

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):

יִרְאֵהוּ עֲלֵיכֶם וַיִּשְׁפֹּט אֲשֶׁר הִבְשַׁמְתֶּם אֶת רִיחֵנוּ בְּעֵינֵי פַרְעֹה וּבְעֵינֵי עֲבָדָיו לְתֵת חֶרֶב בְּיָדָם לְהַרְגֵנוּ.	May God see you and judge for, having made our smell reek in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, giving a sword into their hand, to kill us!
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After which Moses turns to God and says:

אֲדֹנָי לְמָה הִרְעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה? לְמָה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי?	My Lord, why have you dealt so ill with this people? Why have you sent me?
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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.

שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי We tend to translate that phrase as, **Let my people go**. That is the translation found in the King James Version, which found its way into the great African American spiritual **Go Down Moses**, and which probably exerted some influence on contemporary translators. But there are plausible alternatives. Everett Fox: **Send free my people**. Robert Alter: **Send off Israel My people**. Alter comments: **the Hebrew word shileah has a range of meanings: "to let go or dismiss," "to divorce," "to send guests decorously on their way," "to grant manumission to a slave."** *There is probably some ironic tension in this narrative between the positive and negative senses of the verb, and since it is repeatedly played off against God's "sending" out His hand or sending ministers of destruction, this translation*

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.
 5:1; 7:16, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3. W. Propp, Anchor Bible Exodus 1-18, p. 252.

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

מִי הִ' אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁמַע בְּקוֹלוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת הִ' וְגַם אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֶשְׁלַח	Who is God, that I should hearken to his voice to send Israel free? I do not know God, moreover, Israel I will not send free!
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But then we notice something very interesting: every time Moses says **שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי** - **Send free My people**, he always takes a verbal joust at Pharaoh with the word: **תָּדַע** - **you will know**.

Verse	When?	The Verbal Joust
7:17	Before 1st plague: blood.	בְּזֹאת תָּדַע כִּי אֲנִי הִ'. By this shall you know that I am God.
8:6	Before 2nd plague: frogs.	לִמְעַן תָּדַע כִּי אֵין כַּהִ' אֱלֹהֵינוּ. In order that you may know that there is none like our God.
8:18	Before 4th plague: wild animals.	לִמְעַן תָּדַע כִּי אֲנִי הִ' בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ. in order that you may know that I am God in the land.
9:3	Before 5th plague: pestilence.	הִנֵּה יַד ה' הוֹיָה בְּמִקְנֶה. here, God's hand⁷ will be on your livestock
9:14	Before 7th plague: hail.	בְּעֵבֹר תָּדַע כִּי אֵין כַּמֶּנִּי בְּכֹל הָאָרֶץ. so that you may know that there is none like me throughout all the land
10:3	Before 8th plague: locusts.	הֲטָרַם תָּדַע כִּי אֶבְדָּה מִצְרַיִם. Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?⁸

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 Pharaoh 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!**

⁶Note the irony here. When God calls Moses, Moses responds similarly, **מִי אֲנֹכִי** כִּי אֵלֶּךָ אֶל פַּרְעֹה (3:11).
⁷Okay. יד is not ידע. We know. But there is what to talk about here.
⁸This is the comment of the Egyptians themselves! They are also jousting with Pharaoh!