

PARSHAS VAEIRA

תשפ"ב

At the end of last week's parsha, Moshe and Aharon come to Pharaoh with a message from "Y-K-V-K, Elokei Yisroel". The Shem Havayoh means Hashem is infinite and ever-present. The Shem "Elokei Yisroel" means this is a special nation with a special relationship to their G-d. The Egyptians knew who the Ivrim were – Yosef was always referred to derogatorily as an Ivri and was treated as a second-class citizen in Egypt – always looked down upon in disgust. Yisroel means we are a nation in the presence of Hashem always – we are always relating to Hashem in everything we do.

Moshe plays a game of negotiation with Pharaoh to release Klal Yisroel, and this is for a number of reasons. One reason is to expose Pharaoh for who he really is. In the beginning, Pharaoh is given a chance to allow the Jews to leave temporarily, but he didn't even let that. Moshe exposes the absolute cruelty and wickedness of Pharaoh when he increases the workload on the Jews for no reason.

He also exposes the bankruptcy of Pharaoh's whole belief system. Pharaoh believed in avodo zoro. It is basically a belief that you can control the forces of nature by worshipping the spiritual beings that are in charge of those forces. But Hashem is above nature and has absolute control over all these forces and beings. He can't be bribed or paid off. He is above the whole system – Pharaoh can't relate to it at all.

Hashem now introduces Himself to Moshe as "Kel Shakkai". Rashi explains that towards the Ovos, Hashem had made many promises and commitments about a future Klal Yisroel that were not yet kept. Now things will change. The promises will now be fulfilled. Moshe performs a miraculous sign for Klal Yisroel. He took water from the Nile and spilled it out on the Earth and it became blood. Why water from the Nile specifically? It was to show that which Egypt regarded and worshipped as a source of life will become a source of death.

Then Moshe comes to Pharaoh when he is visiting the Nile to strike all the water in Egypt and turn it into blood. The fish will die – life turns to death. He is telling Pharaoh: Your deity is subject to Hashem's control. But then comes the incredible irony. The Chartumim of Egypt say, "You know what? We can also turn the water into blood!" – and they do so. They don't realize that they have just taken the very thing they have been worshipping their whole lives, and showed that it is not really worthy of worship. In their rush to deny the power of Moshe's message, they discredited their own god! How blind they are to the emptiness of their beliefs. You can violently shake a person to make him realize he is living a life of illusion and it won't work. People prefer to live in denial. Even if it leads to complete absurdities.

Pharaoh refuses to let the reality sink in. The reality is telling him that if he doesn't listen to Moshe and Aharon and obey Hashem's command to let Klal Yisroel go, he will lose his entire economy. His country will collapse. But Pharaoh cannot allow himself to face such a possibility. It simply isn't possible that he can lose everything. So he lives in denial and refuses to give in – fooling himself into thinking he can get through it all regardless.

People think they have it all figured out in the way it is convenient for them. When you try to point out that the truth is the opposite of what they think, you are simply ignored.

The Egyptians carry on with their self-deception. They are willing to pay the Jews for blood that miraculously turns into water because they drew it – just to avoid giving in.

Then the tzfardim come from the same Nile they worshipped. It will drive them to complete distraction. Pharaoh finally caves in to the pressure and allows Klal Yisroel to leave to worship Y-K-V-K so long as these tzfardim just go away. So Moshe snaps his fingers and they all magically disappear. But Pharaoh is not impressed. The moment they are gone, Pharaoh immediately goes back to his stubborn illusion of control and refuses to keep his word.

Then we have makkas kinnim. And here, Moshe does something the Chartumim can't replicate. They cannot create life from inanimate matter. Only Hashem can do that. They acknowledge it is the finger of Hashem. Moshe Rabbeinu is clearly in touch with a power that can turn a source of life into death and then turn around and create life.

The next phase is to show that Hashem is "b'kerev ho'oretz." He is an active, conscious force in human affairs that rewards and punishes people for their actions.

Then the next phase is to show "ayn komoni b'chol ho'oretz". He is above and beyond any limitations of the forces of nature. The Egyptians worship nature as the ultimate forces that influence their world. Hashem will show He is beyond any force that exists in nature.

At the end, Hashem demonstrates complete control of the world.

What does this story mean to us today?

We live in a "scientific" world. Everyone in the West grows up to believe that science is the be-all-end-all of reality. The laws of nature never change and they alone cause everything to happen in the universe. And it is true that science has made tremendous advances in understanding the physical world. People get enthralled by the power and scope of scientific knowledge. But this parsha is telling us that Hashem is beyond this world and He controls everything. The laws of nature are just tools in Hashem's hands and can be manipulated at will to give reward and punishment. With today's scientific mindset, it is a very hard concept to accept.

But now, given our experience with Covid, it should be a little easier.

Two years ago, there was a little virus from China which the doctors thought they had all figured out in the first few weeks. The scientific establishment made all kinds of predictions about how it worked, and what it will do, and how it will spread. All their predictions were proven wrong – time and time again.

I remember when it began to spread from China to Europe, and Italy was suffering badly, I recalled the midrash about Titus, the rosho, coming out of the Kodosh HaKodoshim. He boasted that He defeated Hashem Himself when he stuck his sword into the paroches and blood came pouring out. Hashem responded that all I need is a little, tiny creature to conquer you, Titus. He send a worm which entered Titus' nose. It ate away at his brain for years until it grew to the size of a small bird and he died. Just a tiny creature was all Hashem needed to humble someone with such an outsized ego. You think you control the world? Hashem will tell us there is a force beyond the world.

I was wondering: How would people react today if they were confronted with one of the makkos Moshe Rabbeinu performed in Egypt. People – even Orthodox Jews – would immediately be skeptical and try to analyze it and explain it away scientifically. Very similar to Pharaoh. We don't want to hear the message that we are not in control of our world. We prefer to live with an illusion rather than confront the

uncomfortable reality – even if the reality is trying to shake us up.

Returning to the beginning of the parsha, we have the four phrases of redemption. Why is Hashem doing all of this? Just to free the Jews from slavery? Why should Hashem care about that?

First of all, Hashem cares about our physical suffering – we are the children of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov. He releases us from the psychological torture of not having satisfaction from our work. But He won't just release us from all these forms of slavery. He will take us out with tremendous signs and wonders – you will learn deep lessons from these makkos – that Hashem runs the world with precise cheshbonos of reward and punishment. There are no other powers besides Hashem. When you realize all this, then you can become My nation.

Yes, Hashem cares about our physical and psychological welfare. But there is something else that is operative. There is a goal and a reason for turning Egypt upside down. We are going out because we are Hashem's nation and we are going to serve Him instead of Pharaoh. It is to ultimately bring Klal Yisroel to Eretz Yisroel and serve Hashem there in the most ideal way. It is not just a national homeland. We are a separate nation with a separate culture – completely different from all other nations. I promised all this to Avrohom Ovinu.

Moshe conveyed this message to Klal Yisroel, but they weren't ready to receive it yet. Why? Hard work and shortness of breath. People can't see beyond their immediate circumstances – especially if they are going through difficult times. But Hashem brings difficult times because He wants people to see the bigger picture.

The same is happening today. We are so embedded in our little narrow world and we don't see what is happening. The world is totally out of control, morally and socially. The world is going totally berserk. There is a pandemic which no-one understands anything about. People thought they could go back to normal, but there is never going to be a "normal" ever again. Iran is boasting that it has the plans and the weapons to blow up the nuclear reactor in Dimona, in southern Israel, causing an existential threat to the State of Israel on a level that we haven't seen before. The world is being turned upside-down and it won't go back to normal.

Hashem is telling us very clearly: I run the world. I'm in charge. Don't try to pretend you can control what is happening. You are not in control of anything in your life. Nothing is stable today. There is nothing that can give you security other than Hashem. This is a hard message for people to adapt to. In Egypt, the Egyptians refused to adjust to reality with makkoh after makkoh. And even after 8 makkos, 80% of Klal

Yisroel couldn't adapt to a new way of thinking. Most weren't capable of envisioning themselves leaving Egypt and going to Har Sinai. So Hashem kills them there.

At the same time that Hashem brought Covid, he brought a social upheaval which is destabilizing the entire world. The midrash about Maaseh Bereishis says the tohu and bohu and choshech and tehom correspond to the four exiles of Jewish history. The last and longest of the exiles, Tehom, is Rome, which Chazal say morphed into Christianity. It will seem to go on forever, but eventually there will be a ruach Hashem – Moshiach hovering over the waters of the tehom. Edom will eventually crumble. The midrash says the waters referred to are the waters of Torah. The widespread learning of Torah precedes the coming of Moshiach.

We see very clearly today that Christianity is crumbling in Europe and in the U.S. In addition, there will be widespread, serious limud Torah. The ruach of Moshiach is hovering. When will it land? With Torah.

When normalcy has gone completely out the window, there is only one thing we can hold on to: Torah. But people have to be open to hearing the message. They have to break out of their old, comfortable patterns of thinking.

I have said many times. If at the precise stroke of midnight there would be a Bas Kol thundering from Heaven saying "I am Hashem", how many people would stop and hear the message and change how they lived? I'm not talking about the non-Jewish world or even the secular Jewish world. How many frum Jews would want to explain it away as some freak accident of nature instead of using it to do some serious cheshbon hanefesh about how real Hashem is to them?

This is what Moshe wants Pharaoh to do – break out of his old habits and ways of thinking about the world. There is something beyond. Then he tells Klal Yisroel: Why am I doing this? Because I want you to see the truth as well.

As we will read in the beginning of the next parsha, Hashem says He is finished with Pharaoh. The miracles are for us as well. We need to internalize the lessons of yetzias mitzrayim and pass them on to all generations how Hashem played with Egypt. They will remember for millennia that Hashem is in charge of human history. This is why yetzias mitzrayim is such a key part of our Jewish identity.

When everything has gone absolutely berserk and no-one knows what tomorrow will bring, we have to know there is only One stable reality in this unstable world: Hashem. This is the lesson of yetzias mitzrayim.