

VAEIRA (EXODUS 6:2-9:35)**THIS is your Life!**

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Slaves aren't real people. They are chattel; they are property. They can be bought and sold and bartered like animals. That's why in our own country, the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave, it was once possible to enslave blacks and subject them to every indignity. They weren't considered fully human -- that's why, even after slavery, they didn't immediately enjoy full rights.

Pharaoh felt the same way about his Israelites. They were his possessions, to be utilized in the efficient production of bricks for his ambitious building projects. He was free to do with them as he wanted. He could even kill their children and use their blood for medicinal purposes. No one was going to take away his Jews...

Well, almost no one. Two Levites by the names of Moses and Aaron were making trouble. The G-d of Israel, they explained, wanted Pharaoh to release the slaves. Pharaoh had no interest in complying.

"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)

How could chattel have a G-d?? These sub-human life forms known as Hebrews couldn't have a G-d! Why should the great Pharaoh follow the dictates of someone who represents the fictional G-d of a primitive cult?

Pharaoh obviously needed some convincing. He needed to be shown that that Master of the World was not going to tolerate Egyptian intransigence. And so, the miracles began.

Aaron threw his staff onto the ground and it turned into a snake. Pharaoh's magicians duplicated the feat. Although Aaron's stick swallowed the other sticks, Pharaoh didn't feel that Moses and Aaron had gone beyond demonstrating that they were magicians. Big deal! We have plenty of those here in Egypt!

Next Aaron brought the first of the Ten Plagues. He struck the Nile with Moses' staff and turned the water to blood. Once again, the magicians demonstrated that they could do it too. Pharaoh was not yet ready to listen:

Pharaoh turned his back to them and went to his palace. He ignored also this. (Ibid, 7:23)

*He ignored also **THIS**.* What is referred to by the word “*this*”? Rashi explains that just as Pharaoh ignored the miracle of the stick turning into a snake, he also ignored the miracle of the Nile turning to blood. **THIS**, the altering of nature by Aaron with his “magic wand” was little more than a parlor trick that any self-respecting magician could reproduce. There was nothing special about **THIS**.-----

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev sees a deeper meaning in the word “*this*.” There is a reason for the specific words used. The Torah does not use words indiscriminately, as we shall see below.

Aaron would one day be the High Priest. He would have special responsibilities in the Temple. On no day were these responsibilities greater than on Yom Kippur. The High Priest was responsible for conducting the Service that would bring about atonement for Israel. Yom Kippur was the only time that he was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies.

G-d said to Moses, “Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to enter the inner Sanctuary at any time ... other than when I appear in a cloud (of incense — on Yom Kippur) With this shall Aaron enter the Sanctuary: with ... a sin offering and ... a burnt offering. He must put on ... sacred garments ... and immerse himself in a Mikveh before putting them on...” (Leviticus, 16:2-4)

With **THIS** shall Aaron enter the Sanctuary... The choice of wording is not coincidental. There is a lesson in words that are used.

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah, 21:5) sees a link between this verse and a verse in the Song of Songs. King Solomon has words of praise for the Congregation of Israel:

THIS is your stature; likened to a towering palm tree, sustenance flows from your teachers like wine-filled clusters. (7:8, based on Rashi’s commentary)

King Solomon refers to Israel with the term **THIS**. The word **THIS** is synonymous with Israel. The Torah says that Aaron is to enter the Sanctuary with **THIS**. Based upon the similarity of words, the Midrash tells us that when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, he did so with **THIS**, i.e., with the merit of the Congregation of Israel. Aaron did not enter the Holy of Holies alone; he carried with him the good deeds and the good will of the People of Israel.

Let us return now to the Torah Portion at hand and Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev’s interpretation.

Pharaoh wasn’t taking Moses and Aaron seriously. He rejected their demands that he release the slaves. *Pharaoh turned his back to them and went to his palace. He ignored also **THIS**.*

Pharaoh was unimpressed by **THIS**. What is this “**THIS**” that Pharaoh was ignoring? Rabbi Levi Yitzchok says that Pharaoh was ignoring the Congregation of Israel. Moses tried to explain to the Pharaoh that the entire world exists only because of Israel. Israel is ****THIS.THIS**, everything around us, everything we can see is because of Israel. As Jeremiah writes, *If not for My covenant ... I would not have set up the laws of heaven and earth.* (33:25) (By the way, the Covenant is also referred to as **THIS**. See Genesis, 17:10)

Pharaoh refused to recognize the uniqueness of Israel. They were simply his beasts of burden; they served no greater purpose than building pyramids. He therefore had no reason to listen to Moses.

Had Pharaoh understood how important Israel is, he would have jumped at the opportunity to set them free. He would have thanked Moses for presenting him with the opportunity to help them fulfill their sacred obligation of observing G-d's commandments.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Throughout the millennia, our People have been hated, persecuted, and tortured. Our enemies are too blind to see **THIS**; that which is right in front of their eyes. Like the Pharaoh, they refuse to recognize that the world was created so that there could be an Israel that would receive the Torah, and serve as a conduit for bringing G-dliness to the world. Like the Pharaoh, they refuse to recognize that if Israel were not here to study G-d's Torah; the world would lose its justification for existing. (See quote from Jeremiah above.) The Talmud states that if the seventy primary nations of the earth had realized how much was accomplished for them by the seventy bull offerings that were brought on their behalf in the Temple during Sukkos, they never would have allowed the Babylonians and the Romans to destroy it.

Unfortunately, this is a message that is also lost on many of our fellow Jews. We have been blessed with a tremendous privilege and responsibility. In spite of Pharaoh's refusal, G-d took us out of Egypt and gave us His Torah. With that Torah, we can elevate ourselves and the world around us. What a shame when we take our cue from Pharaoh and ignore our sacred mission.

Someday the rest of the world will recognize the value of all **THIS**. But meanwhile, you and I can start.

Have a great Shabbos.

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