָהּ, he gives him his hand, וְאַוְקָמָהּ, and he helps him stand up. Though a prisoner alone

cannot free him/herself from prison, s/he needs to be ready to walk out of the open door.

In *parshat Va'era*, *B'nai Yisrael* are still too consumed by their suffering to walk out of their prisons. However, over the course of the next couple of *parshiyot*, they succeed in transforming from a people who cannot hear Moshe to a people who follow his word, paint their doorposts red, grab their unleavened bread, and walk towards a new life.

When they were ready to envision this new life, they were open to receiving the hand God offered them through a redemption of epic proportions - וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהִצַּלְתִּי, וְגִאֲלֹתִי, וְלִקְחֹתִי, וְהִבַּאתִי.

May we merit the wisdom to know when we get stuck in life, and be blessed with the openness and vision to discern a path to redemption.



Rabbanit Dalia Davis majored in Jewish History and Dance at Barnard, studied in Israel at Nishmat, received an M.A. in Jewish Education from Y.U. and a certificate in Talmud and Halacha from GPATS. Rabbanit Dalia co-founded Uprooted: A Jewish Response to Fertility Journeys. She teaches Judaic studies at Minneapolis's HMJDS and is designing a youth curriculum for Congregation Darchei Noam. Rabbanit Dalia served as Rosh Beit Midrash for Merkavah Women's Torah Institute in Berkeley, taught Melton courses in Springfield, MA, and served as Jewish dance educator for the Foundation for Jewish Camps. She created Beit Midrash in Motion, a fully embodied approach to Jewish learning.