



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Vaera

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The Magicians

By Sara Fredman Aeder

In Parshat Va'era, God commands Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the Israelites. Moses protests, saying:

הֲנִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאִיךָ יִשְׁמְעֵנִי פֶרְעֹה וְאֲנִי עֶרְל שִׁפְתַּיִם

*The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should
Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech! (Shemot 6:12)*

Commentators see Moses' refusal as a failure of leadership, as evidenced by Aaron's elevated role in communicating with Pharaoh, and the subsequent leadership of Aaron's family through the priesthood.

Read another way, however, Moses' fears are well-founded. When we remember that he was raised in Pharaoh's household, we can understand that he, more than Aaron, more than any Israelite, knew how Pharaoh and those under Egyptian influence would respond. Moses also knew of the power of the *chartumim*, Pharaoh's magicians. He knew all too well that Pharaoh had a legion of sorcerers capable of creating miracles, or at least seeming to. And Moses' concerns prove valid, as time and time again the impact of his message is belittled by the *chartumim*, who are able to replicate the signs and plagues meant to signify God's great power.

Moses' fears are well-founded

וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פֶּרְעֹה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶהָרֹן אֶת־מִטְהוֹ לִפְנֵי פֶרְעֹה וְלִפְנֵי עֲבָדָיו וַיְהִי לְתַנְיֹז: וַיִּקְרָא גַם־פֶּרְעֹה לַחֲכָמִים וְלַמְכַשְׁפִּים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם־הֵם חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלַהֲטֵיהֶם כֹּן:

So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as the LORD had commanded: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. Then Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the Egyptian magicians, in turn, did the same with their spells. (Shemot 7: 10-11)

True, Aaron's serpent proves its superiority by swallowing the others, but this slight edge is not enough to convince Pharaoh or his advisors.

For the first plague, blood, God instructs Moses to announce to Pharaoh,

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה הַנֵּה אֲנֹכִי מִכָּה | בַּמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר-בְּיָדִי עַל-הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּאֵר וְנִהְפְּכוּ לְדָם:

Thus says the LORD, “By this you shall know that I am the LORD. See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood.”
(Shemot 7: 17)

And yet,

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן חֲרֹטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלִטְיָהֶם וַיַּחֲזִק לִב-פְּרַעֲוֹה וְלֹא-שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה: וַיָּפֶן פְּרַעֲוֹה וַיָּבֹא אֶל-בְּיֹתוֹ וְלֹא-שָׁת לִבּוֹ גַם-לְזֹאת:

But when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as the LORD had spoken. Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this. (Shemot 7: 22-23)

Likewise, the magicians are able to replicate the plague of frogs. When their magic falls short and they cannot replicate the third plague, lice, they exclaim that this plague shows the “finger” of God. But how powerful, really, is one finger? Certainly, it is not an overwhelming way to describe God’s strength. In any case, it is too late. Pharaoh has seen too often how this Israelite God can be sufficiently copied by his magicians.


Seen this way, Moses’ courageous leadership becomes even more praiseworthy. He foresaw the challenges ahead of him, and understood that even girded with miraculous signs, he might very well be unsuccessful in his mission. *And yet, he went.* Again and again he repeated God’s message and demanded the freedom of his people, knowing that what lay ahead of him was humiliation and refusal. His strength of character, his ability to buffet the winds of rejection, and his *emunah*, showed him to be the ultimate leader, not only to free the Israelite people from bondage but also to withstand 40 years of complaints and rejections from his own people in the desert (spoiler alert).

*Moses’
courageous
leadership becomes
praiseworthy*

Sara will assume the role of Executive Director of American Friends of Nishmat in February, after 5 years at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Life at NYU. She is also the Manager of Tablet Studios, where she produces Tablet Magazine’s podcasts, including Unorthodox, the leading Jewish podcast on iTunes. She grew up in the Young Israel of Scarsdale, and is happy to now share the community with her husband Robert, and children Liana and Roi.

Want to write a Parsha essay?

Please contact Steve Smith at LivingTorahFund@gmail.com

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