

The Birth of a Jewish Leadership Ethic in the Sands of Egypt

In the Exodus narrative, Pharaoh's¹ cruelty to the Jewish people is, of course, a given. Yet, what is more subtle, though no less important, is the callousness with which Pharaoh relates to his own nation. As we read the first seven of the ten plagues in this week's portion, Vaera, we cannot help but be struck by the degree to which Pharaoh seems completely unconcerned with the suffering and death of the Egyptian masses.

Before adducing evidence from the text to support this thesis, there is perhaps an even stronger argument to be made from omission. Nowhere does the Torah record Pharaoh sending out messengers, let alone personally emerging from the palace, to ascertain the damage caused by each plague to the Egyptian populace. There would be no Churchillian visits to bombed out neighborhoods. This is especially noteworthy considering the fact that Pharaoh certainly does make sure to ascertain whether or not the Jews were suffering from these supernatural plagues². Apparently, Egyptian suffering was not of sufficient interest for Pharaoh to wish to know the simple facts.

During the first plague, as the Egyptian people are desperately digging around the Nile for water³, Pharaoh does not send in federal emergency relief, let alone, offer a word of comfort. On the contrary, the Torah records that Pharaoh retreated into his own palace⁴, and insulated himself from the terrible plight of his own people.

During the second plague, when Pharaoh is mildly humbled, and calls to Moshe and Aharon to pray for some relief, it is striking that he asks for the plague to be removed from him, and only then, from his people⁵. There is no question as to who comes first in this narcissist's mind⁶. Moreover, when Moshe asks when, exactly, he should pray for the plague to cease, Pharaoh, haughty and stuffed with pride, does not ask for an immediate cessation to the suffering of his people. It is more important to Pharaoh to demonstrate his machismo, that he can withstand the pain for another twenty four hours⁷, rather than be concerned enough with the suffering of the average Egyptian to plead for immediate relief.

It is not as if Pharaoh was carrying out the will of the people in refusing to yield, or even the self serving interests of his closest advisors. On the contrary, in the immediate aftermath of the third plague, Pharaoh's trusted sorcerers, in a moment of remarkable honesty, told Pharaoh that these plagues were the work of God⁸.

¹ In this essay, we will be referring to the second Pharaoh, not the first one who enslaved the Jews, but the second one, who continued his predecessor's policy, and refused Moshe and Aharon's requests to allow the Jewish people to engage in religious ritual. It was this second Pharaoh who is met with the ten plagues. For the transition between the two rulers, see Shemot 2:23.

² Shemot 9:7.

³ Shemot 7:24.

⁴ Shemot 7:23.

⁵ Shemot 8:4

⁶ This point becomes even clearer following the fourth plague, when Pharaoh asks Moshe and Aharon to pray *only* for him, and not for the people at all. (Shemot 8:24). For precisely the same phenomenon following the eighth plague, see Shemot 10:17. See also Pharaoh's reaction following the tenth and final plague, when again, he asks Moshe and Aharon to bless *him*, see Shemot 12:32.

⁷ Shemot 8:6

⁸ Shemot 8:15.

Implied in their statement was a need for him to recognize that this was a losing battle. Of course, Pharaoh knows better, and disregards his advisors warnings. On the contrary, as noted by Ramban, he never seeks their counsel again. Following the seventh plague, at the very beginning of next week's portion, Pharaoh's advisors, with a brazenness triggered by sheer desperation, accuse him of causing the destruction of Egypt through his recalcitrance⁹.

While it is true that at the very end of the portion, Pharaoh seems, momentarily, to recognize his own wickedness, telling Moshe and Aharon, "*this* time, I have sinned; God is the righteous one, and me, and my nation, are the evildoers¹⁰", three countervailing points should be raised. First of all, Pharaoh seems to be deflecting a certain part of the blame onto the Egyptian nation. Second, Pharaoh seems to be admitting guilt on this occasion, neglecting the fact that his stubbornness had already caused the Egyptians to suffer through six previous plagues. Third, and most importantly, Moshe immediately responds by noting the insincerity of Pharaoh's statement, "and as for you and your servants, I know that you have yet come to fear God¹¹". And, so it was. When the hail storm stops, Pharaoh immediately recants¹², refusing to let the people go. Due to their leader's sociopathy, more suffering would have to come to the Egyptian people.

This pattern would continue through all of next week's portion, and through to the following one as well, when Pharaoh personally leads his nation to final destruction at Yam Suf. While the physical suffering of the Egyptians obviously takes the top billing in this connection, it should be noted that Pharaoh's actions equally led to the financial collapse of Egypt¹³. The worst fears of his closest advisors were confirmed- he did bring the utter destruction of Egypt.

Pharaoh's reckless narcissism and disregard for the average Egyptian is highlighted when contrasted with Moshe's deep sense of concern for the suffering of his people. Of course, this concern is evident from Moshe's initial coming of age¹⁴, but is expressed, with great anguish, following his return to Egypt. As his initial efforts on behalf of the Jewish people do not bring relief, but greater suffering, Moshe cries out to God, wracked with a deep sense of guilt¹⁵, "why have you sent me? From the moment I have come to Pharaoh to speak in your name, it has been worse for this nation". While, in rabbinic literature¹⁶, Moshe is taken to task for his need for immediate results, there is no question that Moshe's concern lies with the people.

Like so many disastrous despots who would follow him on the stage of world history, Pharaoh believed that the nation existed to serve him, to create a platform on which he could be elevated. Their suffering, their pain, their anguish, and ultimately, their deaths, were never his concern.

⁹ Shemot 10:7

¹⁰ Shemot 9:27.

¹¹ Shemot 9:30.

¹² It should be emphasized that the Torah is quite clear in this instance that it was not God who hardened Pharaoh's heart, but Pharaoh himself who refused. Shemot 9:34. C.f., Rashi Shemot 7:3.

¹³ Shemot 12:36.

¹⁴ Shemot 2:11-13.

¹⁵ Shemot 5:22-23

¹⁶ Sanhedrin 111a.

The Jewish leadership ethic has been born in diametric contrast to the Egyptian one, in which leadership is expressed through service of the people, through sharing in their distress, and through self-sacrifice for the betterment of the nation.

Later in the Book of Exodus, when Moshe insists that he would rather his name be erased¹⁷ - that is, he would rather die- than see the destruction of the people, with a new nation to be built from Moshe himself, the contrast with Pharaoh is complete. While the Egyptian despot would allow his nation to die so that he might continue to wield power, the Jewish servant-leader, most humble of men, would rather die so that the nation might live.

¹⁷ Shemot 32:32