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A User's Guide to Prophecy

How do we know whom to trust? How should we make decisions under pressure? When and how should we be strong and when and how should we be flexible? What arguments are convincing to others and what arguments do we find compelling? These questions are at the heart of many of our dilemmas as human beings who must live with others and therefore make decisions in public life together with fellow citizens who may see things differently. These questions complicate sensitive dynamics within families. And these questions circle around the character of Pharaoh in the Torah who assumes the role of a sort of model of leadership that the Torah wishes to describe and condemn.

Pharaoh in the Torah is not a person, it is a title, an office, a rank at the top of an imperial hierarchy. This sets up the obvious comparison between different occasions in which the Egyptian monarch confronted a similar situation so that we can learn from the contrast and explore its significance.

The Pharaoh who confronts Moshe in *Parashat Vaera* is not the first Pharaoh to face a Hebrew with a message from God. In *Sefer Bereishit*, Yosef is brought to the palace to interpret Pharaoh's dream and deliver a message to Pharaoh about God's plans for his kingdom and his kingship. Back then, Pharaoh chose to listen to Yosef and the similarities and differences between the two episodes is revealing.

Yosef was not Pharaoh's first recourse when he awoke following his double-dream about the cows and the sheaves growing on the banks of the Nile. He called to his astrologers or magicians.

ח וַיְהִי בַבֶּקֶר וַתִּפְּעַם רוּחוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־כָּל־חֲרֹטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־כָּל־חֲכָמֵיהֶּ וַיִּסְפָּר פְּרַעֲהַ לָהֶם
אֶת־חֲלֹמוֹ וְאֵין־פּוֹתֵר אוֹתָם לַפְּרַעֲהַ:

Next morning, his spirit was agitated, and he sent for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men; and Pharaoh told them his dreams, but none could interpret them for Pharaoh.

But Pharaoh rejects the interpretation of his astrologers and magicians. According to the Netziv they could not find a way that Pharaoh's dream of hunger and lack could be relevant to a monarch like Pharaoh.

עוד טעם על שלא הבינו הפתרון משום לפרעה וחשבו למאי יראה פרעה ענין שבע ורעב. והלא פרעה לא
: ירעב ללחם ע"כ נתעו לראות דברים רחוקים

Pharaoh isn't threatened with hunger. He does not lack for bread. Of what relevance to him is a dream about scarcity? This way of thinking lead them far afield as they tried to interpret Pharaoh's dream.

Yosef understood that Pharaoh, standing in his dream on the banks of the Nile was dreaming of himself as ruler of Egypt - the "gift of the Nile."

Pharaoh listens to Yosef rather than to his own staff because Yosef told him what he wanted to hear. Yosef told him something useful that accorded with his own feelings about himself as the embodiment of Egypt. And Yosef told him about his dreams - where he wanted to be in the world, a strong ruler who could protect his people.

Decades later, a new Pharaoh rules in Egypt and he too must decide whether to listen to members of his own court, his astrologers and magicians he has on his staff, or to the more challenging message from Moshe.

Pharaoh's own magicians on retainer are able to match Moshe and Aharon, sign for sign, wonder for wonder, plague for plague. They turn staffs into snakes, water into blood, and cause frogs to swarm across the earth.

You may be familiar with the website, "LOL My Thesis" which contains lists of one sentence summaries of doctoral dissertations like "housing policy is complicated." But "two different people are different" is not a thesis. It isn't interesting to notice that two different Egyptian kings responded in two different ways, unless we realize that the Torah pushes us to compare them since they each are characters in the Torah with no personal identification information other than the title that they share.

This time, Pharaoh rejects Moshe and clings to the comforting message of his *hartumim* because what they say accords with his worldview. We know Pharaoh didn't actually respect the judgement of the *hartumim* because after the third plague when they start to recognize the superiority of God, Pharaoh ignores them. He listens to them initially, and repeatedly fails to listen to Moshe, not because the *hartumim* weren't trustworthy, but because Moshe's message was so hard to hear.

What Moshe says is challenging. Moshe demands that Pharaoh treat his Hebrew slaves as human beings. Remember, throughout the negotiations between Moshe and Pharaoh Moshe never asks for freedom for the Hebrew slaves. That is the mission he was on from God, but that was not his opening bid when he first confronted Pharaoh. "Let my people go," Moshe famously said, "so that they may serve me," Moshe concludes - less famously. Moshe was asking for a three day break in work responsibilities so that the Hebrew slaves could observe a holiday. This very modest and minor request was what Pharaoh rejects until his very kingdom is brought to its knees.

Why didn't Pharaoh let them go for three days? Why bring such destruction on his people to avoid a three day holiday? Pharaoh said no because they asked. Allowing them to take days off to celebrate a holiday acknowledges their humanity. Only human beings with souls and spiritual integrity need to observe a holiday.

It isn't only Egyptians who have to decide which prophet is telling the truth. Yermiyahu had a competitor. A prophetic rival named Hananiah who arose in the final years of the first Jewish kingdom with a reassuring and inspiring message:

בְּעוֹד | שְׁנַיִם יָמִים אֲנִי מְשִׁיב אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי בַיִת ה' אֲשֶׁר לָקַח נְבוּכַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ־בָּבֶל
מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיָּבִיאוּם בָּבֶל:

"In two years, I will restore to this place all the vessels of the House of the LORD which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took from this place and brought to Babylon."

"Everything will be great," Hananiah declares. God has decided that the punishments will end and the redemption and comfort can begin. Yirmiyahu, and everyone else hearing these words, yearned for them to be true:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִרְמְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא אָמֵן כֹּן יַעֲשֶׂה ה' יְקֻם יְהוָה אֶת־דְּבָרָיו אֲשֶׁר נִבְּאתָ לְהַשִּׁיב כְּלֵי בַיִת־ה' וְכָל־הַגּוֹלָה
מִבָּבֶל אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה:

The prophet Jeremiah said: "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill what you have prophesied and bring back from Babylon to this place the vessels of the House of the LORD and all the exiles!"

But then he continued:

אֶךְ־שָׁמַע־נָא הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי דֹבֵר בְּאָזְנֶיךָ וּבְאָזְנֵי כָל־הָעָם: ח הַנְּבִיאִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לִפְנֵי וּלְפָנֶיךָ
מִן־הָעוֹלָם וַיִּנְבְּאוּ אֶל־אַרְצוֹת רַבּוֹת וְעַל־מַמְלָכוֹת גְּדוֹלוֹת לְמַלְחָמָה וּלְרָעָה וּלְדָבָר: ט הַנְּבִיאִים אֲשֶׁר יִנְבְּאוּ
לְשָׁלוֹם בָּבֶל דְּבַר הַנְּבִיא יִדְּעַל הַנְּבִיאִים אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלְחוּ יְהוָה בְּאֶמְתָּ:

But just listen to this word which I address to you and to all the people: The prophets who lived before you and me from ancient times prophesied war, disaster, and pestilence against many lands and great kingdoms.

So if a prophet prophesies good fortune, then only when the word of the prophet comes true can it be known that the LORD really sent him.

The true prophets had grim warnings of death. The true prophets demanded repentance as the only thing that could stave off destruction and guarantee the survival of the Jewish kingdom. Hananiah's message, quite literally, was too good to be true. But throughout Yirmiyahu's career, the decades in which he tried to convince his people that the path they were on lead to the destruction of everything they cared about, he was undermined by a religious message of false comfort. From Hananiah's imagined fantasy that the Babylonian enemy would miraculously vanish, to the pious assumption that God would never allow God's own Temple to be harmed.

אַל-תִּבְטְחוּ לָכֶם אֶל-דְּבָרֵי הַשָּׁקֶר לְאֹמֵר הִיכָל ה' הִיכָל ה' הִיכָל ה' הַמָּוָה:

Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the LORD, the Temple of the LORD, the Temple of the LORD are these [buildings]."

Like, Pharaoh confronted by Moshe, when we were confronted by Yirmiyahu we ignored the message that required us to make major adaptive changes to our way of life, and embraced a message that gave us superficial comfort.

This week the country will observe MLK Day and it's an appropriate time to use his memory and his legacy to ask ourselves challenging questions. This is harder and harder to do as every American holiday becomes increasingly superficial as it becomes commercialized and commodified and turned into a Hallmark Card version of a day that is only useful for selling cars and sofas.

Martin Luther King Jr. confronted the United States with a prophetic message of critique and a demand for liberation like Moshe. But he also interpreted a dream that touched the hearts of his audience like Yosef. He invoked America's Declaration of Independence and challenged us to live up to our claimed founding creed that "all men are created equal."

Those of us who were not alive or who were children during the peak years of the civil rights movement need to ask ourselves would we have been receptive to a message of moral critique and adaptive change? When he came to Chicago in 1967 he was not welcomed by many people here. What are the causes that are active today that we can align with if we wish our future descendants will be proud of us? Is there looming destruction that we can yet avert if we heed the right message?