Vaera: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?



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God reveals himself to Moses, promising to free the Israelites, appoint them his chosen people, and deliver them to the land he had promised their patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh, and issue the famous cry, speaking in God's name — "let my people go." Pharaoh refuses**, even after Aaron's staff turns into a snake and swallows all the magical wands of Egypt's sorcerers.

And so, **God sends down the first of the plagues**: first, the Nile's waters turn to blood; then, frogs infest the land; next, man and beast alike are infested with lice. The fourth plague delivers hordes of ravenous wild beasts running wild in Egypt's cities; the fifth pestilence that kills all the livestock; and the sixth afflicts the Egyptians with boils. For plague number seven, God mixes together fire and ice, which rain down from the heavens as deadly hail. **And yet, Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go.**

> ""“The heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the children of Israel go.”"

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha begins with a stirring speech, in which **God reminds Moses of his covenant** with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and **promises to redeem the Israelites and deliver them to the Promised Land**. HaShem then asks Moses to go and share the good news with the Israelites, and Moses, inspired, does just that.

How do the people respond? With what is arguably the biggest emotional letdown in human history: "Moses spoke thus to the children of Israel," the Torah tells us, **"but they did not hearken to Moses because of [their] shortness of breath and because of [their] hard labor."**

"Hard labor" we get! These are slaves, and the business of carrying bricks is backbreaking and soul-crushing, and it's completely possible to imagine a nation of oppressed people just too physically exhausted to behold the divine promise. **But what does "shortness of breath" mean?**

The Rashar, the great 19th century German Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, delivered a beautiful and terrifying explanation. **"The inhuman suffering of their present moment weighed them down mightily,"** he wrote, "and they were preoccupied exclusively with meeting its demands and seeking minor comforts. And so, they had no excessive spirit, no leisure to contemplate an issue, like redemption, that belongs squarely in the future. So that when Moses came to speak to them, they had no patience to listen to him quietly. So pressed were they by the demands of the hour, and so burdened were they by their work."

This, alas, isn't just an affliction particular to the Israelites in Egypt. **This shortness of breath is a daily challenge for each of us.** This is why the Ramchal, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the 18th century Italian kabbalist, warns us in his masterful book, Mesilat Yesharim, that "for while a man is occupied in his worldly affairs, his thoughts are bound by the chains of the burden that weighs on them and it is impossible for him to give thought to his deeds."

Like us, then, the Israelites refused to listen because they had too much on their minds. They were preoccupied with work, with troubles, with the thousand and one demands daily life puts on each and every human being, regardless of their particular circumstances. They chose to focus on the mundane rather than on the miraculous, though the miraculous — a very real and very spectacular liberation —was at hand.

Moses's response to this dispiriting reply isn't recorded, and some rabbis argued that Moses, being humble, blamed himself for the debacle, and that "shortness of breath" meant his own impatience with his failure as a stuttering speaker. But this week's parsha leaves us all with a major challenge: **the challenge of doing whatever we can to cure our own shortness of breath and open our own minds and hearts to the miracles that surround us each and every day.**

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