Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vaera

Listen Up!

At the beginning of this week's portion, Vaera, God commands Moses to speak to the people of Israel and assure them that God will soon rescue them from slavery. However, the people prove unreceptive to his message.

Exodus 6: 2,5-9	**שמות ו:ב, ו-ט**
(2) God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the Lord." (5) "I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered My covenant. (6) Therefore, say to the Israelites: I am the Lord. I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, rescue you from their slavery, and redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments. (7) I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt. (8) I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inheritance. I am the Lord." (9) Moses spoke these words to the Israelites, but they did not listen to Moses because of their shortness of spirit and hard labor.	ב) וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה: (ה) וְגַם | אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־נַאֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם מַעֲבִדִים אֹתָם וָאֶזְכֹּר אֶת־בְּרִיתִי: (ו) לָכֵן אֱמֹר לִבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי יְהוָה וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלֹת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעֲבֹדָתָם וְגָאַלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בִּזְרוֹעַ נְטוּיָה וּבִשְׁפָטִים גְּדֹלִים: (ז) וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וִידַעְתֶּם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלוֹת מִצְרָיִם: (ח) וְהֵבֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂאתִי אֶת־יָדִי לָתֵת אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיַעֲקֹב וְנָתַתִּי אֹתָהּ לָכֶם מוֹרָשָׁה אֲנִי יְהוָה: (ט) וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקֹּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה:

- **Why do you think God repeats the phrase "I am the Lord," or variations of it, so many times in His message?**
- **Even though Moses brings the Israelites good news, they are unable to hear it. Can you think of a time you found it difficult to receive good news? What made it hard to take in?**

Biblical commentators have long debated what the final verse means and why the Israelites were unable to listen to Moses. One interpretation comes from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a prominent 19th-century German rabbi, scholar, and communal leader. His Torah commentary, originally written in German, combines traditional interpretations with original insights into the biblical text.

Rabbi Hirsch on Exodus 6:9
The inhumanity of their present state lay so heavily upon them, and to satisfy its demands and get even a momentary respite for themselves, so completely took up all their energy, that they had no mind left even to give a thought to the future of which Moses would speak to them. They were so pressed by the demands made upon them, the work burdened them down so completely, that they had no patience to listen to him quietly.

- **Rabbi Hirsch describes the Israelites' condition as "inhuman." Why do you think he chose this particular word?**
- **In your experience, when you are especially busy or overwhelmed, what are some things you find it difficult to do or focus on?**

Nachmanides, a leading medieval Torah scholar who wrote commentaries on the Torah and Talmud, offers a different explanation:

רמב"ן, שמות ו:ט מִקֹּצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה לֹא בַּעֲבוּר שֶׁלֹּא יַאֲמִינוּ בַּה' וּבְנְבִיאוֹ, רַק שֶׁלֹּא הִטּוּ אׇזֶן לִדְבָרָיו מִקֹּצֶר רוּחַ, כְּאָדָם שֶׁתִּקְצַר נַפְשׁוֹ בַּעֲמָלוֹ, וְלֹא יִרְצֶה לְחָיוֹת רֶגַע בְּצַעֲרוֹ, מִדַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁיִּרְוַח לוֹ אַחֲרֵי כֵן, וְקֹצֶר הָרוּחַ הוּא פַּחְדָּם שֶׁלֹּא יַהַרְגֵם פַּרְעֹה בַּחֶרֶב כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ שׁוֹטְרֵיהֶם אֶל מֹשֶׁה, וַעֲבוֹדָה קָשָׁה, הוּא הַדּוֹחַק שֶׁהָיוּ הַנּוֹגְשִׁים אָצִים בָּהֶם וְלֹא יִתְּנוּם לִשְׁמֹעַ דָּבָר וְלַחְשׁב בּוֹ:	**Nachmanides on Exodus 6:9** **For anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage.** It was not because they did not believe in G-d and in His prophet [that they hearkened not]. Rather, they paid no attention to his words because of impatience of spirit, as a person whose soul is grieved on account of his misery and who does not want to live another moment in his suffering even though he knows that he will be relieved later. The "impatience of spirit" was their fear that Pharaoh would put them to death, as their officers said to Moses, and the "cruel bondage" was the pressure, for the taskmasters pressed upon them and hurried them [in their daily task], which

	gave them no chance to hear anything and consider it.

- **In what ways is Nachmanides' explanation similar to Rabbi Hirsch's, and how do they differ?**
- **Nachmanides distinguishes between belief and attention as two different ways of relating to a person or idea. Does this distinction resonate with you? Can you think of something you believe in but struggle to pay attention to, or something you pay attention to without fully believing in?**

The Israelites are not the only ones who fail to listen to Moses in this week's portion. When Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh to demand the Israelites' freedom, Pharaoh also refuses to listen:

שמות ז:י-יג	**Exodus 7:10-13**
(י) וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵּן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיַּשְׁלֵךְ אַהֲרֹן אֶת־מַטֵּהוּ לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְלִפְנֵי עֲבָדָיו וַיְהִי לְתַנִּין: (יא) וַיִּקְרָא גַּם־פַּרְעֹה לֶחָכָמִים וְלַמְכַשְּׁפִים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם־הֵם חַרְטֻמֵּי מִצְרַיִם בְּלַהֲטֵיהֶם כֵּן: (יב) וַיַּשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ מַטֵּהוּ וַיִּהְיוּ לְתַנִּינִם וַיִּבְלַע מַטֵּה־אַהֲרֹן אֶת־מַטֹּתָם: (יג) וַיֶּחֱזַק לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה	(10) Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh and did exactly as the Lord had commanded. Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. (11) Pharaoh then summoned his wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians did the same with their secret arts. (12) Each threw down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs. (13) Pharaoh's heart remained hard, and he did not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

- **Why do you think the Torah emphasizes that Moses and Aaron did "exactly as the Lord commanded"?**
- **Pharaoh is described as having a "hard heart." Can you think of a time when you found yourself resistant to changing your mind? What made you so resistant?**

Like the Israelites' failure to listen to Moses, Pharaoh's refusal has attracted a range of explanations from biblical commentators. Ibn Ezra, a 12th-century Spanish rabbi whose

Torah commentary reflects his expertise in Hebrew grammar and language, offers one interpretation.

אבן עזרא שמות ז:יג **ויחזק.** מעצמו בעבור שראה שעשו החרטומים כמעשה אהרן:	**Ibn Ezra on Exodus 7:13** **Pharaoh's heart [remained] hard.** By itself. Pharaoh saw that the magicians were able to do what Aaron did.

1. **Ibn Ezra specifies that Pharaoh's heart remained hard "by itself," rather than because of an outside force. Why do you think he considers this distinction important?**
2. **Based on Ibn Ezra's explanation, why do you think Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses and Aaron?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. According to Ibn Ezra, Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses and Aaron because he was unimpressed by their magic. Could a similar explanation account for the Israelites' failure to listen to Moses? Does it fit with the verses and your understanding of the story?
2. Based on the explanations offered by Rabbi Hirsch and Nachmanides, was there anything Moses could have done differently to reach the Israelites?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study
If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vaera, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vaera page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Vaera topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Pharaoh, Slaves, and Hardening of the Heart.

The verses in the first source contain what are known as the "four languages of redemption" – four verbs which God uses to describe how he will take the Jewish people out of Egypt. According to some opinions, it is in recognition of these four words that four cups of wine are drunk at the Passover Seder. What do you think each of the words uniquely adds? The Meiri, a rabbi from medieval France, offers one explanation in his commentary on the Talmud.

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