## Some Comments on Parashat Va'era Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 13, 2024 3 Shvat 5784

At three crucial moments in the story of the Exodus, Moses and Aaron speak to the people of Israel and at each of these three points, the people respond in some way.

Text	Response	Translation
4:29-31	ויַאֲמֵן הָעָם	The people trusted,
Parashat	וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ	they hearkened,
Shmot		that God had taken account of
(Last week's		the Children of Israel ,
parasha)		that he had seen their
	<mark>ַנִּקְדוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּקוו</mark> ּ.	affliction. <mark>And they did homage</mark>
		<mark>and bowed low</mark> .
6:6-9	וִיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן	Moshe spoke thus to the
Parashat	אָל בְּנֵי ישְׁרָאֵל	Children of Israel.
Va'era		<mark>But they did not hearken to</mark>
(This week's	<mark>משֶׁה</mark> מִקְצֶר רוּתַ	
parasha)	וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קַשָּׁה.	out of shortness of spirit and
		out of hard servitude.
12:3-27	ואָמַרָתָּם זָבַח	then say:
Parashat Bo	כָּסַח הוּא לַהי	It is the sacrificial-meal of
(Next week's	אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל	Passover to God,
parasha)		who passed over the houses of
		the Children of Israel in Egypt,
		when he dealt-the-blow to Egypt
	· ·	and our houses he rescued.
		The people did homage and
	<mark>ַוּיִּשְׁתַּקַווּ.</mark>	<mark>bowed low.</mark>

The first occurred in last week's parasha, when Moses returned to Egypt after his exile in Midian. God had told Moses at the Burning Bush that he was going to save the people of Israel from Egypt and bring them up from that land (3:8). When Moses returned from Midian, he told this to Aaron and then he and Aaron assembled the elders to impart the deliverancemessage to them. Aaron, newly appointed as Moses' spokesman, communicated the deliverance-message to the people. That, together with the miraculous signs,<sup>1</sup> elicited trust and the people responded by bowing, ויקדו וישתקוו.<sup>2</sup> The second reaction, which we will focus on, is found at that beginning of this week's parasha. The third takes place on the eve of the Exodus. In response to the pre-Exodus instructions, most importantly, the command to keep this ritual when they enter the land, ויִקָּד הַעָם ויִשְׁתַהוּ, they bow (12:27). Clearly, the people are capable of reverence and respect especially when it comes to the hearing a good speech telling of their salvation. However here, when Moses relates to them God's inspirational message that they will be saved and taken out of Egypt, they

could care less. The speech is a remarkable piece of oratory.3 But more remarkable is how the Israelites responded (6:9): וְלֹא But they did not hearken to Moshe, out of shortness of spirit and out of hard servitude. These commentators offer their views of Israel's mood:

Rashi	לא קַבְּלוּ תַנְחוּמִין:	They didn't accept the	They hostil	have ity, and
		comfort.	anger	•
Ibn Ezra	· · · ·	They didn't incline their	physi	did not cally listen
		ear to his words.	to hin	n.
Bekhor Shor		They didn't pay attention to his words.	-	ignored he said.
Sforno	לְהַתְּבּוֹנֵן בְּכָל זֶה. לְהַתְבּוֹנֵן בְּכָל זֶה.		overv	were too vhelmed to through it.
Reggio	וְכָזָה יִקָרָא גַּם לְאִישׁ אֱמוּנִים כְּשֶׁתְּתַדַּשְׁנָה עָלָיו מְצוּקוֹת רְבּוֹת וּכְבַדוֹת שְׁתַּאֲפָלְנָה אוֹר שִׁכְלוֹ וּבִינָתוֹ.	person of faith, when he suddenly experiences terrible suffering, that darken		collective

Even the greatest orators would have failed here because the audience was emotionally distracted. However, two words are overlooked in these commentaries, and they are the key to understanding what was going on here: אל משה - to Moses. They are not listening to Moses. Sure, they are too overwhelmed or depressed to listen to the message, but they have no faith in the messenger. Moses' leadership is the problem. How effective has he been? Not much. What kind of legitimacy does he have? Next to none. What has he done for them lately? Nothing. One would have expected the people to show reverence at this extraordinary speech, but here they don't even listen to what he is saying! More importantly, they do not listen אל משה - to Moses. To him! And that's the point. When he speaks to them the first time, they respond out of respect and awe. Here was this meteoric figure who is suddenly telling them what they wanted to hear. And miracles! Although the Torah never describes what he looked like, it's quite likely that his appearance made an impression on them too!<sup>4</sup> But they felt let down by him. Mario Cuomo famously

ghost of Samuel (1 Sam. 28:14), and Bathsheva before David (1 Kings 1:16, 31). It is not a formal act of worship but a solemn gesture. <sup>3</sup>In Judaism, these verses become the key organizing structure for the Passover Seder, specifically because of its four terms or redemption: *"yell take*, specifically because of its four terms or redemption: *will take*, which the rabbis will connect to the four cups of wine. <sup>4</sup>It is tempting to find analogies in Jewish history. When Theodor Herzl organized the first Zionist Congress in 1897 he was received jubilantly. The great British Jewish writer, Israel Zangwill described him glowingly: A majestic Oriental figure not so tall as it appears when he draws himself up and stands dominating the assembly with eyes the brood and glow - you would say one of the Assyrian Kings, whose sculptured heads adorn our museums, the very profile of Tiglath Pileser. Diaries of Theodor Herzl, ed. M. Lowenthal p. 215. By the second

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>The staff turning into a snake, then back to a snake; the clear-skin hand turning leprous and then back to normal; the water to blood (Exod. 4:2-9)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>This phrase occurs in several places in the Bible. It demonstrates awe, respect, gratitude Abraham's servant bows to God when he hears that the girl who he met at the well is the granddaughter of Nachor, exactly the one he has been looking for to be the wife of Isaac, איש (Gen. 24:26). When the brothers come to Joseph a second time and they are received by Joseph courteously. Joseph asks them about their father and then, ויאקרו שלום לעבדור לע

said, "You campaign in poetry and govern in prose." Meaning that in the campaign you are expected to give lofty speeches. But when you are actually governing, you are supposed to get results. When Moses appears before the people with the *Four-Terms-of-Redemption* speech, it is after a great setback and a plummet in his popularity. Having appeared before Pharaoh with his first petition, the people are punished with even harsher demands and worse conditions. They now have to collect their own straw for bricks and produce the same daily quota. The taskmasters are under pressure; they in turn put more pressure on the Israelite overseers, and the situation is about to explode. The Israelite overseers then confront Moses and Aaron (5:21):

	May God see you
וְיִשְׁפּֿט אֲשֶׁר	and judge for,
	having made our smell
	reek in the eyes of
	Pharaoh and in the eyes
בְּיָדָם לְקָרְגֵנוּ.	of his servants,
	giving a sword into their
	hand, to kill us!

After which Moses truns to God and says:

אֲדֹנָי לָמָה הֲרֵעֹתָה	My Lord,
	why have you dealt so ill
לָמָה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי?	with this people ?
	Why have you sent me?

The people may be exhausted and downtrodden, but they are not stupid. They turn on Moses, but they are also intuitively picking up on what Moses is projecting to them: a lack of faith in the rescue project, and a lack of confidence in himself as to whether or not he can pull it off. They *do not listen "to him"* because he has not delivered for them, he has only made things worse, and moreover, they sense that he is not fully in the game. It will take nine plagues to get them back to the point where they will actually listen to him and accord him the awe and respect that he will deserve.

*represents the reiterated request to Pharaoh as "send off."* Significantly, the phrase occurs seven times throughout the course of the story.<sup>5</sup> But look closely at what happens the first time Moses says this to Pharaoh. Pharaoh responds harshly (5:2):

	Who is God <sup>6</sup> ,	
	that I should hearken to his voice	
לשַלַח אֶת ישָׁרָאֵל	to send Israel free?	
	<mark>I do not know</mark> God,	
	moreover, Israel	
לא אַשַלָּת	I will not send free!	

But then we notice something very interesting: every time Moses says שלח אָת עמי -Send free My people, he always takes a verbal joust at Pharaoh with the word: אַרָּמָע אווו know.

Verse	When?	The Verebal Joust	
7:17	Before 1st plague: blood.		By this <mark>shall you</mark> <mark>know</mark> that I am God.
8:6	Before 2nd plague: frogs.	לְמַעַן <mark>תַּדַע</mark> כִּי אֵין כַּהי אֱלהֵינוּ.	In order <mark>that you may know</mark> that there is none like our God.
8:18	Before 4th plague: wild animals.		in order <mark>that you may</mark> <mark>know</mark> that I am God in the land.
9:3	Before 5th plague: pestilence.		here, <mark>God's hand<sup>7</sup> will</mark> be on your livestock
9:14	Before 7th plague: hail.	אֵין כַּמֹנִי בְּכָל	so <mark>that you may know</mark> that there is none like me throughout all the land
10:3	Before 8th plague: locusts.		Do you <mark>not yet know</mark> that Egypt is lost? <sup>8</sup>

Pharaoh's first reaction to Moses is a bombastic put down. It's a denigration of God and a delegitimization of Israel. The plagues are Moses' answer. In speaking to Pharaoh in the language of plagues, Moses establishes his own legitimacy before the people. Decoding the plagues deserves a whole seminar, but the bottom line is that the plagues are a form of language that communicates to Pharoah on many levels. They act against the tyranny of ruthless unchecked human power and the moral absurdity of Egyptian mythology. While we may recoil at the use of violence, here, it is the last resort. After all, Pharaoh could have just said, "Okay, you can go" after the first petition. The arrogant refusal is a great moral transgression, unredeemable through diplomacy or language. Language broke down and hence, the plagues.

This week's Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Cathy and Ira Cohen to commemorate the 9th Yahrzeit of Ira's sister, Susan Cohen Slavet, z'l. Shabbat Shalom! Am Yisrael Hay!

Congress there was already opposition. Ahad Ha'am the great voice of Cultural Zionism did not attend. Herzl, as an almost totally assimilated Western European Jew, did not yet have the legitimacy he needed to win over everyone.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>5:1; 7:16, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3. W. Propp, Anchor Bible Exodus 1-18, p. 252.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Note the irony here. When God calls Moses, Moses responds similarly, **אַלָרָ אָל פּרְעֹה** (3:11).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Okay. דע is not ידע. We know. But there is what to talk about here. <sup>8</sup>This is the comment of the Egyptians themselves! They are also jousting with Pharaoh!