

Some More Comments on Parashat Va'era
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שמות וי:ו לכן אמר לבני ישראל אני ה' והוצאתי אתכם
 ממתחת סבלת מצרים והצלתני אתכם מעבדתם וגאלתי אתכם
 בזרוע נטויה ובשפטים גדלים:

Exodus 6:6 Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the LORD. I will take you out from under the sufferings of the Egypt and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. והוצאתי. I will take out This verb always implies the presence of a boundary, almost always, a lateral boundary. Here God promises to take אתכם you (the Israelites) out. But while other passages from the Torah and Jewish liturgy have conditioned us to expect, I will you take you out of the Land of Egypt (ie. from one space to another) here God says, I will take you out ממתחת סבלת מצרים from under the sufferings of Egypt (and notice that this phrase is repeated). This is very unusual. The mental image that is being created here is that of someone being crushed by a burden on their head. But look at this iconic image of an Egyptian Pharaoh:



Not only does Pharaoh have his arm outstretched, he is literally on top of a victim, crushing him! If we understand our text in light of this imagery, God is promising to take Israel out from under their oppression, that is, the oppression of Pharaoh! Thus, the text cleverly inverts a common Egyptian motif: the God of Israel has usurped the place of the Pharaoh, and instead of

Pharaoh crushing the Israelites, the implication is that God will crush the Pharaoh! And what is Israel's suffering? The Pharaoh himself!

ובשפטים ובזרוע נטויה with an outstretched arm and great judgements. In this next picture, Pharaoh is slaying victims with an outstretched arm while holding a weapon or mace in the extended arm.



שפטים is an unusual word. God certainly judges, but it is possible that layered into this word is a similar sounding שבטים which means a kind of rod or mace. It's hard not to perceive a pun here: God will punish the Egyptians not only with harsh judgements, but with mighty blows, as if using a rod or a mace. If we are keeping track of parallelisms, ובשפטים גדלים amplifies בזרוע נטויה.

שמות וי:טו ונדבר משה בן אל-בני ישראל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדַת קֹשֶׁה:

6:9 But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their breath short spirits crushed by cruel bondage. **Rashi:** וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה: **But they would not listen to Moses:**

— לֹא קִבְּלוּ תְּנַחֲמִין they did not accept his words of comfort. Rashi gives us wonderful insight. It's one thing to give words of comfort, it's another thing to accept words of comfort. We recall that when we find ourselves in situation where we are the comforters, we have to be especially careful in what and how we speak to the mourners. This can be very difficult. Some mourners welcome opportunities to share the feelings and reminiscences and others are more apprehensive. On

the other hand, even those who are being comforted have an obligation to accept the comfort that is being offered to them, at the very least, as a courtesy to those who are providing the comfort. כל מי שזהו מצר, רוחו ונשימתו — מקצר רוח. If one is in anguish, his breath comes in short gasps and he cannot draw long breaths.

It is very tempting to consider in this instance the role of breath in calming the spirit. People who meditate or practice mindfulness or relaxation therapy understand that the key to achieving any state of calm is to control the pace of one's breathing and to breathe from the diaphragm. Obviously, the Israelites are not in a state of calm. R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), comments: וקשה:

It is difficult to endure a long statement that requires an explanation in order to understand it in an expansive spiritual state. In other words, how could they understand what was being said, when they were so overwhelmed?

וי:כ"ו הוא אהרן ומשה אשר אמר ה' להם הוציאו את בני ישראל ממצרים על צבאותם:

6:26 *It is the same Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said, "Bring forth the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop."*

רש"י על שמות וי:כ"ו הוא אהרן ומשה. יש מקומות שמוקדים אהרן למשה ויש מקומות שמוקדים משה לאהרן, לומר לה ששקולין כְּאֶחָד:

Rashi on Exodus 6:26 *There are some passages where Scripture mentions Aaron before Moses (as here) and other passages where it mentions Moses before Aaron; this is done in order to indicate that they were equal in all respects (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:1).* Rashi emphasizes the ethical dimension in the Torah's storytelling. How the text orders the characters is a subtle device that conveys their relative importance. In the case of Moses and Aaron, the order of their appearance shifts all the time. They are a team of leaders. While Moses is the primary leader, often it is because of Aaron, that Moses is successful. This is a *duumvirate* or a *dyarchy*. The rabbinic tradition perceives Moses as the stern leader; Aaron, as the more agreeable leader who makes peace among people.

ט:כ"ד ויהי ביד ואש מתלקחת בתוך הברד כבד מאד
9:24 *The hail was very heavy—fire flashing in the midst of the hail—*

רש"י על שמות ט:כ"ד:א' מתלקחת בתוך הברד. גם בתוך גם, האש והברד מערבין, והברד מים הוא, ולעשות רצון קונם עשו שלום ביניהם:

Rashi on Exodus 9:24 *fire flashing in the midst of the hail* — a miracle within a miracle! Fire and hail mingled, although hail is water! But in order to perform the will of their Creator they made peace one with the other (Exodus Rabbah 12:4).

This fascinating comment blends several ideas. Like Russian nesting dolls which delight us in when we remove each successive doll, here Rashi, citing a midrash, shapes us to see miracles not as singular events but as nested events, *miracles within miracles*. In Shmot Rabbah, R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia debate the hail's appearance. One said that it was like *the berry of a pomegranate whose stones are seen from within*, in other words, the hailstone was like a globe with a flame inside the globe. The other said that it was *like an emulsion of water and oil mixed together* where sparks of fire mingled with crystals of ice. Perhaps the deeper question in the debate is: what are the limits when we imagine a miracle? How far can we stretch our imagination beyond what the text seems to imply? R. Yehuda (the more conservative) seems to suggest that there is a set of limits, *fire and hail mingled* means a fire, ie. a flame within a chunk of ice; R. Nehemia (the more liberal) seems to have a much more expansive view of the miracle. Every hailstone consisted of sparks of fire and crystals of ice mingled together. Two visions, two ways of imagining the miraculous, two ways of rendering the world. It is akin to a debate between schools of art: Realism vs. Surrealism. Representational vs. Abstract. A Rembrandt versus a Picasso. To Rashi, the main point of the midrash is that fire and water, which normally cannot coexist, *made peace with one another* for the sake of a higher objective: the liberation of Israel. In the midrashic imagination, all nature yields to God's will.

ט:ל"ד נראה פרעה כִּי־חָלַל הַמִּטָּר וְהַבָּרָד וְהַקָּלַת וְיָסַף לַחֲטֹא וַיִּקְבַּד לְבוֹ הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו:

9:34 *But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he became stubborn and reverted to his guilty ways, as did his courtiers.* Midrash: כל זמן שהן בצרה הם מכניעים עצמן, משהצרה עוברת חוזרין לקלולין. *This is the way of the wicked. When they are in trouble, the grovel, when the trouble passes, they go back to their evil ways.*

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