

Parshat Va'era:
Savlanut! Undoing the Web of Enslavement
Rabbanit Michal Kohane
Class of 2020

“The world was created through Ten Utterances, our sages tell us” (Pirkei Avot 5:1). בעשרה מאמרות נברא העולם... (פרקי אבות ה:א)

And yet, one wonders: The same God Almighty who can create a perfect world in 10 sayings, could do so in one! Why the extra work then? Let's hold the question while we look at this week's Torah portion.

The journey of a band of slaves becoming a free people, is fascinating, perhaps because it's something that each person can identify with on many levels. Whether the story of one's birth, or our struggle with various kinds of mitzrayim – narrow places - of enslavement (physical, emotional, spiritual) and our complicated journey to freedom.

Once again, we read this week, about the first seven of the Ten Plagues, reminiscent of the Ten Utterances as well as the later Ten Commandments; and once again we may wonder, why so many plagues? If G-d – or anyone for that matter- wants to get someone out of a bad situation, why not just go in and get them out? And the people? Didn't they know they were suffering in slavery? Didn't they groan and moan, crying and wanting to get out??

Rashi, the medieval commentator, points to Shemot 6:9: “and they did not listen unto Moses due to impatience of spirit, and cruel bondage”. Drawing on the unique term “*kotzer ru'ach*” – literally meaning, shortness of breath, he says that someone whose breath (“*ru'ach*”, also wind, spirit, soul) is short, cannot have long breathing. Isn't Rashi stating the obvious?

Rabbi Binyamin Lau explains Rashi: “This is like a person who is experiencing an asthma attack, and seeks immediate relief. As he reaches for his inhaler, someone tells them about an experimental new drug which might be available someday. The patient's reaction is likely to be – I'm choking here, and you're talking to me about something long term in the future? Likewise, the rulers of Egypt were pressuring the Children of Israel, leaving them breathless, unable to hear anything”. Next, G-d explains to Moses the famous stages to the delivery from bondage, using the *arבע לשונות* גאולה: Four Expressions of Salvation:

“and I shall take you out.... And I shall save you.... and I shall redeem you... and I shall take you to me unto a nation” (Shemot 6:6-8), which are the basis for our Four Cups on Passover. And again, we wonder. We can easily understand the asthma patient metaphor, but here we're talking about G-d! Why not just get the people out already? After all, they were in so much anguish and G-d can do anything!

Inspired by watching “[Chatufim](#)”, the Israeli TV drama that was bought in the U.S. and became Homeland, I realized the devastating pattern of enslavement.

Chatufim tells the story of three IDF soldiers who are kidnapped and kept in captivity for 17 years. The complex and highly recommended show, takes a serious look into the psychology of the kidnapped. It shows what happens to someone who is kept in isolation, beaten up (physically and emotionally) and yet, at the same time, cared for and fed. Each one of these three components is critical to the combination, and creates a complete dependency of the kidnapped to his capturers. This pattern repeats itself in all abuse situations, from that of POW's, to battered women, to the Children of Israel in Egypt. We'll see it later, when the Children of Israel will "remember the fish, which we ate in Egypt for free; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic" (Bamidbar 11:5). Is their imagination running wild? Are they suffering from heat stroke? Or perhaps, not everything was bad in Egypt, or else slavery would not have been possible. Too much oppression ultimately begets escape, riots and revolts, or the death of captive, situations the oppressor usually want to avoid. It takes the right mixture of isolation (in this case away from their land, from the silent G-d), harsh labor and torture (as in the back breaking work and killing of the baby boys,) as well as care ("free food" and a sense of safety) to create the ultimate slavery.

When we see people in abuse situation, we often wonder: why doesn't this person who is in so much pain, just walk out? If living in Egypt didn't work anymore, why didn't Jacob's children travel the relatively short distance home, with the many caravans and merchants who passed by? Similarly, why didn't the Jews of the 1930's leave Europe? Why doesn't the battered woman walk out on her abuser? Why doesn't our hero in *Chatufim* cross the border, not even a few kilometers away, even though there are times he can? Why don't we free ourselves from what's holding us down internally?

Because from where we stand during these moments, it's not possible. The successful captor knows it. The successful redeemer must know it too. The carefully constructed web designed to keep one in, must be carefully undone to ensure a complete and safe journey out. Hayim Sabato in his book "Ahavat Torah" points out that the "Four Expressions of Salvation", G-d's plan which He shares with Moses, appear in three verses. Which correspond to the three elements that hold one in, and parallel the three elements needed in the Jewish People's redemption: The Exodus, the Covenant at Sinai, and the journey to the Land of Israel. These further parallel to the three "*regalim*", our holidays that celebrate that journey, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. The journey takes a detailed plan in order to be successful. Likewise, when encountering enslavement, from within or without, maybe we shouldn't judge too quickly. Even G-d takes time when delivering a band of slaves from their oppressor. We too, have to be patient with the journey ahead.



Rabbanit Michal Kohane was a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, Federation executive director and more. Most recently she was the Rosh Kehila of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn. Rabbanit Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an MS in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and holds a PsyD in organizational psychology. Rabbanit Michal's first novel, Hachug ("Extracurricular") was published in Israel by Steimatzky and she writes a weekly Torah blog. Now back in Israel where she grew up, she continues to be a scholar in residence in Israel and abroad.