

VAEIRA (EXODUS 6:2-9:35)

Let the Pharaoh GO!

2008 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

The Pharaoh was a man to be reckoned with. The leader of the most powerful nation on earth, he was treated by his people like a god. He was surrounded by wealth and opulence in this world, and when he died they filled his pyramid with goodies for him to enjoy in the next world.

The Pharaoh was an absolute monarch who ruled with an iron hand. No one would dare to challenge the authority of this man-god.

Well, almost no one.

At the end of last week's Torah Portion, two Hebrews penetrated Egyptian security and showed up in the palace:

Moses and Aaron came and said to the Pharaoh, "So said the G-d of Israel, 'Let My People go so that they may celebrate for Me in the desert.'"

Pharaoh replied, "Who is G-d that I should listen to His voice to release Israel? I don't know G-d, nor will I let Israel go!" (Exodus, 5:1-2)

In a sense, Pharaoh's point was well-taken. After all, in Egyptian society, the Pharaoh himself was a god. "G-d of Israel?" Never heard of Him! He's not a member of MY country club! He's no colleague of mine!"

Pharaoh didn't like the idea of Moses, and Aaron spreading their fables about some "other G-d" taking them out of Egypt. The last thing the Egyptian economy needed was to have their slaves distracted by dreams of independence. He dismissed Moses and Aaron and immediately went about ordering the slaves to work even harder.

Pharaoh needed some more convincing. Moses and Aaron appeared a second time in the palace. Aaron threw his staff on the ground and it miraculously turned into a snake. Pharaoh was unimpressed. His magicians duplicated the "trick." (See "Abracadabra = MC2") Aaron's snake turned back into a stick and then swallowed the other sticks.

Pharaoh the man-god was not convinced. Why not? Moses proceeded to bring nine Plagues against Egypt, almost destroying the whole country. Still he stubbornly refused to give in. Why not?

I believe that Pharaoh's recalcitrance came, in part, from his own arrogance. Why should Pharaoh, the "god of the Nile and of Egypt, listen to some unknown G-d? *"Who is G-d that I should listen to His voice to release Israel? I don't know G-d, nor will I let Israel go!"*

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin observed that Pharaoh was so caught up the cult of his own deification that he began to believe it himself. People bowed down to him all day. He was raised with the belief that he was a god. He was so full of himself that even when faced with the miracles of the One True G-d, he viewed Him simply as an insignificant competitor.

It was time to begin the Ten Plagues. For Plague #1 the Nile was going to be turned to blood. Moses was dispatched to place another call upon the king. However, this time, a different venue was chosen:

G-d said to Moses, Pharaoh's heart is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning—he is going out to the water—and stand opposite him on the river bank... (Ibid, 7: 14-15)

Why the water? Why didn't Moses go back to the palace?

Rabbi Sorotzkin points out that this was the most opportune time to confront Pharaoh and Egypt with the truth. The Egyptians used to get up early every morning and bow down to the Nile River and pray to it for sustenance. As well, they used to bow down to Pharaoh "who created the river," and was the "god of Egypt and of the Nile". This was a most opportune time to show the Egyptians that the Nile was no god and neither was their king. The G-d of Israel was about to turn their river-god into blood, and their king-god was powerless to stop Him.

Pharaoh took this god thing pretty seriously. He even went to great efforts to convince his subjects that he was super-human. Yes, they fed him the finest foods. He had the most comfortable royal furniture. This man who would be a god was a very material fellow. Every creature comfort known to man was, no doubt, available in the palace. With one exception.

The king's chambers had no men's' room. Part of the façade of the godliness of the Pharaoh was his pretense to have no need to get rid of bodily wastes. "I'm a god! Bathrooms are for mortals!"

And so this "god", this "superman", spent all day, every day, resisting nature's call, waiting to sneak down to the river for a little relief.

Can you picture the scene?

“Good morning, Your Majesty!”

“Oh, Moses! Is that you again? What are you doing here?”

“I need to speak with you, your Majesty. Right away.”

“Not now, Moses. Come see me at the palace later.”

“No, Your Majesty. I really need to speak with you now...”

“Uhm, not right now, Moses. I’m kinda busy at the moment...”

“Oh I’ll be quick, Your Majesty. I just have to speak with you for a couple of minutes...”

“FOR A COUPLE OF MINUTES??!! I DON’T HAVE A COUPLE OF MINUTES!!! PLEASE MOSES, GO AWAY! NOW! PLEASE! I REALLY HAVE TO GO NOW...”

Isn’t that pathetic? The great god of Egypt and the Nile, sneaking out every morning and polluting that other god of Egypt.

And so, this great king, this immortal leader of Egypt, this little man who thought he could defy the Master of the world, was forced to admit that he was, after all, just another human being who can’t travel too far from a service area.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2008 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.