

Sermon | Parshat Vaera
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Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

Digging for Justice

On the list of headlines I never thought I would see: "Chaos ensues as NYPD tries to fill in secret tunnel in Chabad HQ synagogue." Yes, you heard that right. On Monday, the NYPD tried to fill in and close up a tunnel that extremist students had tried to dig from adjacent properties into the synagogue. The Chabad community had asked that the illegal tunnel be filled in, and these extremist students tried to prevent the construction workers from doing so, resulting in Chabad calling the NYPD to remove the students from the area and allow the work to continue. Feel free to Google the story after Shabbat to read more of the details, but suffice it to say that this was not on my 2024 Bingo card, and we are only 13 days into the new year!

And speaking of digging around to find things, Parshat Vaera also offers a brief description of digging. After Moses and Aaron bring the first plague, dam, the turning of the waters of Egypt into blood, we read this verse in the Torah, "וַיִּחְפְּרוּ כָל-מִצְרַיִם, And all the Egyptians had to dig round about the Nile for drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the Nile."¹ The Torah suggests here that the Nile was turned to blood, but that the groundwater surrounding the river was perhaps potable, and thus the Egyptians had to dig up fresh water in order to survive. There is a midrash which suggests that this is not entirely true, but that all waters were turned to blood for the Egyptians.² According to the midrash, any water in the home of an Israelite was fresh, but if an Egyptian tried to take that water, it would

¹ Exodus 7:24.

² Shemot Rabbah 9:10.

immediately turn to blood. Therefore, any water held by an Egyptian was blood, whereas the waters remained fresh for the Israelites. If this is true, then it appears that from the very first plague, the Israelites were protected while the Egyptians suffered.

Later in the Torah this is made explicit. When the plague of swarms of insects is sent, God says, וְהִפְלִיתִי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת-אֶרֶץ גּוֹשֵׁן, “I will set apart the region of Goshen on that day, the region where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there, that you may know that I God am in the midst of the land. And I will make a distinction between My people and your people.”³ The same is true for the plague of hail; the Torah tells us that God will shield Goshen and therefore protect the Israelites from suffering from that plague.⁴ Reading the text this way, one comes to the following conclusion: only the Egyptians suffered from the plagues, whereas the Israelites were protected. Theologically, this is troubling. After all, the fight was with Pharaoh, not with the Egyptians. It was Pharaoh’s cruelty that enslaved the Israelites and his stubbornness that kept them in captivity. Of course, the plagues were meant to put a strain on Egypt overall, to force Pharaoh’s hand so that he would free the Israelites by Moses and Aaron’s demand. It seems unfair that all of Egypt suffers the consequences of Pharaoh’s actions.

But there is another way to read the biblical text, which brings us to a very different conclusion. In his long commentary on the Torah, Ibn Ezra, the great Spanish exegete of the 11th century, disagrees with the midrash I cited earlier. Instead, he suggests that the first three plagues, blood, frogs, and lice, were wrought upon the entire region and all of its inhabitants such that both Egyptians and Israelites suffered these first few plagues. Ibn Ezra, as a close

³ Exodus 8:18-19.

⁴ Exodus 9:26.

reader of the biblical text, argues that the Torah would have told us that the Israelites were spared from suffering if that miracle indeed occurred, just as the Torah does tell us that they were spared from the later plagues. It was only the later plagues in which the Israelites were spared from suffering. But in the beginning, the Israelites suffered alongside the Egyptians. In Moses's fight for justice and freedom for his people, his people suffered a heavy price, too. The Torah reminds us here of a painful reality, one that we face today: for those who pursue justice, there is pain and suffering along the way. The injustice was caused by Pharaoh. God, through Moses and Aaron, was fighting for justice. And in that fight, both Egyptians and Israelites suffered before they managed to all be free.

On Monday our nation will mark Martin Luther King Jr. Day. On that day we remember Dr. King and his fight for justice and racial equality. In this fight, Dr. King risked everything, and he paid the ultimate price when he was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Countless other individuals were harmed when they too fought for justice and racial equality at sit-ins, protests, and many other places in which civil disobedience, a fight for justice, came with a terribly high price tag. Those who sought justice would end up suffering pain and further injustice.

Israel is fighting for justice, and Israel is doing it on multiple fronts. There is, of course, the war in Gaza, Israel's legitimate and justified response to the atrocities of October 7. Israel is fighting by air, land, and sea to rescue those who have been held there for nearly 100 days. In this pursuit, many Israelis have paid the ultimate price, with 187 IDF soldiers who have died since the war in Gaza started, not to mention those who have been wounded, those who have been displaced, and those who have lost loved ones since that horrible day. Yes, Gazans are suffering because of this war, and we must remind the international community that their

suffering is because of the intractability of Hamas. How much different the situation might be if the hostages were freed! And, of course, Israel is also fighting to dismantle Hamas, the terrorist regime that masks itself as a political party to find safe-haven abroad, and which has embedded itself so deeply within and underneath the Palestinian population in Gaza so as to make it nearly impossible for Israel to wage war against Hamas without inevitably causing destruction and death. Hamas' actions are acts of terror and clear violations of international law, and yet it is the State of Israel that stands on trial at the International Court of Justice in The Hague after South Africa filed claims that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

If you have not been following this week's events at the ICJ, I encourage you to read up about them. The Times of Israel is a reliable source of news, and has been particularly helpful in covering the first couple days of this trial. Israel is not committing genocide in Gaza; our United States government affirmed this to be true when John Kirby, spokesman for the National Security Council, called the allegations "unfounded." Amongst those who spoke on Israel's behalf before the Court was Tal Becker, the legal advisor for Israel's Foreign Ministry and a person from whom I have learned many times before because he is a senior research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, an organization working both in Israel and here in the U.S. Becker argued before the court that Hamas is the one to blame for the "appalling suffering" of civilians, both Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza. Professor Malcom Shaw, also advocating on Israel's behalf before the Court, noted that Hamas' tactics clearly demonstrate that they have no concern for their welfare of their own citizens. Hamas is Pharaoh—despotic rulers, unconcerned with and indifferent to the suffering of their own people, obstinate when given the opportunity to right their wrongs and thereby alleviate the suffering of all.

Israel's fight is a fight for justice, and this fight is never easy. There is suffering and pain when you fight for justice. Those who fight for justice are themselves placed in a position to be pained and to suffer. Parshat Vaera reminds us, however, that the pain and suffering is temporary, and that it comes to an end because the forces of evil eventually fall. History shows us that they always have. Hamas is no exception. They too will be routed. Israel will be victorious. Am Yisrael Chai. Shabbat shalom.