

JANUARY 16, 2012

Parashat Vaera

Modern-Day Pharaoh

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 7:3)

ואני אקשה את לב פרעה (שמות ז: ג)

Commentators throughout the ages have grappled with a troubling dilemma regarding the story of the Exodus: If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, how could the Egyptian king have had free will? Rabbi Yaakov Medan suggests that God did not, in fact, take away Pharaoh's freedom to choose whether or not to release the Jews. Rather, the phrase "hardened Pharaoh's heart" means that after each plague God gave Pharaoh an opportunity to continue enslaving the Jews by ending the plague before freeing the Jewish people. Rabbi Medan wrote, "A 'strong hand' without a forceful, smart, and suspicious foreign policy accompanying it—is insufficient to bring the [Jewish] nation to freedom." Realizing Moses' and Aharon's negotiating naiveté, Pharaoh found them to be easy adversaries who would capitulate without explicitly demanding the Jews' freedom.

In using the phrase "hardened Pharaoh's heart," the Torah relates that God actually gave Pharaoh the freedom of choice to follow the evil that was within his own heart. Sadly, despite international condemnation and the presence of Arab League observers, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad continues to have the freedom to murder his own people.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad recently vowed to respond to threats against him with an "iron hand" and refused to step down, insisting he still has his people's support despite the 10-month-old uprising against him, [The Associated Press](#) reported. In his first speech since June of 2011, Assad repeated claims that a foreign conspiracy as well as terrorists are behind the unrest. "Our priority now is to regain security which we basked in for decades, and this can only be achieved by hitting the terrorists with an iron hand," Assad said. "We will not be lenient with those who work with outsiders against the country." Assad also lashed out at the Arab League, which has suspended Syria and sent a team of monitors to assess whether the regime is abiding by an Arab-brokered peace plan. Despite the presence of a team of Arab league monitors sent to quell the killings in Syria, the repressive, violent crackdown on Assad's opposition continues unabated.

When the Torah states that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, it is actually referring to Pharaoh's own self-destructive plan of repression against the Jewish people. Sadly, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is following in Pharaoh's footsteps, conducting a brutal and violent campaign much like his biblical predecessor. Hopefully, Assad's rule will come to a swift end bringing a close to this modern-day horror story of killing and cruelty. ■

Lashing Out in Anger

And the frogs came (Exodus 8:2)

ותעל הצפרדע (שמות ח: ב)

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 67b), noting that the word for frogs appears in the verse in the singular form, explains that at first, a single frog rose from the Nile. Rashi (on 8:2) adds that each time the Egyptians struck the frog, it would splinter miraculously into more frogs. Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky wondered why the Egyptians continued to strike the frog, instead of simply leaving it alone. He explained that the Egyptians struck the frog because they had lost the ability to be reasonable. According to Rabbi Yissachar Frand, "Once a person becomes angry, he loses all

sense of reason and rationality. Of course, the logical thing to do would have been to stop hitting the frogs, but when a person is very angry and frustrated, he loses control of his faculties.”

While the Egyptians could have avoided the plague of the frogs by simply holding back, they lashed out and struck the frog in anger and frustration. Just as the Egyptians’ penchant for violence led to unnecessary hardship, so too does Hamas’ similar predilection prevent Israel from making compromises in the hopes of achieving peace.

More than 15 months after Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas walked away from talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met in Jordan with the goal of resuming direct peace negotiations. The recent meeting comes even as the PA seeks reconciliation with Hamas, whose leader Ismail Haniyeh [said](#) late last year, “The armed resistance and the armed struggle are the path and the strategic choice for liberating the Palestinian land, from the [Mediterranean] sea to the [Jordan] river...” It is with this threat in mind that, as [The New York Times](#) notes, Israel remains skeptical about ceding territory to a Palestinian entity. “Every time [the Israelis] have withdrawn from land—from southern Lebanon in 2000, from Gaza in 2005—Islamist forces hostile to Israel have taken power. The Sinai, yielded to Egypt in 1982, is now becoming another area of instability dominated by anti-Israel and Islamist forces. Given the rise of Islamism more widely, another territorial concession without ironclad security guarantees makes no sense, the Netanyahu government says.” For a two-state solution to end the conflict, it is essential that the PA not reconcile with any group that, like Hamas, does not recognize Israel’s right to exist, has not renounced violence and will not agreed to abide by previous treaties.

By giving in to their violent tendencies, the ancient Egyptians brought a plague upon themselves. If the Palestinians are genuinely aiming to achieve a two-state solution with the state of Israel, they must heed the Egyptian’s example and learn to control their violent elements. ■

Feeling the Sting of Sanctions

He who feared the word of God (Exodus 9:20)

הִירָא אֶת דְּבַר ה' (שְׁמוֹת ט:כ)

When warning Pharaoh about the financial devastation that the coming plague of hail would bring—by wiping out the Egyptians’ livestock—Moses admonished the Egyptians to “hasten in your cattle and all that you have in the field” (9:19), lest they perish in the plague. While many Egyptians ignored the warning and suffered devastating losses, the Torah notes that “He that feared the word of the Lord among the servants of Pharaoh made his servants and his cattle flee into the houses” (9:20). Yet, Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk (Meshech Chochmoh on 9:20) notes that the Egyptian government, in its defiance of Moses, actually harmed the average Egyptian, stating that “the servants of Pharaoh warned [the people] not to bring their cattle and servants in...”

In ancient Egypt the Pharaoh’s stubborn defiance of Moses led to financial ruin for his people and nation. Today, the Iranian government’s stubborn defiance of the calls of the international community is having a similar effect.

As the United States continues to ratchet up its sanctions program on Iran, the leadership of the Islamic regime remains defiant. In a recent televised speech, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said, “Sanctions imposed on Iran by our enemies will not have any impact on our nation. The Iranian nation believes in its rulers.” Yet, according to the [Asia Times](#), “The financial sanctions against Iran signed into law by United States President Barack Obama...are having deeper financial effects than previous measures and highlight the regime’s domestic political weakness.” [Reuters](#) reported that despite Khomeini’s claims, “the latest measures against Tehran are causing real pain. Oil buyers are demanding deep discounts from Iran, cutting the revenue it needs to feed its 74 million people. The rial currency has plunged and Iranians have scrambled to withdraw savings from banks to buy dollars.” Iran’s currency lost over 12 percent of its value in the days following the passage of the new sanctions against Iran’s central bank. For more on Iran, visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

When the Pharaoh in Egypt ignored Moses’ warnings, the people of Egypt paid the price. Sadly, it is the people of Iran who are now paying the price for Islamic Republic’s reckless pursuit of nuclear weapons. ■

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