

Parshat Shemot 5780

In this week's Parasha, G-d appears to Moshe at a burning bush. G-d tells Moshe that He has seen the affliction of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt. G-d is going to rescue the people and bring them to Canaan. Moshe is given a mission: "Now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall take My people, Bnei Yisrael, out of Egypt" (3:10). This mission forms the basis for the negotiations and plagues that then ensue, which culminate in the great exodus of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt. It is therefore important to understand what the mission entails. Moshe's immediate reaction is to say, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt?" Rashi and Sforno both understand this to comprise two questions: Why should I go to Pharaoh? Why does Bnei Yisrael merit redemption from Egypt? Thus we can divide the mission into two parts. The first results in Moshe's ongoing discussions with Pharaoh, while the second involves Moshe communicating with Bnei Yisrael.

Moshe's request of Pharaoh is to allow the people to take a three day break from work, to go to the desert, where they will offer sacrifices to G-d. Moshe's continued and oft-repeated request is that Pharaoh should *shalach ami ve-ya-avduni* – he should send the people so that they can go to serve G-d. Pharaoh refuses to allow the people to go to conduct this religious service. Later in the negotiations, when warned of the upcoming plague of locusts (the eighth plague), Pharaoh suggests that only the men need to go, while Moshe states that all Bnei Yisrael need to worship G-d (10:9-11). At the end of the plague of darkness (the ninth and penultimate plague), Pharaoh suggests that the men, women and children can go, but not the animals. Moshe refuses this offer, on the basis that Bnei Yisrael do not know what will be the order of service – which animals they will need to sacrifice – until they get to the place where the sacrifices will take place (10:24-26). At no time does Moshe request permission from Pharaoh for Bnei Yisrael to take permanent leave from Egypt.

In contrast, Moshe never tells Bnei Yisrael that he is negotiating on their behalf to obtain for them a three-day religious holiday. He tells Bnei Yisrael that they will be leaving Egypt for good. Why does Moshe need to request anything from Pharaoh? Our familiarity with the story of the ten plagues and the negotiations that take place during the plagues might lead us to imagine that the question is preposterous. There is no way that Bnei Yisrael could have left Egypt without Pharaoh's permission, and permission could not have been obtained without the infliction of terrible plagues on Egypt. But surely that cannot be true. G-d could have provided any number of alternative means of releasing the people to freedom. For example, they could have left during the plague of darkness, a time when Bnei Yisrael could still see their way. Alternatively, the Egyptians could have been hit with an illness that disabled the fighting men for long enough to allow Bnei Yisrael to escape with impunity. We are left wondering why the need for the plagues, or any involvement with Pharaoh at all. Why request a three-day religious holiday that is not wanted, seeing anyway that G-d already tells Moshe at the outset that Pharaoh will refuse this request (3:19)?

(Moshe may have had this in mind when G-d told him that He was going to rescue the people and bring them to Canaan, and that Moshe should therefore go to speak to Pharaoh. Moshe's questioning as to why *he* should go to *Pharaoh* can be interpreted in two ways. Either that Moshe wonders why *he* should go rather than someone else, or that he questions why anyone should go to *Pharaoh*. What has Pharaoh got to do with it? If G-d wants to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt why does He not just do it? Why involve *Pharaoh*?).

Brit Bein Habetarim provides an insight to a solution. The slavery that the people endured in Egypt had been foretold to Avram. "Know with certainty that your offspring will be strangers in a land not their own, and they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. I will judge the nation that will enslave them, and afterwards they will leave with great wealth." (Bereishit 15:13-14). The Divine plan for the fulfilment of this prophecy therefore necessitates both parts of Moshe's mission. The Egyptians must receive G-d's judgement, and Bnei Yisrael have to be awoken from slavery to become a nation. (With the exodus and the subsequent drowning of the Egyptians in the sea, the judgement of the Egyptians is completed. On the other hand, Bnei Yisrael takes rather longer to become a nation that is capable and worthy of entering Canaan. That requires three and a half more books of Torah, forty years in the desert, considerable education, and the construction of a sanctuary, as we will read in coming weeks.)

G-d knows that the request for a three-day religious holiday will be refused. G-d knows that Pharaoh thinks so much of himself that he does not recognise Hashem; Pharaoh does not recognise the existence of any power greater than the power of Pharaoh. Rashbam describes the request for a three-day religious holiday that is not wanted as being a *derech chochmah* – a wise path. Indeed it is wise, for it reminds the world that there exists a power above human power, and it enables all parts of the redemption foretold in Brit Bein Habetarim to take place. Pharaoh's refusal to grant reasonable religious freedom to his workforce is sufficient to cause G-d to punish Pharaoh, and to bring about Pharaoh's downfall. Even in the final midnight call for them to go, it appears that Pharaoh still believes that Bnei Yisrael are only going away for a three-day religious holiday: "Rise up, go out from among my people, you and Bnei Yisrael, and go serve Hashem as you have spoken" (12:31). This helps to explain why the Egyptians are so willing to *lend* to Bnei Yisrael their silver vessels, gold vessels and garments (12:33), enabling Bnei Yisrael to leave with great wealth. They expect to reclaim the items on the return of Bnei Yisrael three days later. Pharaoh never imagined or understood the real agenda. Bnei Yisrael knew that they were leaving Egypt for good, never to return. Word must at some stage have reached the palace that they were talking about leaving forever. However, the state of the slave nation at that time must have been so depressed that Pharaoh could not fathom any idea that Bnei Yisrael could organise into a fighting force, survive a journey to Canaan, and conquer the land. He was not alone in this view. Even after the exodus, the people themselves requested return to Egypt in preference to death in the desert or in a failed conquest of Canaan. Pharaoh did not fear the mass exodus of the people. The Egyptians' fear was rather of an enemy within, and that was why Pharaoh's predecessor had originally enslaved them (1:8-11). Sforno even suggests that the intent of the slavery was to encourage voluntary exodus. After Bnei Yisrael leave, it is reported to Pharaoh that the people have retreated back towards Egypt, where they have encamped, and not returned to work. His actual fears are realised, he believes he is facing an enemy within his own borders, and he declares war on them first. The two missions become one. When redemption from Egypt occurs, Moshe's two missions are united. His discussions with Pharaoh and Pharaoh's reactions enable the punishment of Egypt and the exodus of Bnei Yisrael. His communications with Bnei Yisrael bring them to observe mitzvot (in Parshat Bo) and become worthy of being redeemed.

Bnei Yisrael embark on a journey that will create an independent nation, tasked with settling the land of Israel and observing G-d's Torah. At the same time, the world is taught a lesson: a regime that does not allow freedom of religious practice will not be allowed to endure.