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בס"ד

## Parashat Shemot Part IV At the Burning Bush: Additional Discussion

### 1. “And They Shall Heed Your Voice” (Exod. 3:18)

Upon concluding the elucidation of His name, and before Moses responds, G-d continues, moving to the next step. Moses’ question as to what he should tell the people when they ask regarding G-d’s name implied that he basically consented to accept the assignment but required the answer to his query. Since G-d answered that question and Moses had no complaints about the answer, He assumed Moses was ready to go. Accordingly, He promptly provides Moses elaborate instructions regarding the mission. Moses was to gather Israel’s elders, deliver G-d’s message to them that He was now going to redeem them and they should then accompany Moses to the king of Egypt to request permission for a three-day journey to sacrifice to Hashem their G-d (Exod. 3:16-22).

After instructing Moses what to say to the elders, G-d told him, “They shall heed your voice” (וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ), followed by “and you and the elders of Israel shall come to the king of Egypt” (3:18). When G-d concluded speaking, Moses responded: “They will not believe me and they will not heed my voice” (וְהֵן לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי [4:1]). How could Moses directly contradict what G-d had just told him?

The Midrash states that at that moment Moses spoke inappropriately (שָׁלָא בְּהוֹנֵן) and G-d reproved him (Exod. Rab. 3:12). It interprets the two signs G-d provided Moses in response to his assertion – the rod turning into a snake and his hand becoming stricken with leprosy – as chastisements. However, most of the classical commentators did not consider this explanation to convey the true meaning of the passage (for good reason as we shall soon see) and proposed various answers. Some of the more prominent ones follow:

Ibn Ezra: G-d predicted that the elders would heed his voice, but Moses feared that the rest of the

people would not. Or, G-d referred to outward obedience; Moses, to sincere commitment.

Rambam: G-d predicted they would have belief in Him, their G-d; Moses feared they would not believe in him, the messenger.

Ramban (His preferred explanation) : G-d referred to the immediate situation, that they would agree to accompany him to Pharaoh; Moses referred to the longer-range process. (We will discuss his non-preferred explanation shortly.)

But the text does not state or in any way imply that G-d and Moses were referring to different groups of people, or different degrees of belief or different objects of belief, or different time frames!

Nehama Leibowitz (*Studies in Exodus, Parashat Shemot, study number seven*) praised the Midrash sages for their interpretation. She admired how they approached the subject without the preconceived notions later commentators appear to have had, willing to interpret the text honestly even with regard to a failing of the greatest of prophets. True, in its boldness, the Midrash does set an example of seeking truth regardless of the personage it may be impugning. However, it is highly unlikely that its interpretation was proffered as a serious explanation of the contradiction. It probably was intended to transmit a valuable message that addressed an important need of the time, and which could always easily be cited and recalled because of the verses it is attached to. As a legitimate explanation, however, it contains at least three critical shortcomings.

Granted that a prophet retains his autonomy even while in a state of communion with the Deity and has the right to endeavor to understand the situation from his own perspective and insist on his personal integrity. However, one cannot conceive that in

midprophecy a prophet would directly contradict G-d on a matter about which He had just informed the prophet, predicting how others will respond to an instruction. If G-d declares they will obey, they will obey! Rejecting such a statement is more than acting inappropriately; it is impugning G-d's power and integrity, cardinal transgressions.

In addition, there is no indication that G-d became angry with Moses at this point, requiring a reprimand; on the contrary His tone is understanding and supportive. Only later, after G-d answered all of Moses' questions, when Moses refuses to accept the assignment without providing a clear-cut explanation, does the text state that G-d became angry with him. And if G-d had, indeed, become angry at Moses' earlier response and chastised him, how could he have continued his arguments, business as usual?

Finally, after G-d accommodated Moses by giving him the rod and leprosy signs, He informed him that if the people did not believe and did not obey the first sign's message they would believe the message of the second. And if they did not believe even with both signs and *וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּן לְקוֹלִי* ("they do not heed your voice"), then "you shall take from the water of the Nile and pour it on the dry land, etc." (4:8-9). Here, G-d Himself clearly indicates that the people possess free will, and so it is possible they will not heed Moses' voice, exactly as Moses feared. G-d employed the identical words that Moses used, adjusted for the tense.

Some commentators defend the Midrash and answer the question that G-d Himself contradicted His original statement by suggesting that G-d cancelled the original guarantee that they will heed Moses' voice when Moses directly contradicted it. However, this is not hinted at in the text and does not fit the passage's tone. And the other aforementioned questions remain unanswered.

Before presenting his preferred solution that we cited above, the Ramban had proposed another explanation. After surveying the other interpretations, that proposal appears to us to be the *peshat*. He suggested that perhaps G-d's words *וְיִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלִי* ("and they shall heed your voice"), which in and of themselves would normally be taken as a definitive statement and when coming from G-d would be thought to be a prediction based on foreknowledge, are not to be so understood

here. In this context they express hopeful expectation, referring to that which would be appropriate for the people to do. G-d is not canceling the people's free will and is not making a prediction. Moses understood that. The issue of G-d's foreknowledge is not brought into the discussion.

The Ramban supports this view of language usage with examples from the very same passage we are dealing with. As previously mentioned, when G-d gave Moses the rod and leprosy signs, He stated, "in order that they should believe." Subsequently, however, within the same context, He Himself expressed doubt as to whether they will believe and heed Moses' voice on each of these two signs (4:8-9). Regarding both, He used the same general wording as Moses previously did.

Sharpening the point of a varied use of language, Cassuto translates *וְיִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלִי* as "when they heed your voice." In other words, we are dealing with a condition that must be met, and that is expected to be fulfilled at some point, but not guaranteed. A speaker who intends such a meaning would indicate it by their tone and accentuation. It appears likely that in certain post-biblical periods such usage was not common and commentators did not proffer interpretations based on it. But surely it can be recognized that such meaning lies within the potential of the words and such usage comprises a legitimate style of speaking.

## 2. Requesting a Leave

An essential element in Hashem's instructions was that Moses and the elders should request from Pharaoh a three-day leave for the Israelites to journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to Him. How could He have them ask this; was it not the intention to leave permanently, and this request therefore a falsehood? Ibn Ezra justifies the request by pointing out that it was, indeed, a three-day journey of traveling to Mount Sinai where the Israelites were scheduled to go to serve Hashem, a detail Moses had already been informed of previously in the theophany (3:12). No mention was made to Pharaoh that they would return from the journey; it is only something he and the Egyptians assumed on their own. It should be borne in mind that had Moses' request been for outright freedom for a nation of slaves he would have been laughed right out of the palace. Yet, it is asked, was it not misleading?

However, we must question the legitimacy of the critique. No nation has the right to enslave people against their will. There is absolutely no moral obligation for the enslaved to remain in slavery or to return to it once they are out of their masters' clutches. The Torah legislates: "You are not to hand over a slave to his master who has escaped to you from his master" (Deut. 23:16). Although the Bible tolerates slavery – with important provisions to ensure it be basically humane – it also respects and supports escaping from slavery. A direction was set for its future elimination (an innovation not doable at the time).

The primary purpose of the three-day request appears to have been to have Pharaoh officially refuse even such a relatively minimal entreaty. In this way, his cruel, arrogant and stubborn disposition would be publicly established, and the stage would be set for G-d's great intervention. Ancient Egyptian records document work groups that received permission for vacations of a week or more, sometimes to travel to shrines to attend religious ceremonies, so Moses' request was not completely unprecedented. In addition, the limited request gave Pharaoh the option to respond with various counteroffers, providing the opportunity for G-d to progressively educate him and his people with chastisements.

When finally, after the tenth plague, Pharaoh acceded to the request (Exod. 12:31-32), it brought about a comical, anticlimactic scene. The matter was then no longer under his control as the Egyptian populace was already vigorously and hastily sending the Israelites out of the land (v. 33). Did Pharaoh or the Egyptians think the slaves were going to return? Subsequently, they said, "What did we do that we sent Israel out from serving us?" (14:5). Of course, that does not mean that they had officially freed them, but it was a rhetorical question, meaning that by giving permission for the three-day journey – if they even had then been thinking of that detail – they in effect set them free.

### 3. Compulsion or Free Will?

Hashem informs Moses that He knows Pharaoh will refuse the request until He brings enormous pressure to bear upon him through powerful plagues (3:19-20). Here, where Hashem explicitly states that He "knows" Pharaoh's reaction, we are dealing with a guaranteed situation. Does His foreknowledge preclude Pharaoh's

free will? This is an ancient theological conundrum. Does G-d know the future? If so, how can free will exist? According to one school of thought (Saadia, Rambam, et al.), G-d has foreknowledge of man's choice, but it is in a totally different realm (or of a totally different nature of knowledge) than that of man, and so does not affect man's ability to choose freely. In recent times quantum mechanics has been utilized to support such an opinion.

Another school of thought is of the opinion that in granting man free will G-d restricted His own foreknowledge of what man will choose and discovers it when man actually makes the choice (Ralbag, et al.). Of course, it is His prerogative to limit human free will in any particular case to predetermine an outcome in advance as He sees fit. (See a further discussion on these matters in our study on *Parashat Ki Tissa Part II: On the King David Census.*)

Nevertheless, even those who do not recognize a contradiction in the foreknowledge-free will issue have a problem with G-d's predicting that He will intervene in Pharaoh's decision-making process, "strengthening" his heart (from קִזְקַז [4:21, etc.]) and "hardening" it (from הִשְׁחִיךְ [7:3, etc.]). Here, the following questions arise: Does G-d preclude a person from repenting? If so, how can such an individual then be criticized, let alone punished, for his actions?

Some have viewed the matter as follows. Pharaoh's character was such – arrogant, haughty, cruel and stubborn – that his refusals were totally predictable. Human nature is such that an individual who has become accustomed to living in accordance with certain behavioral traits may at some point truly be unable to reverse himself. He will continue behaving in accordance with his ingrained personality. He would have essentially destroyed his free will on matters related to those areas of behavior connected to his deeply-rooted characteristics until an overwhelming event "forces" him to reconsider. Short of such an event he would not repent. Knowing Pharaoh, Hashem knew that even under the pressure of the first nine plagues he would not reverse himself until the tenth plague struck.

In this view, Hashem's "strengthening" and "hardening" Pharaoh's heart are terms used to describe the king's amazing obduracy in the face of the plagues, persistence that is inexplicable to average

people except as the result of divine intervention. As Hashem is the Creator of the natural order that allows such personality traits to exist and as He is the cause of causes, the Bible ascribes to Him the phenomenon of Pharaoh's extraordinary refusals (see Luzzato, Cassuto).

It should be noted, however, that when Moses spoke to Pharaoh after the fourth plague, it appears that at that point he believed there was a chance that the tyrant might finally let the Israelites go (8:25b). After the seventh plague he is skeptical and accuses the king and his courtiers of not yet having achieved fear of Hashem, but implying that they could have.

Saadia Gaon (Beliefs and Views, 4:6, see Abarbanel) views the "strengthening" and "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart as providing him the wherewithal to withstand the pressure of the plagues and continue to retain his free will, which he exercises throughout.

The Rambam's explanation is that G-d precluded Pharaoh from the possibility of repentance as retribution for the tremendous evil he had already committed with his free will through the brutal oppression (*MT, Laws of Repentance*, 6).

As it turned out, the Torah described Pharaoh as having himself hardened his heart during the course of the first five plagues, and G-d having hardened it during the course of the last five.

#### 4. You Shall Not Leave Empty-Handed

G-d informed Moses that when the Israelites leave they would not leave empty-handed. "Each woman should request from her neighbor silver vessels and gold vessels and garments...and you shall despoil Egypt" (Exod. 3:22). This is in accordance with what G-d foretold to Abraham in *berit ben habetarim*, וַיֵּצֵא בְרָכָה שְׂדוּל ("they shall depart with great wealth" [Gen. 15:14]). Such parting "gifts" partly fulfilled the demands of justice and fairness in the larger, cosmic context; a nation enslaved against its will for as long as Israel was surely deserves substantial reparations (See *b. Sanh.* 91a).

In the standard case when a Hebrew slave is sent to freedom upon conclusion of his enslavement term, the Torah mandates that he not be sent out empty-handed. Although we should assume he was treated kindly, he

must be given הַעֲנִיקָה, a severance grant (Deut. 15:13-14). The Torah indicates that it should be substantial: "From your flock, from your threshing floor and from your vat" (Deut. 15:14). The word usage in our Exodus context appears linked to that Deuteronomy passage. Here it states וְאַחֲרָי כֵן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם followed by וְהָיָה כִּי תֵלְכוּן לֹא תֵלְכוּ רֵיקָם (Exod. 3:20-21) while there it states, וְכִי תִשְׁלַחְמוּ רֵיקָם followed by לֹא תִשְׁלַחְמוּ רֵיקָם.

#### 5. The Signs

G-d responded to Moses' fear that he might not be believed by furnishing him with two signs to help persuade the people. The first related to his staff and the second involved his skin becoming temporarily leprous. In accordance with the standards of the ancient Near East, these signs surely had symbolic meaning. What do they represent? Rabbi Sassoon explains them as follows.

The staff has been looked at as symbolic of a leader's power and authority. As Moses ascends to a position of leadership, this sign provided a relevant message for him and the people. The staff turns into a snake, one of the wildest and most dangerous of creatures (see Gen 3:1). This indicates that leadership is deceptive and potentially hazardous to the one who wields it. It is a widely experienced feature of human nature that power often leads to an increased ego and a heightened sense of self-importance and may corrupt the individual who possesses it. Eventually, it may bring about his downfall.

Moses is told to grasp the snake by its tail, contrary to the safe and usual method of grasping it by its neck. He is to demonstrate that he is not assuming leadership in the normal manner, which may be understood as based on the standard methods of talent and superior ability with self-confidence and as a result of personal ambition. He is accepting an assignment strictly at G-d's behest and relying on His directives. When one is holding a snake by its tail he is aware that he must be on constant guard not to be bitten; similarly, one who exercises power and authority must never be lulled into complacency but must be ever wary of it injuring him, that is, damaging his character and much more.

In the second sign, Moses placed his hand in his bosom; when he took it out it was struck with leprosy. When he returned it into his bosom and took it out

again, it was back to normal. Rabbi Sassoon suggested that the hand in the bosom symbolizes inaction. In requesting G-d to become active, the psalmist cries out: לָמָּה תִּשְׁיֵב יְדְךָ וְיָמִינְךָ (“Why do You withhold your hand, your right hand?”) and מִקְרָב חִיקְךָ כְּלֵה (“Cease keeping it in Your bosom” [Ps. 74:11]). The second sign balances the first; it proclaims that although leadership has its pitfalls, inaction is not necessarily correct – it too can be destructive. The same action can produce opposite results, for the true determinative factor as to how one should act is that it should be in accordance with G-d’s will.

## 6. Moses’ Further Resistance

Moses’ fourth objection was that he had a speech impediment and lacked verbal fluency (Exod. 4:10). G-d reassured him on this, pledging to be with his “mouth.” Given his mission and the milieu in which he was to function, one wonders whether his speech impediment may not ultimately have been an advantage; it mitigated the fear that he might be suspected of accomplishing his mission by dint of great eloquence.

As respectfully as possible, without explicitly stating his refusal, Moses put forth his final and most obscure dissent: “Please delegate whom You will delegate” (4:13). Did he finally just feel inadequate? Did he fear that ultimately the people would not respond to him or just that somehow things would not work out? At this point וַיִּחַר אַף ה’ בְּמֹשֶׁה (“Hashem became angry with Moses”) since He had adequately addressed all of his objections. Moses had identified with the concept of the mission and implied he had a favorable view toward it, so resistance based on personal reluctance without legitimate reason is no longer appropriate or acceptable. To some degree G-d accommodates Moses by including Aaron in the mission, but essentially He overpowers him, closing off further discussion on the subject. G-d has a great deal invested in this enterprise; Moses is the right man for the task and the time is right. His providence had been hovering over Moses continuously from before his birth (2:1).

It is noteworthy that this is the only instance in Scripture of וַיִּחַר אַף ה’ (Hashem becoming angry) with somebody without mention of a retribution or at least a threat of one.

## 7. Moses and Jeremiah – Is this a case of מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים?

The “biography” of Jeremiah parallels that of Moses to a remarkable degree. Jeremiah also was reluctant to accept the mission G-d selected him for until G-d overpowered him: וְאַפְתָּ הַזֹּקֵתְנִי וְתוֹכַלְתְּנִי, “You enticed me, Hashem, and I was enticed, You overpowered me and You prevailed” (Jer. 20:7). Just as Moses did, Jeremiah protested that he was not a good speaker (1:6). G-d’s response to him, that He will place His words in his mouth, was similar to His response to Moses, that He will be with his mouth. As with Moses, with Jeremiah there was a great deal already invested in the upcoming mission from before he was born, undoubtedly including his parents’ dedication, as G-d explicitly informed him: בְּבֶטֶן יִדְעָתִיךָ יָדָעְתִּיךָ (“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you” [Jer. 1:5]).

The sages pointed out many additional similarities between these two great prophets. Both were from the tribe of Levi; a rod is prominent in the first prophecy of each; both were placed in a life-threatening situation in water; both were saved by non-Israelites; both had to confront rebels among the Israelites and both had to overcome challenges to their prophecies; Moses prophesied forty years as did Jeremiah in Jerusalem; Moses led Israel out of Egypt and Jeremiah led a remnant into Egypt. In our *Parashat Korah Part II* study we will point out several remarkable associations between the accounts of Moses and his challenger Korah (Num. 16-17) and that concerning Jeremiah and יוֹחָנָן בֶּן קָרְחָה (Johanan son of Kareah), one of those who accused the prophet of falsifying his prophecy (Jer. 40-43).

Although reluctant at first to accept their assignments, once they accepted, both Moses and Jeremiah devoted every fiber of their being to faithfully and courageously fulfilling G-d’s instructions. But in the midst of their missions both had moments when they questioned G-d concerning their assignments. Their extraordinary initial reluctance to acquiesce to G-d’s summons illuminates a number of matters, including their great humility, the enormity of the problems being confronted, the requirement for supernatural solutions and G-d’s commitment to His people and His world.