

**Parshat Bo:  
With All Your Heart**  
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*Class of 2019*

On God's orders, Moshe has just threatened Pharaoh with a plague of locusts, a swarm so thick the land beneath it will become invisible. Pharaoh's advisors are trying to convince him to spare Egypt and let the Israelites go. They make a convincing argument ("הטרם תדע כי אבדה מצרים" "Don't you see yet that Egypt is lost?"), and Pharaoh relents. Calling Moshe and Aharon to him, he says:

Go, worship your God. And by the way, who all will be going? (Shemot 10:8)                      לכו עבדו את ה' אלקיכם מי ומי ההלכים (שמות י"ח)

It's a weird question. Who will be going? Moshe has told Pharaoh over and over again: The God of the Hebrews commands you to let His people go so that they may worship Him. Clearly, it's the Jewish people who will be going. But Pharaoh still needs clarifying, and Moshe responds:

With our youth and with our elders we will go, With our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go Because we have a festival for God (Shemot 10:9)                      בנערינו ובזקנינו נלך בבנינו ובבנותנו בצאננו ובבקרנו נלך כי חג ה' לנו (שמות י"ט)

Moshe makes it as clear as can be for Pharaoh. It's all or nothing. If you are letting us go, you are letting **all** of us go. Pharaoh is unwilling to agree to this, and he sends Moshe and Aharon away, and along comes the plague of the locusts.

It's a beautiful moment of leadership on the part of Moshe, and a whole dvar torah could be written on the power of his words here; on the importance of including all parts of the Jewish community, young and old, men and women, in our rituals and traditions. However, what I would like to focus on here is Pharaoh's response. He is infuriated by Moshe's answer:

And he said to them: It will be so that God is with you. If I send you all and your children. It is clear that there is evil in you (Shemot 10:10)                      ויאמר אלהם יהי כן ה' עמכם כאשר אשלח אתכם ואת טפכם ראו כי רעה נגד פניכם (שמות י"י)

In order to understand Pharaoh's anger, we have to remind ourselves what Moshe is asking for. He is not asking for Pharaoh to free the Israelites. Rather, God has commanded Moshe to ask Pharaoh to allow the Israelites a three day journey into the wilderness to worship God. As far as Pharaoh knows, that's it, it's just a three day break from their intense labor in order to sacrifice to their God. This begs a very important question: why the unbending resistance from Pharaoh? Forget that it's a reasonable request, that surely Egypt can survive three days without the labor of the Hebrew slaves. At the very least, it seems far more politically expedient for Pharaoh to agree to Moshe's request than to put his people through the horrors of the ten plagues. Why put up such a huge fight over a measly three day vacation?

The answer lies at the heart of Moshe's request, what has by now become a mantra repeated time and again in his meetings with Pharaoh:

Thus says Lord, God of the Hebrews Send out my people so that they may serve me (Shemot 9:1)                      כה אמר ה' אלקי העברים שלח את עמי ועבדני (שמות ט:א)

The striking truth is that Pharaoh intuitively understands the central lesson of Shemot: you cannot serve one Master while still subject to another. Pharaoh and God understand each other all too clearly; they speak the same

language of power. Pharaoh knows that his grip on the Jewish people lies in his ability to control them completely. If the entire people takes a three day journey into the wilderness to solidify their commitment to their God, it is as good as him setting them free altogether. “It will be that God is with you if I let you all go.” You will no longer be under my control; I will have been replaced by God.

Here we realize that Pharaoh knew the stakes of the game all along. He has been very careful in his language thus far. If you look closely, the two times he has come close to capitulating to Moshe before this he has intentionally avoided the word עבד, to serve or to be enslaved. Instead he uses the word זבח, to sacrifice to:

...Plead with the Lord to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will send the people out to **sacrifice** to God (Shemot 8:4)

...העתירו אל ה' ויסר הצפרדעים ממני ומעמי ואשלחה את העם ויזבחו לה'. (שמות ח:ד)

And Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Go and **sacrifice** to your God in the land.” (Shemot 8:21)

ויקרא פרעה אל משה ולאהרן ויאמר לכו זבחו לאלהיכם בארץ (שמות ח:כא)

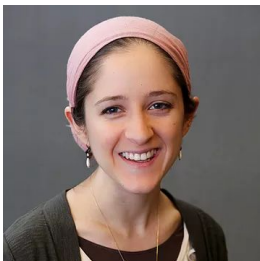
In both cases, Pharaoh is craftily avoiding any language that implies that the Israelites will be allowed to fully serve God. He will concede to allowing them to momentarily sacrifice to God while still confined within the bounds of Pharaoh’s realm of power, both physically and spiritually. But if they were truly allowed to go out into the wilderness and serve God fully with their entire hearts and minds, the Israelites would inevitably break free from Pharaoh’s control. You cannot serve one Master while enslaved to another.

This revelation allows for a powerful rereading of the underlying motivation behind the ten plagues. God says at the beginning of our parasha:

...Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that **you** may recount to **your** children and your children’s children how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed my signs among them **in order that you may know that I am the Lord.** (Shemot 10:1-2)

...בא אל פרעה כי אני הכבדתי את לבו ואת לב עבדיו למען שתי אתתי אלה בקרבו: ולמען תספר באזני בנך ובן בנך את אשר התעללתי במצרים ואת אתתי אשר שמתים בם וידעתם כי אני ה': (שמות י:א-ב)

Pharaoh is not the one who needs to learn a lesson. He knows the costs of ultimate power and what it would mean for the Jewish people to truly serve God. It is the Jewish people who still need to learn this lesson. They need to see the progressive power struggle between Pharaoh, the only god they’ve ever known, and God. They need to come to understand what it will truly mean to serve God. They will not perform a simple sacrifice and return to life as it was. Rather, they are being asked to give of themselves fully; to break any bonds that pull them to serve other sources of power and to fully commit to serving God.



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