

DID PHARAOH REALLY CHANGE HIS MIND?-
Shiur for shvii shel Pesach

We are all so familiar with the story of the "kriyat Yam Suf" [the splitting of the Red Sea], that we rarely pay careful attention to how the Torah tells that story.

As the Torah reading for 'shvii shel Pesach' includes that story, in the following shiur we re-examine its details in attempt to better understand God's master strategy, and possibly fulfill the commandment of "in order that you shall tell your future generations how I made a mockery of the Egyptians..." (see Shmot 10:2).

INTRODUCTION

According to the 'classic' story of the Exodus, after the Tenth Plague, Pharaoh frees Bnei Yisrael from their slavery – and allows their departure to the Promised Land; but only several days later, he 'changes his mind', gathers his army and chases after them, only to drown in the sea during that pursuit.

The story in the Bible, however, is much more interesting, especially for those who enjoy studying 'military strategy'.

Let's begin our study with what 'really happened' after the Tenth Plague - to show how Pharaoh never granted Bnei Yisrael freedom (nor did Bnei Yisrael ask for freedom).

THREE DAYS IN THE DESERT

Recall from our study of the story of the 'burning bush' in Parshat Shmot - how God never instructed Moshe to demand freedom for the Jewish People. Rather, Moshe was only supposed to request that Pharaoh allow the Jewish people to undertake a 'three day journey' into the desert, where they would worship their God. [See Shmot 3:18-20 & 5:1-5.]

Moshe was also instructed to warn Pharaoh that, should he refuse this request, Egypt would be smitten with terrible plagues. [See Shmot 5:3, as well as the warning to Pharaoh before Plagues 1,2,4,5,7, & 8 in 7:14-16, 26-27; 8:16-17; 9:1-3, 13-18; and 10:1-4.]

Therefore, after the Tenth Plague - Pharaoh is finally 'convinced' that Bnei Yisrael must worship their God in order to stop the Plagues:

"And it came to pass at midnight, and God smote the first born of Egypt... then Pharaoh got up and called to Moshe and Aharon that night saying:

Get up and get out... and GO WORSHIP your God - "ke-daberchem" - as you (originally / in 5:3) requested!

Even your sheep and cattle take with you, as you requested (in 10:26), and BLESS ME AS WELL..." (see 12:29-33).

Clearly, Pharaoh only grants Bnei Yisrael a three-day journey to offer 'korbanot' - after all, that is all that Moshe ever asked for!

This background explains why the entire Egyptian nation rushes Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt as quickly as possible (see 12:33-34) - so they can sacrifice to their God as soon as possible to stop the Plagues.

This also explains why the Egyptians 'LEND' ['va-yish'alu'] Bnei Yisrael their finest wares, to encourage them to leave as quickly as possible (see 12:35-36). As Bnei Yisrael are only taking a 'holiday leave' to worship their God, the Egyptians have every reason to assume they will return - and bring back what they had 'borrowed'.

[This topic was discussed in greater detail in our TSC shiur on Parshat Shmot - see www.tanach.org/shmot/shmot1.pdf]

PHARAOH'S GREATEST WORRY

If all that Bnei Yisrael wanted was 'freedom to worship their God', why was Pharaoh so reluctant to 'let them go'?

Pharaoh's greatest fear was that Jewish People would take over his country (either on their own, or with the help of Egypt's enemies). It was for this reason that the enslavement began in the first place (see Shmot 1:8-10)!

Even had he heard 'rumors' that his Hebrew slaves were plotting to emigrate to Canaan, he would not have believed them. [Such an endeavor would have been almost suicidal, considering the desert they would need to cross, and the nations of Canaan that they would need to defeat (see Shmot 14:12 & 10:10, and Bamidbar 13:31-33).]

Instead, Pharaoh assumed that any request to go to the desert to worship God (or to emigrate to Canaan) was simply a 'ploy' to hide the first step of a planned insurgency. Therefore, he was quite adamant about not allowing this 'three day journey'. And even when he finally granted partial permission (after some of the plagues) - he made every effort to keep some safeguard against an insurgency (like leaving the women & children behind / see Shmot 10:7-11). [Clearly, Pharaoh was also worried about losing his work force, even for a short amount of time - but his greatest fear was an insurgency.]

With this background in mind, let's follow the events that transpire after the Exodus, as Bnei Yisrael begin their supposed 'three days journey' into the desert'.

DAY ONE : From Raamses to Succot

The first day of this journey is clearly recorded in Sefer Shmot: "And the children of Israel traveled from Raamses to Succot, approx. 600,000 men..." (see 12:36). There, they baked their dough as 'matza', and received numerous commandments concerning how future generations must remember these events. [See 12:36 thru 13:16.]

DAY TWO: From Succot to Eitam

Parshat Beshalach opens by describing the direction of their travel (i.e. not towards Canaan [northeast], but rather towards Yam Suf [apparently southeast] - towards the desert as they requested). See 13:17-18.

Note however, how the Torah also informs us that Bnei Yisrael were also armed during this journey:

"...v'chamushim alu Bnei Yisrael m'erez mitzraim"
[see 13:18]

Then, we are informed concerning what happened on day two: "And they traveled from Succot and encamped in Eitam - located **at the edge of the desert.**" (see 13:20)

So far, it seems as this journey is following Bnei Yisrael's request to travel a three day distance into the desert. Days one and two of this journey, they are still in Egypt - but marching towards the desert. After two days, they have reached the border between Egypt and the desert, and the assumption is that on day three - they would continue this journey into the desert, and find the proper place to worship God.

DAY THREE - A SURPRISE MANEUVER!

The opening psukim of chapter 14 contain details that are key to understanding how the story unfolds; let's read them carefully - as God suddenly commands Moshe to 'turn around' and travel **back towards Egypt!**

"And God spoke to Moshe saying - Speak to Bnei Yisrael - instructing them to TURN AROUND and set up camp in front of Pi-ha'Chirot, between Migdol and the [Red] Sea...setting up camp next to the sea..." (see 14:1)

This command apparently comes as a total surprise to Bnei Yisrael (and even to Moshe) - for instead of continuing into the desert, as everyone expected, God now instructs the nation to return towards Egypt!

Fortunately, God does explain the purpose of this maneuver (apparently only to Moshe) in the next pasuk. As you read 14:2, note how God is still speaking to Moshe (and **not** Pharaoh to his servants!). In other words, 14:2-3 should be read as a continuation of the command that began in 14:1:

"[so that] Pharaoh will say **about** Bnei Yisrael - "nevuchim heym b'aretz" - they are 'unsettled' in the land, "sagar aleihem ha'midbar" - the desert has them 'closed in'. And [thus (or then!)] I will harden Pharaoh's heart and he will chase after them..." (see 14:2-3)

[We have translated "navoch" as unsettled, not as 'lost' - for "navoch", as in "moreh nevuchim" does not imply someone who is lost, but rather someone who is 'confused' / perplexed or unsettled with his thoughts.]

It is important to pay attention to every detail in this pasuk, for it explains the reason for this sudden 'change of plan'.

God explains (to Moshe) **why** he wants Bnei Yisrael to turn around and re-locate their camp by the sea - in order to entice Pharaoh to 'change his heart' a chase after Bnei Yisrael (or basically to declare war).

Let's explain now how this maneuver will cause Pharaoh to launch an immediate (but careless) military attack.

THEY'RE NOT GOING TO THE DESERT!

The first (and primary) affect of this 'turn around' maneuver, is to cause Pharaoh to conclude that Bnei Yisrael are NOT continuing into the desert. In other words, had Bnei Yisrael continued on day three from Eitam to the desert, there would have no reason for him to launch an attack. Instead - it is because they **don't go to the desert**, but rather **stay in Egypt** - that he decides to attack them.

The reason why is simple. The only reason why Pharaoh allowed them to embark on this 'three day journey', was so that they could worship their God in the desert. By returning on 'day three' towards Egypt - Pharaoh will conclude that Bnei Yisrael have no true intention of going to the desert. Instead, it will convince him that his original fear was true - that his Hebrew slaves are planning to turn around and take over Egypt - or at least to declare their own independence in southern Egypt!

[What happens is rather interesting, for it turns out that Pharaoh chases after Bnei Yisrael because they **don't leave Egypt!**]

WHAT CAN PHARAOH DO?

Faced with this predicament, and convinced that he has been duped - what can Pharaoh do? They longer he would wait, the more time Bnei Yisrael would have to organize their army and set up a perimeter defense around their new [temporary] settlement area. The sooner Pharaoh could mount an attack, the better his chances of quelling this 'rebellion'.

This explains what God tells Moshe in 14:2. Not only will Pharaoh and his servants be convinced (by Bnei Yisrael turning around) that they have no intention of going to the desert - but God himself also gives Pharaoh two good reasons why to launch an immediate attack:

1) "nevuchim heym b'aretz" -

They are [still] 'unsettled' in the land (of Egypt) - implying that soon they will be more organized - but in the meantime, they are not yet prepared for battle.

2) "sagar aleihem ha'midbar" -

The desert has them 'closed in' - Hence, from a military point of view, the Hebrews are in weak military position; they have nowhere to run away to, and their backs are to the sea.

These two additional considerations cause Pharaoh not only to attack, but more important to attack immediately (and possibly carelessly) - falling right into God's trap, for God wanted to entice Pharaoh (the 'super-power') to enter a war - against a 'supposed enemy' - who had no real intention of ever attacking.

[This is an example of how God 'hardens Pharaoh's heart, by giving him a 'tiny window' - a reason for him to make his own unwise decision.]

To support this interpretation, let's pay careful attention to what Pharaoh does say when he first hears about this maneuver: "And it was told to Pharaoh that the people **ran away**, and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants changed and they said - What have we done, for we have sent Israel away from serving us" (see 14:5).

According to the 'classic' story of the Exodus, it is almost impossible to explain this verse, for how could it be that Pharaoh was told that the people 'ran away' - he himself sent them away!

However, according to our explanation, this verse makes perfect sense, for Pharaoh was not told that the people 'ran away' from Egypt. Rather, he was told that they were going to the desert not to worship God, as they promised, but to set up their own camp within Egypt - and hence they **'ran away from slavery'** - and that's exactly what they say about Bnei Yisrael in the second half of the pasuk.

This also explains the next pasuk:

"And he ordered his chariot, and took his men with him, then took six hundred of his best chariots, and ALL the chariots of Egypt, and officers over all of them..."

Notice how this pasuk describes a quick mobilization of the entire Egyptian army, to launch an immediate attack against Bnei Yisrael. Pharaoh falls right into God's trap.

Within a short time, Pharaoh will fall for God's next 'trap', by carelessly following Bnei Yisrael into the Sea - but making his own military blunder.

As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Shmot - Egypt declares war against Israel. Egypt loses the battle. The 'possessions' of the Egyptian that Bnei Yisrael had borrowed from Egypt have now become 'nationalized' - and God has fulfilled yet another stage of His promise at "brit bein ha'tarim":

Bnei Yisrael receive their "rechush gadol."

Egypt - the nation that enslaved another - is punished.

(see Breishit 15:13-14).

Bnei Yisrael, impressed by the greatness of their God (and new master), will now continue on their journey into the desert - to receive the Torah on Har Sinai. Those laws will become their guide for establishing God's model nation in the land of Canaan.

It is God's hope that by remembering this experience, Bnei Yisrael will eternally act with a higher ethical standard than their Egyptian oppressors.

chag samayach,
Menachem