

Study as a Means for Allowing One to “Hear”

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Parashat VaEira

The Jewish people’s lack of receptivity to Moshe’s message of impending redemption.

The final total demoralization of the Jewish people during their enslavement in Egypt is reflected in Shemot 6:9.

And Moshe spoke in just this way (he related all that HaShem had Instructed him to say¹ to the children of Israel, and they did not listen to Moshe because of “Kotzer Ruach” (shortness of breath/spirit) and “Avoda Kasha” (difficult work).

The people’s disinterest or perhaps even inability to take heart from Moshe’s relaying HaShem’s message this second time appears to be in stark contrast to their original reception of God’s Word, as conveyed by Moshe and Aharon in 4:31.

And the people believed, and they heard that HaShem had Remembered the children of Israel, and that He had Seen their affliction, and they bowed down and prostrated themselves.

It would appear that Moshe’s assumption that the people would ultimately believe neither in him nor in the Word of God—see 4:1²—if not immediately borne out in Parshat Shemot, is eventually confirmed in Parshat VaEira.

¹ Shemot 6:2-8

And God spoke to Moshe saying to him, ‘I am HaShem’. And I Appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov in the manifestation of “Keil Shaka” and by My Name “Yud-Keh-Vav-Keh” I was not known to them. And I have Fulfilled My Covenant with them to Give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned. And I have also Heard the cries of the children of Israel that result from the Egyptians enslaving them and I Remember My Covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel, “I am HaShem, and I will Take you out from under the burden of Egypt, and I will Save you from your work, and I will Redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will Take you to me to be a nation and I will Be to you for a God, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who Takes you out from under the burden of Egypt. And I will Bring you to the land that I Raised My Hand to Give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and I will Give it to you as an inheritance, I am HaShem.”

² And Moshe answered and said: “But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice; for they will say: The LORD hath not Appeared unto thee.”

Midrashim take Moshe to task for stating that the people would not believe him and ties the signs that HaShem Instructs him to perform in order to convince the Jews and Pharaoh of Moshe’s Divine Mission, also implied rebuke for Moshe’s lack of faith in his co-religionists:

Shemot Rabba 3:12

“And Moshe answered and said: “But, behold, they will not believe me...” At that moment Moshe spoke improperly. The Holy One, Blessed be He, Said to him: (Shemot 3:18) “And they will listen to your voice” and he said: (Ibid. 4:1) “And they will not believe me.” Immediately HaShem Responded to him in kind. He Gave him signs in accordance with his words. See what is written afterwards: (Ibid. 2) “And HaShem Said to him: “‘MahZeh” (what is this) in your hand?’ And he said: ‘A staff.’” That is to say “MiZeh” (from this; the Midrash is punning on the word, reading it according to an alternate vocalization, substituting a Chirik for a Patach) in your hand you are

Factors contributing to the people's not paying attention to Moshe the second time around.

Yet, the Tora does supply mitigating circumstances—“Kotzer Ruach” and “Avoda Kasha”—that account for this relatively quick reversal on the part of the people, when they go from viewing their immediate futures in optimistic terms to despairing of all remedies for their dire plight. Reading the Tora in a straightforward manner, however intensely the Jews may have been laboring prior to Moshe’s arrival, the “hard, breaking work”³ becomes even more acute as a result of Pharaoh’s negative response to the request to allow the Jews to travel for three days in order to worship HaShem in the desert. Shemot 5:7-9 describes the new demands that will be made of the Jewish slaves in order to combat their apparent “laziness” (5:8, 17), i.e., while their production quotas will remain unchanged, they will from this point on have to also obtain the raw materials by which to fabricate the bricks that they are commanded to make. Consequently, if they had little spare time for themselves prior to Moshe’s arrival, their lives now become even more desperate. They not only figuratively, but even literally have no time to listen to anything that will cause them to lose focus from their onerous tasks at hand. They tell Moshe and Aharon

worthy to be punished, for you have cast false aspersions upon My Children. They are believers, the children of believers: “Believers” because it is said, (Ibid. 31) “And the people believed”; children of believers because it is said (Beraishit 15:6) “And he (Avraham) believed in HaShem”. Moshe took on the act of the Serpent who spoke evilly against His Creator, as it is said, (Ibid. 3: 4) “Because God Knows”. As the serpent is punished, so you will eventually be punished. See what is written: (Shemot 4:3) “And He Said: ‘Cast it to the ground.’ And he cast it to the ground and it became a serpent.” Because he did an action of the Serpent, therefore he was shown a serpent, as if to say, you did the action of this. (Ibid.) “And Moshe fled from before it.”

Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Shemot, #20

Another interpretation: “And it will be if they do not believe you...” “And they will not believe me...” The Holy One, Blessed be He Said to him: (Shemot 4:2) “What is this in your hand?” (Ibid. 3) “And He Said: ‘Cast it to the ground...’”

He Said to him: You are saying “Lashon HaRa” (evil statements) concerning My Children (the Jewish people—see 4:22.) Just as in the case of the Serpent Who said Lashon HaRa—see Beraishit 3:4-5—I Punished him with Tzora’at (a skin disease; although there is no explicit reference in the biblical text to the Serpent being afflicted with such a condition, since Tzora’at is paradigmatically associated with Miriam’s act of Lashon HaRa directed at her brother Moshe—see BaMidbar 12:10—it stands to reason that the Serpent was likewise afflicted), you too, (Shemot 4:6) “‘Put now thy hand into thy bosom.’ And he put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. ” The Holy One, Blessed be He Said to him: You said concerning My Children that they weren’t believers, (Ibid. 9) “And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe even these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land; and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.” The Holy One, Blessed be He Hinted to him a hint...Said R. Shmuel bar Nechemia: He Hinted you will meet your end by means of water, as it says (BaMidbar 20:10) “And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them: ‘Hear now, ye rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?’” (One view as to why God Decreed at this point that Moshe would not enter Canaan was because he had once again spoken ill of the Jewish people by referring to them as “rebels”).

Yet it is clear from Shemot 6:9 that the people did not believe Moshe when he made promises of redemption for a second time. Perhaps since they saw that his original promises did not come to fruition, they were justified in their skepticism of similar promises. Consequently this is not a reflection that the people lacked faith and the ability to believe; it was in Moshe as the initiator of the process of redemption that they had lost trust based upon his previous failure.

³ See 1:11, 13; 2:23.

(5:21) that as a result of the ill-fated negotiation with Pharaoh, the Egyptians, by means of the intensified work requirement, now have a better pretext than ever to beat Jewish slaves to death for failure to meet production expectations. Consequently, if all things had remained “equal” the people would have continued to believe in HaShem’s Promises of Redemption, contrary to Moshe’s expressed cynicism; however, either because they were literally too exhausted to stop and listen to Moshe and Aharon’s words a second time, or they realized that should additional attempts be made to try to convince Pharaoh to allow them to leave Egypt even for a short time, their situation might deteriorate even further, if they valued their own lives and the lives of their families, they simply couldn’t afford to take these Divine Promises seriously. Consequently, rather than criticizing the Jews for displaying a lack of belief, the Jewish people could be viewed more charitably at this point as being under extreme duress,⁴ with at least a figurative “gun being held to their respective heads” by the Egyptian ruler. Midrash HaGadol⁵ applies to the verse describing the Jews’ unwillingness to take seriously that God was Prepared to finally redeem them, the statement, “MiKan Ein Adam Nitfas Al Tza’aro” (from here it can be concluded that an individual should not be held accountable for what s/he does or says while experiencing severe trauma).⁶

Not having time to reflect prevented the people from taking Moshe’s second appearance seriously.

A more psychologically subtle approach to the people’s inability to listen to Moshe the second time that he comes to them, is offered by RaMBaN and Sephorno. RaMBaN writes that as a result of the constant pressure applied by the Egyptian taskmasters, “Lo Yitnum LiShmoa Davar VeLaCheshov Bo” (they would not permit them to hear a matter and think about it.) Sephorno feels that they would not only have paid attention to Moshe’s message had the work not been as difficult, but they would have been able to reflect upon it, understand it and accept its implications. Consequently, what is at issue is not whether Moshe was perfunctorily “listened to” by the people, but rather was he “heard”, i.e., was there opportunity, interest and even energy to take his words to heart, to analyze them, to ask questions in order to achieve clarity with regard to what was being proposed. Particularly concerning matters of belief and faith, as well as what lies in store for a people that has been long oppressed, hearts and minds will not be altered by a brief oral presentation in the midst of an intolerable workload and fear for one’s life. Whereas they were ready the first time that Moshe came to take seriously and deeply believe the possibility that the time for Redemption has arrived, when the process not only failed to begin, but was perceived as retrogressing, with even worse conditions being imposed upon the Jews, they decided that there was no point in thinking about these promises any further. In order to have faith, the believer needs to have confidence in his leaders as well as in God Himself; when their hopes were raised, only to have them resoundingly shattered, the Jews were reluctant to trust and believe again, perhaps as a defense against being let down in the future.

⁴ The operant Halachic principle would consequently be: “Ones Rachmana Patrei” (an individual under duress is pardoned by Heaven), e.g., Avoda Zara 54a.

⁵ Quoted in Tora Shleima, vol. 10, ed. R. Menachem Kasher, Beit Tora Shleima, Jerusalem, 5752, p. 15.

⁶ Bava Batra 16b draws the same conclusion from Iyov 34:35, where rather than categorizing his rants against the Divine as evil, he is described as simply devoid of knowledge, i.e., he is incapable of thinking straight under these circumstances.

Shabbat as a day of reflection and study.

R. Yaakov Kaminetsky⁷ explains the deterioration of the Jews' situation and their inability or lack of interest in taking God's Promises seriously in Shemot 6 in terms that offer guidance for our contemporary experience of living as Jews in a society that does not always reinforce the values of our tradition. The commentator references several Midrashim with regard to the Jews' observance of Shabbat during their years in Egypt.⁸ With respect to Shemot 2:11 (an aspect of which was discussed in the essay on Parshat Shemot <http://text.rcarabbis.org/parashat-shemot-coming-of-age-and-searching-for-oneself-by-yaakov-bieler/>), Shemot Rabba 1:28 states that not only did Moshe empathize with the harsh labor

⁷ Emet Le'Yaakov, R. Jacob Joseph School Press, New York, 5751, pp. 262-3.

⁸ The assumption that the Jews observed Shabbat while in Egypt flies in the face of the well-known Rabbinic theme that they had become idolaters and had stopped observing their religious traditions. E.g., RaShI on Shemot 12:6

“And ye shall keep it (the Paschal lamb) unto the fourteenth day of the same month; and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at dusk.”

This is an expression of inspection that (the Paschal sacrifice) requires four days of inspection regarding any blemishes prior to slaughter (i.e., some blemishes only arise after some time elapses. Consequently in order to assure that the potential sacrifice is free of such blemishes, it has to be obtained several days prior to the time of slaughter and carefully watched). And what was the reason that its taking was required to take place four days prior, something that was not made a requirement for subsequent observances of the Paschal sacrifice ritual? R. Matya ben Cheresh said: Behold the text states (Yechezkel 16:8) “ ‘Now when I Passed by thee, and Looked upon thee, and, behold, thy time was the time of love, I Spread my skirt over thee, and Covered thy nakedness; yea, I Swore unto thee, and Entered into a covenant with thee,’ Saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest Mine. ” The time for the fulfillment of the oath that I Swore to Avraham that I will Redeem his offspring has arrived. But they did not have to their credit the performance of Mitzvot that would render them deserving of redemption. As it says there (Ibid. 7) “I Cause thee to increase, even as the growth of the field. And thou didst increase and grow up, and thou camest to excellent beauty: thy breasts were fashioned, and thy hair was grown; yet thou wast naked and bare.” And He Gave them two Commandments, the blood of the Paschal sacrifice (that was to be applied to the doorposts in order to ward off the Plague of the Firstborn) and the blood of circumcision, that they engaged in circumcision on that very night, as it says (Ibid. 6) “And when I Passed by thee, and Saw thee wallowing in thy blood, I Said unto thee: ‘In thy blood, live; yea, I Said unto thee: In thy blood, live’”, blood being mentioned two times (corresponding to two separate Commandments involving blood, (ironically, Midrashim such as VaYikra Rabba 32:5 posit that the Jews deserved redemption for among other things, not having changed their names or their language. Yet beyond maintaining their cultural identity, their religious identity, at least according to this RaShI and other sources like it, went by the wayside.) And it also says, (Zecharya 9:11) “As for thee also, because of the blood of thy covenant I Send forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water.” And since they were deeply involved with idolatry, he (Moshe) said to them: (Shemot 12:21) “Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said unto them: ‘Draw out, and take you lambs according to your families, and kill the Paschal lamb,” (an implication that the Jews should reject the Egyptian objects of idolatrous worship.) Draw your hands back from idolatry and take a lamb for the purpose of a Commandment.

One could probably say that the “Shabbat” that they observed was devoid of religious meaning and was simply a day when they rested from their work. The fact that Shabbat is one of the Mitzvot that may have been introduced to the people at Mara prior to Sinai—see Shabbat 56b—suggests that any previous Shabbat observance was incomplete at best.

imposed upon his brethren, as explained by RaShI, but that he also tried to do something about it.

“He saw/understood⁹ their burdens”—He saw that they had no rest. He went and said to Pharaoh, “Whoever owns a slave, if the master does not allow him to rest one day per week, he will die. So too with your slaves, if you do not leave them alone one day per week, they will die.”¹⁰ He said to him, “Go and institute for them in accordance with what you have said.” Moshe then went and instituted for them the day of Shabbat as a day of rest.

Shabbat was not only a day to recover from the physical strain of slavery.

Once it is established that the Jews rested on Shabbat at least during the time leading up to Moshe’s demands that they be released from slavery,¹¹ the Rabbis imagined that they would have spent at least part of their Shabbatot engaged in textual study.¹² It is intriguing to consider what those texts may have been. One possibility based upon an event taking place later at Sinai, is that these texts were the history of the Jewish people up until the Exodus. Shemot 24:7 recounts how a “Sefer HaBrit” (book of the covenant), which according to RaShI was the Tora text from Beraishit until the giving of the Tora at Sinai, including the commandments given at Mara—see Shemot 15:28, RaShI—was read to the people prior to their declaring “Na’aseh VeNishma” (we will do and we will hear/understand). If this is the case, then the delight of the enslaved Jews might have originated from passages such as Beraishit 15:14, where Avraham is told at the “Brit Bein HaBetarim” (the Covenant between the Pieces) that

⁹ In the same manner as the root “Sh-M-A” (to hear) is explained as connoting hearing cognitively, or understanding, so too is the root “R-A-H” (to see) interpreted as representing a level of cognitive “seeing” or understanding.

¹⁰ The Midrash presumes that Pharaoh did not wish to exterminate the Jews. That is not clear from some of the policies that were instituted. If the male children were to be killed, as per Pharaoh’s order that would certainly severely reduce the slave population. Furthermore, Rabbinic sources claim that another hindrance to Jewish population growth or even replacement, was the taskmasters attempting to prevent husbands and wives from spending any more time together than absolutely necessary. An approach that would reconcile such sources with the Midrash being presently considered is that rather than trying to wipe out the Jews, the Egyptian ruling class’ intent was to keep them a small enslaved minority within greater Egypt so that menial tasks could be assigned to them, and therefore preserving those who were alive was in Egypt’s best interests.

¹¹ Shemot Rabba 5:18 conjectures that following Pharaoh’s rejection of Moshe and Aharon’s first proposal and his order to increase the difficulty of the Jews’ tasks, their ability to rest on Shabbat was revoked.

“Increase the work for the people”—this teaches that they (the Jews) had in their hands scrolls which they would delight in from one Shabbat to the next, and on the basis of their studies they believed that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will Redeem them. This was possible because they were resting on Shabbat. Pharaoh said to them, “‘Increase the work for the people so that they will work in it and will not rejoice in words of falsity.’ You shall neither delight nor rest on the day of Shabbat.”

¹² Several Rabbinic sources maintain that a goodly portion of Shabbat should be devoted to Tora study, particularly by those who are unable to study during the week. E.g., RaMA on Orech Chayim 290:2 : Laypeople who do not engage in Tora study during the workweek, should engage in such study on Shabbat even more than the scholars who study Tora throughout the week. The scholars should spend extra time with respect to eating and drinking (i.e., physical pleasures), since their enjoyment during the week is their studies (i.e., spiritual pleasure).

eventually the oppressors of the Jews would be judged and that the Jews would emerge from their servitude with great wealth, as well as Beraishit 50:25 in which Yosef evidences a high level of certainty that God would Redeem His People, the question not being “if”, but rather “when”.

A novel suggestion regarding the object of Shabbat study by the Egyptian slaves.

R. Kaminetsky suggests a different hypothesis as to the identity of the scrolls that the Jews studied on Shabbat. He argues that Psalm 92, entitled “Mizmor Shir Le’Yom HaShabbat” (A Poem for the Day of Shabbat), seems to not contain any reference to Shabbat aside from its title.^{13 14} Furthermore, RaShI on Bava Batra 14b, in which are listed the multiple authors of the book of Tehillim, including Moshe, offers the following comment: Moshe wrote Psalm 90, entitled “Tefilla LeMoshe”, as well as the next eleven Psalms in accordance with their order.” As soon as it is posited that Psalm 92 was authored by Moshe, that allows for the possibility of his having distributed it, along with the other Psalms attributed to him, to the Jews for their study during the period of their enslavement.¹⁵ R. Kaminetsky contends that the rationale for calling this Psalm one designated for Shabbat was because it was a key element in the people’s Shabbat study while they remained in Egypt. He thinks that a verse that was particularly meaningful to Jewish slaves and that gave them the strength to continue on under such adverse conditions was the final verse: (92:16) “To declare that the Lord is Just; He is my Rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him,” a form of “Tzidduk HaDin” (justifying the judgment). They would tell themselves from week to week that no matter what was happening, HaShem must have a Reason for Bringing this about, and that only trust in God was what was needed under these circumstances.¹⁶ By extension, the commentator continues, another of the scrolls that was

¹³ A Psalm, a Song. For the Sabbath day. It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto Thy Name, O Most High; To declare Thy Lovingkindness in the morning, and Thy Faithfulness in the night seasons, With an instrument of ten strings, and with the psaltery; with a solemn sound upon the harp. For Thou, LORD, hast Made me glad through Thy Work; I will exult in the works of Thy Hands. How great are Thy Works, O LORD! Thy Thoughts are very deep. A brutish man knoweth not, neither doth a fool understand this. When the wicked spring up as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do flourish; it is that they may be destroyed forever. But Thou, O LORD, art on high for evermore. For, lo, Thine Enemies, O LORD, for, lo, Thine Enemies shall perish: all the workers of iniquity shall be scattered. But my horn hast Thou Exalted like the horn of the wild-ox; I am anointed with rich oil. Mine eye also hath gazed on them that lie in wait for me, mine ears have heard my desire of the evil-doers that rise up against me. The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the House of the LORD, they shall flourish in the Courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness; To declare that the LORD is Upright, my Rock, in Whom there is no unrighteousness.

¹⁴ RaShI interprets the Psalm as dealing with the World To Come, and since Shabbat is referred to as “MeiEin Olam HaBa” (the essence of the World To Come) there is a connection between Shabbat and the Psalm. However, this would appear to not necessarily be in consonance with the simple meaning of the Psalm, a case where the question may be better than the answer.

¹⁵ If Moshe was writing and distributing Psalms prior to his murdering an Egyptian and running to Midian, this implies a high level of Jewish sophistication prior to his encounter at the Burning Bush in Shemot 3:2 ff. And if it is posited, as we have in the essay for Shemot referenced above in the body of this essay, that he may have been only thirteen years old at the time of his flight, this suggests that he became conversant in these matters at an extremely young age. Of course, it is not necessary to reconcile all Midrashim, and it will prove impossible to do so on occasion. Nevertheless such speculations are intriguing and interesting.

¹⁶ In a footnote (fn. 46), the editor of Rabbi Kaminetsky’s Chumash commentary notes that he once explained that the reason for the citation of the Exodus from Egypt in the Shabbat Kiddush liturgy is because it was the observance of Shabbat that kept the Jews from despairing during their years of enslavement.

studied carefully during the years in Egypt was the book of Iyov, whose authorship Bava Batra 14b also attributes to Moshe. The problem of theodicy certainly could have been on the minds of the Jews at that time, and the fact that God eventually heals Iyov and restores his life to normalcy may similarly have been of comfort to the Egyptian slaves.

The end of Shabbat Tora study led to the inability to believe Moshe's optimistic predictions?

But when Pharaoh increases their labor as a result of Moshe's asking that they be allowed to worship in the desert, not only could they no longer rest on Shabbat; they also lost their opportunity to think about and study the scrolls that gave them hope and confidence in a better future.¹⁷ Once they lost even that glimmer of optimism that studying Psalms and Iyov supplied, concludes, R. Kaminetsky, they were unable to listen to Moshe's words when he came a second time. Furthermore, in light of the Rabbinic tradition that the vast majority of Jews ended up not wishing to leave Egypt, but rather chose to remain, and died during the plague of darkness, would things have been different had they too participated in these studies and religious deliberations? Would they have continued to dream of a better future, rather than choosing to throw in their lot with their non-Jewish neighbors?

Conclusion.

What does emerge from ideas such as these is the importance of not only being able to take a break from one's work so that s/he does not become enslaved both mentally and physically, however important that work might be thought to be, but also to spend time on Shabbat engaged in relevant, inspiring spiritual activities, not least of which is Tora study. If this is what helped Jews survive the major portion of the Egyptian exile, then the potency of such learning for assuring that our own lives will continue to have meaning wherever we live and whatever we do, is clear and should be a significant component of each of our lives.

¹⁷ See fn. 11.