

Pharaoh regrets sending the people out of Egypt. **מה זאת** *What did we do?* he says, together with his advisors, **כי שלחנו את ישראל מעבדנו** *now, that we have sent free Israel from serving us?* (Exod. 14:5). He set out to retrieve them, with a force of six hundred chariots.<sup>1</sup> Then this:

**וּפָרַעְהָ הַקָּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת עֵינֵיהֶם וְהִנֵּה מִצְרַיִם נֹסֵעַ  
 אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל ה'.** (שמות יד:)

**And Pharaoh got closer and the Children of Israel lifted up their eyes and here! Egypt was coming after them! And they were terribly afraid. And the Children of Israel screamed to God.** (Exod. 14:10)

**Commentary:** **And Pharaoh got closer.** This is an aerial view of what is happening on the ground. We picture Pharaoh leading his force of chariots. In a single column? A horizontal line? A V-shape? We don't know. But what we do know is that these are professional soldiers on chariots. And that is very scary. **And the Children of Israel lifted up their eyes.** This is a view from ground-level as the people crane their necks to see what is coming in the distance. They would have also heard a lot of thundering noise, but the text focuses on what they saw and not what they heard. **וְהִנֵּה** *And here! Egypt was coming after them!* We have gone from an aerial view to a ground view, to the view from inside their minds. They are shocked and surprised. The word - **וְהִנֵּה** *and here!* - found in so many biblical stories, alerts the audience that something awesome and overwhelming is about to take place. **Egypt was coming after them!** They think the entire country is pursuing them! **And they were terribly afraid.** Nu, how would you feel? **And the Children of Israel screamed to God.** Were it not for the fact that there is a lot of screaming in Exodus, it would be easy to overlook this. The Egyptians screamed over their firstborns, a scream never heard before or since (11:6), a scream from every household (12:30). The Israelites have been screaming, groaning, and wailing



because of their suffering at the hands of the Egyptians (2:23, 3:7,9, 6:50). But until now, the text never states **to whom they are screaming.** They are simply screaming to the universe. **This is the first time in the Torah that it says specifically that they screamed to God.** This is significant. It means that they have internalized the idea that God listens to them and speaks to

them through Moses. True, at first they were too overwhelmed to pay attention to what Moses said to them on God's behalf (6:10), but after ten devastating plagues during which Egypt was hammered and Israel was spared, they began to understand that the things God says actually do happen. This little screaming detail demonstrates how **they** have changed. Before, they did not pay attention to God. But now they honor God's word and obey his instructions (12:27-28). **The people transitioned from being primal screamers to profoundly penitent pray-ers.** But in this very moment, God did not respond to them! Imagine their despair after all they had been through, and all the trust that they had developed for God, that now when they screamed to God, nothing happened! When they figured that they were getting no response, what were they going to do? I wish we could go back in time to watch. Wouldn't some of them, perhaps a small fraction, have said:

**וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה הַמִּבְלִי אֵין קְבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לָמוֹת  
 בַּמִּדְבָּר! מָה זֹאת עֲשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם!?**

**And they said to Moses: Was it for a lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?! What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt?!**

Who **said** this to Moses? All of them? Some of them? The majority? There had to be some dissent. Could it be that they were that awful? That ungrateful? But alas, this unflattering statement makes it into the Torah and defines the people for all time.

**And they said to Moses.** Note: they don't direct their anger to God. Even though they have cried to God just minutes ago, they now turn to Moses and launch their fusillade of anger against him. And why are they so angry at him? Because no matter how much he has accomplished for them so far, he is failing right now. And more importantly, **in their minds he is still not yet one of them.** He does not yet have total legitimacy as their leader. He was never a slave. He never knew what it meant to suffer the indignities. Sure, he could risk his life to defend an Israelite. But no one ever beat him. Sure, he experienced exile and dislocation. But he ended up making a good life for himself in Midian and never experienced the day-to-day uncertainties of being under someone else's control. It's not that the people are

<sup>1</sup>Note the description in Exod. 14:7 of the force Pharaoh deploys to pursue the Israelites: **שֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב בָּחוּר וְכָל רֶכֶב מִצְרַיִם וְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב מִצְרַיִם וְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב מִצְרַיִם** *six hundred selected chariots and every kind of chariot of Egypt, teams of three upon them all.* We catch a textual echo here because the text reports that Israel left Egypt (12:37), with **about six hundred thousand on foot, menfolk**

**apart from little-ones.** Ah, so the elite force that Pharaoh deploys has a ratio of 1 **select chariot** for every 1000 Israelite men (1:1000). According to military experts, successful control operations require a much lower ratio, of 1:50 or even 1:40. This means Pharaoh thought that overtaking Israel would be relatively easy, that they were no match for his superior force.

simply being ungrateful boors. They are lashing out at someone who they feel is responsible for their present predicament who they feel could also walk away from them at any time.

**Was it for a lack of graves in Egypt.** We can read this as either bitter sarcasm or perhaps as the genesis of all Jewish humor!<sup>2</sup> Either way, what a great line it is! After all, Egypt was the ultimate land of graves! The great monuments of Egyptian civilization were the tombs of the Pharaohs! The entire society was organized around entombment and tending to the dead.<sup>3</sup> But what we really hear in their caustic verbal insult is a clash of cultures:



Egypt	Israel
Ruled by a cruel Pharaoh.	Ruled by merciful God.
Defined by slavery. Oppression.	Defined by freedom. Dignity.
Focused on providing for the needs of the dead in the next world.	Focused on providing for the needs of the living in this world.
The "Book of the Dead."	The Book of Life. Torah.

Their sarcastic barb works because we (the audience) know that the **Torah's great theme is: choose life. But at this moment, they think Moses has made them choose death.**

**That you took us to die in the wilderness?!** The wilderness was not supposed to be a death-zone. It was supposed to be **the transition zone between death in the land of Egypt and life in the land of Israel.** But according to them at this moment, the desert is a place of death. Just like Egypt.

**What is this that you have done to us?!** We have to note that this is heavily coded language. **מה זאת עשית לנו** - is a formulation which we see in six other specific cases of moral accusation (see the footnotes for the text):

Gen 3:13	God accuses Eve of eating the fruit. <sup>4</sup>
Gen.12:18	Pharaoh accuses Abram of lying. <sup>5</sup>
Gen. 26:10	Avimelekh accuses Isaac of lying. <sup>6</sup>
Gen. 29:25	Jacob accuses Lavan of cheating him. <sup>7</sup>
Gen. 42:28	The Brothers accuse God of wrongfully punishing them. <sup>8</sup>

**NO MORE HOSTAGES IN GAZA.  
THIS ANGUISH IS OVER. THANK GOD.**

<sup>2</sup> Is it funny? It has all the ingredients of great Jewish humor: A *shtickel* sarcasm, a *bissel* irony, and a *shmeck* of the truth. Like these four random humorous Yiddish proverbs: 1. **When God wants to punish an unbeliever he gives him a pious wife.** 2. **With such a meal you can barely forget your hunger.** 3. **A wedding is like a funeral with music.** 4. **As long as you're healthy you can always kill yourself later!**

<sup>3</sup> By volume, perhaps by weight as well, the Great Pyramid is 15 times bigger than the Karnak Temple, the largest religious structure built in antiquity.

**Exod. 14:5 Pharaoh and his advisers accuse themselves of failure for allowing Israel to leave Egypt.<sup>9</sup>**

In each one of those cases there is a perceived moral violation. Adam violates God's word. Abram and Isaac lie about their wives' identity as their sisters. Lavan tricked Jacob by marrying him off to Leah instead of Rachel. The brothers believed that God was wrongfully punishing them because they found the money they had just paid for their food back in their grain-sacks. When Pharaoh and his servants ask, **What did we do?** it has a moral component to it, because they believed - like all overlords - that their enslavement of the Israelites was right and proper. Likewise, when the Israelites say **what did you do to us!** to Moses **it is not only in a context of despair but one of moral rage.** In their audacity, they are claiming that it was morally wrong for Moses **to take us out of Egypt.** That had to hurt badly. That had to sting. But Moses answers them:

**אל תיראו התיצבו וראו את ישועת ה' אשר יעשה לכם היום כי אשר ראיתם את מצרים היום לא תספו לראתם עוד עד עולם. ה' ילחם לכם ואתם תחזקו.**

**Do not be afraid! Stand fast and see God's deliverance which he will work for you today, for as you see Egypt today, you will never see it again for the ages! God will do battle for you, and you—be still!**

Many commentators see this as Moses' attempt to bolster faith and reassure the people. But others see this as Moses' complete failure to understand the situation. And even God is frustrated with Moses here. God says: **Why do you cry out to me?! Speak to the Children of Israel and let-them-march-forward!** **Conclusion for now:** The people have experienced a divine deliverance, but this is their first encounter with mortal fear. Instead of channeling their fear into a defense strategy in the face of the Egyptian onslaught, they channeled it, together with their hostility and anger, into an astounding moral reproach of Moses. Moses deflects their reproach and invokes God. But seeing that Moses also does not know what to do, God intervenes and instructs him to split the sea. In this one act, God earns the people's trust, and Moses earns it also. As it is written:

**ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו. (שמות יד:לא)**

**They had trust in God and in Moses his servant. (Exod. 14:31)**

**SHABBAT SHALOM!**

**This parasha sheet is sponsored by Gittel Footerman and family to commemorate the yahrzeit of her mother, Mollie Gruman and her sister Ruth Leah Rothman z"l.**

<sup>4</sup> ויאמר ה' אליהם לאשה מה זאת עשית.

<sup>5</sup> ויקרא פרעה לאברהם ויאמר מה זאת עשית לי

<sup>6</sup> ויאמר אבימלך מה זאת עשית לנו

<sup>7</sup> ויהי בבקר והנה הוא לאה ויאמר אל לבן מה זאת עשית לי

<sup>8</sup> ... ויצא לבם ויחרדו איש אל אחיו לאמר מה זאת עשה אליהם לנו.

<sup>9</sup> ... ויהפך לבב פרעה ועבדיו אל העם ויאמרו מה זאת עשיתנו כי

שלחנו את ישראל מעבדנו.