

Parshat Bo Is Pharaoh Feeling Guilty? Sarah Rosenberg

The plague script is well known: Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites leave to worship G-d, Moshe and Aharon threaten Pharaoh with a plague, Pharaoh still says “no,” a plague ensues, then Pharaoh calls back Moshe and Aharon to plead that they stop the plague, and Moshe or Aharon or both make it happen through G-d’s intervention. We see this sequence of events play out multiple times, both in this week’s parsha, Parshat Bo, and last week in Parshat Va’era.

But a closer look at these conversations reveals multiple strange, unexpected phrases. Twice Pharaoh admits his guilt, saying חטאתי, I have sinned. We see it first after the plague of hail, when Pharaoh says:

חַטָּאתִי הַפְּעַם הַזֶּה יָדִיק וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי הַרְשָׁעִים (שמות ט:כז)

I sinned this time, G-d is righteous and I and my people are evil (Shemot 9:27)

This is quite a statement from Pharaoh, calling himself and his entire people evil. Ostensibly, Pharaoh’s sin is refusing to allow B’nei Yisrael to worship G-d in the desert. Yet it’s interesting that Pharaoh also calls attention to the sin of the Egyptian people. Perhaps he recognizes that Egyptians perpetuate an immoral system and even help kill Israelite children.

Still, we must remember Moshe’s and Aharon’s request is *not* to free the Israelite people. Rather, they simply want to go into the wilderness for three days and observe a festival for G-d. Moshe never requests complete freedom. But whenever Pharaoh concedes, offering to let just the men leave or to let everyone leave but not their flocks, Moshe provides a technical reason for why that isn’t enough. All of B’nei Yisrael and its animals must go as well. Pharaoh grows increasingly suspicious, but neither of them explicitly acknowledge the possibility that Moshe is deceiving Pharaoh and B’nei Yisrael will instead escape to freedom.

Perhaps, then, the sin of Pharaoh and his nation is not recognizing G-d’s power and commands. Not that these plagues are supposed to turn Egyptian polytheists into Jewish monotheists. Pharaoh says in his and Moshe’s first conversation: לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־ה', I do not know G-d (Shemot 5:2). G-d is not necessarily looking to proselytize the Egyptians, but G-d does want recognition. G-d is more powerful than the Egyptians’ gods, including Pharaoh, a demigod.

Pharaoh’s second admission of guilt occurs after the locusts. He says:

חַטָּאתִי לֵה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְלָכֶם (שמות י:טז)

I have sinned against Hashem your G-d and you. (Shemot 10:16)

Here Pharaoh does not mention the Egyptian nation but instead focuses on his own wrongdoing toward G-d and toward “you,” לָכֶם. Many commentators assert that this last part serves as an apology to Moshe and Aharon for harshly kicking them out of the palace during their earlier conversation. Yet this is strong language for such a banal action. לָכֶם is in the plural and could refer to Moshe and Aharon, but it could also represent an admission of guilt toward all of Am Yisrael. In this context, the sin would not be enslaving the Israelites, since this would not even

be relevant to the conversation—Moshe is solely asking to go worship G-d in the desert for three days. In this reading, Pharaoh's admission of guilt would be for refusing to allow Am Yisrael to do so. It would concern religious freedom rather than servitude.

The final plague—death of the firstborn—breaks through Pharaoh's last bit of resistance. In his final conversation with Moshe and Aharon, Pharaoh concedes and allows all of B'nei Yisrael and their flocks to leave for their festival. Yet he ends with a strange line:

גַּם-צֹאנֵיכֶם גַּם-בְּקָרְכֶם קָחֻ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם וּלְכוּ וּבְרַכְתֶּם גַּם-אֵתִי
 (שמות יב:לב)

Take also your flocks and your herds as you said and leave, and bless me as well (Shemot 12:32)

The commentators struggle with this last clause. Why would Pharaoh ask Moshe and Aharon for a blessing? Rashi cites the midrash and says Pharaoh himself was a firstborn, so he was worried for his own life. This explanation is strained, as all the firstborns had already died. Pharaoh had clearly been spared; why would he be killed now? Ramban offers an alternate explanation: Pharaoh is asking for no further punishments for his treatment of the Israelites, though again, it had been made clear the plagues would cease with the Israelites' departure, so this explanation is also not compelling. The Or HaChaim adds simply that Pharaoh is asking for help in rebuilding Egypt. But his use of the singular, "bless *me* as well," casts doubt on this explanation.

This clause feels like a last-minute plea in a moment of desperation. Perhaps Pharaoh panics as the full devastation of the plagues finally hits him. He realizes the full extent of G-d's power and recognizes his wrongdoings in the earlier conversations, that חטאתי לה' אלקיכם. Though Pharaoh is hardly a monotheist, polytheists can believe in G-d while still believing in their own deities. Asking Moshe and Aharon for a blessing (presumably from G-d through them) may be a way of acknowledging his defeat. It has been made clear to him and all of Egypt that G-d is triumphant and is the more powerful one, which was a justification for the plagues all along:

וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי ה' בְּנֹטְתִי אֶת-יָדִי עַל-מִצְרַיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם
 (שמות ז:ה)

The Egyptians will know I am G-d when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out B'nei Yisrael from their midst (Shemot 7:5)

Though Pharaoh will later chase down B'nei Yisrael when he realizes that they do not plan to return from their three day journey, he now knows G-d and concedes to G-d's power. He realizes that he needs the blessing of G-d. It's not teshuva, but perhaps it is a good first step.



Sarah Rosenberg came to Yeshivat Maharat after working with high school students at the Tikvah Fund. She received her B.A. from Johns Hopkins University in International Relations and History. Sarah planned to enter the world of Washington, D.C. think tanks after completing internships at various policy research institutions but decided during her senior year to instead pursue further her Jewish education. She then spent a year at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and discovered her love of beit midrash learning. Sarah lives in Manhattan and can be found baking challah, browsing used bookstores, and wrestling with Jewish texts.