

PARSHAT VA-ERA

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

THE MAKKOT [the Plagues] & BRIT BEIN HA-BTARIM

1. In your opinion, what was purpose of the 'Ten Plagues'? Can you explain why **ten** were necessary (i.e. why would not have one plague been enough)?

Was their primary purpose to convince Pharaoh to allow Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt, or were they also supposed to affect how Am Yisrael understood God? If so, how are these two purposes related?

[In your answer, relate to 3:18-22, 5:1-4, 7:1-6, & 10:1-2.]

2. In our shiur on Parshat Shmot, we explained how the process of Yetziat Mitzrayim can be understood as God's fulfillment of his promise in brit bein ha-btarim. First of all, review Breishit chapter 15, especially 15:13-15 to verify this point. Then, identify which specific pasuk in that covenant 'foresees' that God may send 'plagues' to punish Am Yisrael's oppressor.

Then, attempt to relate each pasuk in 15:7-8, 15:13-15 & 15:18 to a stage in the process of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Then, attempt to find psukim in Shmot 3:6-22, 6:2-9 and 11:1-6 that support your answer. Finally, note Shmot 12:40-41 (in their context). How do these psukim relate to the above question?

3. Based on the above psukim from brit bein ha-btarim (mentioned above), had Pharaoh not 'hardened his heart' and allowed Bnei Yisrael to leave, would have **all** the ten plagues been necessary? [If so, would there have been a need for them to be so severe?]

In your opinion, did Pharaoh have 'bechira chofshit' [freedom of choice], or was it 'pre-destined' that he would enslave Am Yisrael? If it was pre-destined, why is God so angry with Pharaoh, and why must he be punished?

Does brit bein ha-btarim predict the degree of severity of either Bnei Yisrael's enslavement or Pharaoh's punishment? [Could one understand the severity of the plagues as a function of Pharaoh's constant refusal?]

As you review the Makkot, note when the Torah mentions that Pharaoh hardened his heart, in contrast to when it mentions that God hardened his heart! Relate as well to Shmot 4:21-23 & 7:3-6. Finally, see Rambam Hilchot Teshuva chapter 6!

4. Review 7:1-7 (especially 7:3-6). Does this short 'parshia' describe one specific event or a set of events? [Be sure that you can explain 7:6, and how it relates to 5:2.]

What 'set of events' is 'introduced' by these psukim, and up until what point to we find their detail?

Then, review 11:9-10, noting how these psukim relate to 7:3-

6. Based on this parallel, in what manner could chapters 7 thru 11 be considered a 'unit'? Suggest a 'title' for this unit?

Does this unit include the tenth plague? Explain why yes and why not. [Relate to the question that follows:]

In this entire unit, in what manner are Bnei Yisrael involved? Does God ever demand anything from Bnei Yisrael in this unit?

When is the first time that Hashem **does** speak to Bnei Yisrael once the Plagues had begun? [If you give up, try Shmot 12:1-28.] Can you explain why?

In your answer, attempt to relate to the spiritual level of Bnei Yisrael prior to the Exodus as described in Yechezkel 20:5-10. Relate this to the purpose of korban Pesach, the fate of someone who did not offer this korban Pesach in Egypt, and the fact that 'redemption' should be considered a 'two way street'!

5. In the above unit (chapters 7-11), how many plagues are described? [Nine or Ten?]

In relation to these nine plagues, is it possible to group them into any type of 'sub-units'? If so, what are they?

Before each plague, we usually find that Moshe delivers a harsh warning. Review each of these warnings, noting especially (if there is one, and) 'where' Moshe is to meet Pharaoh. Attempt to identify a pattern of 3-3-3. Does each group of three share any common topic or phrase?

Recall from the **Haggada** that R. Yehuda gave 'simanim' to remember the plagues "detzach-adash-be-achav". Relate the above question to R. Yehuda's statement!

WAS IT A SERPENT OR A CROCODILE?

1. To the best of your recollection, when Moshe hit his 'mateh' [staff] on the ground - what did it turn in to? [Also, in front of whom did he perform this 'trick'?]

To 'refresh your memory', carefully review both the stories in 7:8-13 and 4:1-5 (& 4:27-30), noting their context. Make sure to note the difference between the 'tanin' and the 'nachash'. Can you explain the need for both instances, and why each one is slightly different. Attempt to explain the need for each 'sign', and what it came to prove.

Attempt to explain the difference between the words 'ot' and 'mofet', and explain how they relate to each respective story.

2. Now, review Breishit 1:21 in its context, and Breishit 3:1 in its context. Can you explain how these two stories can shed light on the above question?

Relate to what Moshe must prove to Pharaoh, and what he must prove to Bnei Yisrael.

WHAT'S A 'PROPHET'?

1. The standard translation for the Hebrew word 'navi' is the English word 'prophet'. According to the popular understanding of this word, would you say that a 'prophet' [in the Biblical sense] is someone with the ability to foresee the future?

If not, what is the meaning of the word navi [prophet]?

In the Tanach, many different people are described as **nevi'im** [including God's prophets, false prophets, prophets of Ba'al, Ashera etc.]. Can you explain why the Torah uses the same word - **navi** - to describe all of them? [Relate to the 'shoresh' [root] of this word.]

Now, read 7:1-2, noting its context based on 6:29-30. Based on these psukim - how would you explain the meaning of the word **navi**? [Be sure that you can explain (in 7:1) what it means that 'Aharon will be Moshe's **navi**'?]

How can the word **navi** in its context in this pasuk help you understand its meaning in the rest of Tanach? Relate your answer to the meaning of the Hebrew word 'niv' (see Yeshayahu 57:19) & the shoresh 'nun.bet.aleph'.

[See also Parshanut question #3 in below.]

2. See 4:10-16, noting Moshe's reluctance to be God's spokesman. Then review 6:29-30, noting Moshe's complaint that he cannot speak to Pharaoh, and God's response in 7:1-2 appointing Aharon to be his spokesman 'instead'.

In your opinion, are these two versions of the same conversation, or are these two totally different events? To support your answer, be sure to read both sections carefully (in their context), and find the differences between them, and why there is a need for both.

Relate this as well to the difference between the stories in 7:8-13 and 4:1-5 (& 4:27-30), and the need for both.

3. In your opinion, when we do find that a navi speaks of the future, is his goal to 'predict' history, or to 'shape' it? From your recollection of Tanach, can you bring any examples of prophets who did either?

In your opinion is a navi permitted to do something or say something on his own initiative; or is he only supposed to act when instructed by God.

PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION for weekly shiur: Topic "ANI HASHEM"

1. Recall that Bnei Yisrael originally 'believed' Moshe's message concerning their forthcoming redemption (see 4:29-31). Based on the concluding psukim of chapter five, how did 'public opinion' change once Pharaoh doubled their workload? Who do you think the people blamed for this 'worse situation'?

Note Moshe Rabeinu's response to the people's complaint in 5:22-23. In your opinion, is God's reply in 6:1 His 'complete' answer to Moshe's complaint, or is it merely an 'introduction' to what continues in 6:2-9? [Explain!]

When Moshe complains to God, is he asking for an explanation to relay to the people; or is he 'complaining' about his own plight? How does your answer to this question affect the way that you understand 6:2-9? [As you review these psukim, make sure that you follow what God tells Moshe, and what God tells Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael.]

2. Review 6:2-9 once again. Is God's message to Moshe and to Bnei Yisrael in these psukim the same or different than His message to them at the 'sneh'?

[Relate to 3:7-9; & 3:16-22; compare with 6:3-8.]
Explain what is similar, what is different, and why?

3. Return once again to 6:2. What is difficult about this pasuk? What statement is God making, and what does it mean?

Before we continue, review the respective use of God's Names ['shem Elokim' and 'shem Havaya'] in the two covenants that God had made with Avraham Avinu concerning the future of Am Yisrael in Sefer Breishit (i.e. shem Havaya in brit bein ha-bitarim (see 15:1-20) and shem Elokim ['Kel Shakai'] in brit mila (see 17:3-10). Relate this to your understanding of 6:2-5?

Similarly, relate this comparison to Moshe's request in Shmot 3:13 (and God's answer in 13:14-16), as well as to his request for an 'ot' [i.e. a sign that God had indeed appeared to him] to convince the people, as described in Shmot 4:1-2.

4. The word brit is mentioned twice in 6:4-5. In your opinion, what brit does each pasuk refer to? Attempt to find textual and thematic parallels to the two britot in Sefer Breishit (as noted above in chapters 15 & 17).

See Rashi on these two psukim, noting how he relates the word brit in these psukim to their earlier mention in Sefer Breishit! Did your answer to the previous question follow Rashi's commentary? What other key phrases from these two britot are found in 6:2-8?

5. As you review 6:2-8, note how many times (and where) the phrase 'Ani Hashem' is repeated? Can you explain why?

Why is it so important that Bnei Yisrael must be told this point, i.e. that they recognize 'Ani Hashem'? [See Ibn Ezra 6:2]

6. Read 6:9 carefully, noting how it relates to 6:6-8. In your opinion, how should the phrase "ve-lo sham'u el Moshe" be translated? Did they not 'hear', or 'accept', or 'believe', or 'pay attention', or 'listen', or 'obey'?

Throughout Chumash, what does the phrase "ve-lo sham'u" usually refer to? [e.g. Vayikra 26:14, Devarim 11:13-15, etc.]

Why would (or wouldn't) that be the proper translation for that phrase in this pasuk?

7. Review 6:10-12, making sure that you understand the logic of Moshe's 'kal va-chomer' when he asks God: 'Why should Pharaoh 'obey' to me if Bnei Yisrael didn't 'obey' (or 'listen')?' How would this affect the meaning of "ve-lo sham'u" in 6:9?

8. Now, read carefully Yechezkel 20:1-10, making sure that you understand when and why this 'conversation' takes place. Note how Yechezkel describes an event that took place before Yetziat Mitzrayim. In your opinion, when and why did God's request from Bnei Yisrael to perform 'teshuva'?

In your answer, relate to the textual parallels between these psukim and Shmot 6:2-9!

How can these psukim help you interpret the meaning of "ve-lo sham'u el Moshe" in 6:9?

Be sure to relate to the textual parallel in Yechezkel 20:7-9! [You may be familiar with a Midrash [actually it is a Zohar] that describes how Bnei Yisrael (in Egypt) had reached the lowest 'spiritual' level / 'mem-tet sha'arei tum'a'. Relate this to these psukim in Yechezkel.]

9. Does the unit 6:14-28 appear to be 'out of place'? If so, where (in your opinion) do these psukim belong? What else is difficult about these psukim? After this 'interruption', does the focus of Sefer Shmot change from Bnei Yisrael to the Egyptians? If so, can you explain why? [Relate your answer to the difference between 6:10-13 and 6:29-30.]

10. What is difficult about the sentence structure of 6:28 (and its interpretation)? Can you relate this pasuk to our discussion in the previous questions?

Can you suggest a reason why the section of 6:14-27 is placed here instead of earlier in Sefer Shmot? In what manner does this unit serve as a 'buffer' between two different aspects of the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim?

11. According to 6:9, it appears that Bnei Yisrael do not accept the message of 'Ani Hashem'. Is there anywhere else in Sefer Shmot where Bnei Yisrael are commanded with a similar message? If so, do they accept this message at that time?

Be sure to relate to 15:25-26; 19:4-6 & 20:1-4. Note as well Vayikra 18:1-5 & 18:24-28!

12. Based on the above questions, could the statement of "Ani Hashem" also be understood as a command? If so, what would that command entail? [A specific action, or a way or life?]

Relate your answer to the opening 'statement'/commandment' of the Ten Commandments (see Shmot 20:1-4). Note the controversy among the commentators, discussing whether or not "Anochi Hashem" is considered a 'commandment' or a 'statement' [See Ramban/ Ibn Ezra etc.]

Relate your conclusions to the questions above, and especially to Yechezkel 20:8-9.

PART III - PARSHANUT

LO NODA'TI

1. What is difficult about God's statement in 6:3 concerning how He made Himself known to the Avot? Is it true that God only 'spoke' to the Avot be-shem 'Kel Shakai' and not 'be-shem Havaya'? [See Br. 12:1-7 13:14, 15:1-20, etc.]

In your opinion, what does the word 'noda'ti' mean? [What is the Hebrew root of this word? Note the various translations of this word in the different English translations, as well as the controversy among the commentators.]

2. See Rashi,

Why does Rashi distinguish between 'lo **noda'ti**' as opposed to 'lo **hoda'ti**', and how does his interpretation take into consideration what God continues to tell Moshe in 6:4-5?

3. Next, see Rashbam, noting how his explanation is quite short and simple. Note as well, how he relates to the point of 'lo hoda'ti', as Rashi had done.

Then, see Ramban, noting how he first quotes and explains Rashi, then quotes Ibn Ezra, and actually accepts his interpretation - but explains why from a different angle.

Try to understand why Ramban does not accept Rashi's interpretation as sufficient, and why he understands that Ibn Ezra arrived at the correct answer, but not for the right reason. It's a very lengthy Ramban, but very important towards understanding the deeper meaning of God's special name [shem Havaya] in the story of the Exodus and several very fundamental concepts concerning the nature of God's 'hashgacha' / providence.

EL-AL

2. What is the textual difficulty in translating 6:13?

Why is the word 'el' so problematic? To whom is God sending Moshe - only to Pharaoh or also to Bnei Yisrael?

See Rasag, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Seforno, & Chizkuni.

To help you appreciate the wide range of solutions that they suggest, try to identify which commentator:

'changes' the word 'el' to 'al'?

adds a 'missing' word to the pasuk?

adds a 'missing' phrase to the pasuk?

treats this as a new commandment, and

understands this as a repeat of a previous commandment?

[Note Ramban on Bamidbar 20:8; re: v'dibartem el ha'selah"!]]

WHO SAYS?

3. To the best of your recollection, each time when Moshe & Aharon went to Pharaoh, who did the talking - Moshe or Aharon?

According to either possibility, why did the other 'join along'? After you answer this question, review 6:10-13 & then 6:29-7:3.

In your opinion, does 6:29-30 simply recap 6:10-13, or do these psukim describe something new that takes place?

Now see Rashi on 6:29 and 6:30. How does he answer this question? [Note how he explains 'Ani Hashem' in 6:29.]

Then see Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, noting how their peirush is similar to Rashi's. If possible, note what specific point each one adds to Rashi's peirush.

Then see Ramban, noting how he quotes Rashi (and Ibn Ezra), and totally disagrees. It's a rather lengthy Ramban, but worthwhile to follow, for his proof is rather rigorous. Note how he explains the various stages in Moshe's conversations with Hashem concerning his ability to speak to Pharaoh. Also pay attention to the fact that Ramban actually 'praises' Moshe's request not to become God's spokesman to Pharaoh.

Be sure that you understand how (and why) Ramban's peirush is different than Rashi, and how they disagree concerning what actually happened each time that Moshe and Aharon went to talk to Pharaoh!

4. The phrase: "Va-yedaber Hashem el Moshe **leimor**" is used numerous times in Chumash. How would you translate 'leimor' in its context in this phrase?

The first time this phrase occurs is in 6:10.

See Ramban on this pasuk for a very interesting and important interpretation! [Note how (and why) he argues with Ibn Ezra.]

be-hatzlacha,
menachem