

DIVREI TORAH BULLETIN

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PARSHAT: Vaera

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DAF YOMI: Arachin 8
NACH YOMI: I Samuel 14

Parshat Va-era is the *Sedrah* that most thoroughly covers the substance underlying the Pesach narrative. HaShem tells Moshe, in language from which we learn the obligation to drink four or five cups at the Seder, that He now is moving towards implementing the Exodus. He commands Moshe to intensify the meetings with Pharaoh, warning that increasingly severe consequences will plague Egypt if Pharaoh does not let the Jews serve HaShem in the Midbar. And soon the plagues come.

Like a military campaign (see Rashi 8:17, citing Tanchuma Bo 4), first the subterranean naval attacks: blood in the river, frogs piling out onto land, teeming *kinim* pervading the soil. Then the army-like land attacks: trampling animals of crazy sorts and shapes, pestilence wiping out the cattle on land, and boils striking people. Then the shock-and-awe from the air: hail, locust swarms, and darkness.

Through it, all sustenance is wiped out, more completely than any siege ever perpetrated, whether by Grant against Vicksburg or Richmond, or more horribly by Babylonians or Romans against Jerusalem: The blood wipes out the drinking supply, and Egyptians start buying water from Jews in Goshen as frogs swarm. New vegetation will not be growing as the soil's nutrients and value are destroyed by the *kinam*. Vegetable patches and farms are devastated by the trampling Jumanji-like *arov* of mixed wild beasts, who come, destroy, and exit. There still is meat, though. But not for long. Pestilence wipes out not only cows but camels, horses, sheep, all sources of meat. (9:3)

As boils send the wizards and sorcerers into hiding, unable to propose any counter-attack, flaming hail stones (9:24) hurtle towards earth, smashing grain stalks and setting off California-style wildfires incinerating the remaining grain fields and vegetation to a crisp. All that is left for locals to eat is fruit still hanging on the trees, along with the last grain left standing: wheat and spelt (9:32). And the locusts come and finish that off.

And that is that. The Egyptians have nothing left to eat. And their soil's poisoning guarantees little for next year. It is the mid-nineteenth-century Irish potato blight – if they are lucky. Now they have three days to sit in Darkness to think about what has happened, to connect perhaps the only thing left unscathed in Egypt: dogs. And the eerie quiet, marked even by the silence of the dogs (11:7), will burst into ear-piercing wailing never before or after heard, not in Cairo and not in Tahrir Square, as the Tenth Plague strikes.

The story of our slavery and our liberation defines us. It is at the center of the Maariv *brakhot* after Sh'ma – the *Ge'ulah* that necessarily links to the *Amidah*. (*Mesechet Brakhot* 4b) It again is the core of the *brakhot* after Sh'ma in the morning, again the *Ge'ulah* connected to *Tefilah*. Our festival holidays all are *zekher l'y'tzi-at Mitzrayim*, in memory of the Egyptian exodus. Even Shabbat: *zekher l'y'tzi-at Mitzrayim*. Of the six Torah events that we are commanded to remember daily, *y'tzi-at Mitzrayim* is chronologically first (*Dvarim* 16:3), followed by

ma'amad har Sinai, the assemblage of our millions at the foot of Chorev. (Id. 4:9-10) We were there.

At Chorev we will be given the marching orders and disciplining restrictions that make us a truly free People. We forever will remind ourselves that freedom without discipline leads not to celebration but to anarchy, as we annually will number the 7 complete weeks of 49 days between the day we received our freedom and the day we voluntarily yoked to Heaven. We will remember how He protected us through the journey with the clouds of glory shielding us as veritable Sukkot. It is our essence. We never will forget because we never may forget.

In our contemporary era of relativism – moral relativism, cultural relativism, theological relativism – we shy away from speaking hard truths. We are non-judgmental. Everyone not only is entitled to her own opinion, but in our generation everyone is right. “I am an Orthodox Jew, which is right for me, and you believe in the opposite, but you also are right. Everyone is right.”

Only, everyone is not right.

When a rabbinic leader of one of America's largest Conservative temples – fittingly, a place called Temple Sinai – made national headlines ten years ago, declaring from his pulpit on Pesach that the Exodus never happened, he gave voice to a burgeoning theology that now lies at the core of his denomination. He emerged that day as one of their national leaders and has grown in stature since. On that day, the debates between Orthodoxy and Conservatism no longer centered around Hillel's *Prozbol* or whether swordfish is kosher. The debates ended because for us, as Orthodox Jews, this week's parshah is Truth. It happened exactly as the Torah records it did.

There are Holocaust Revisionists who claim the Shoah never happened. Most of us never have read the literature published by their academics and would be surprised at their extent of scholarship. There are

scholarly papers that “prove” the Nazis could not have murdered six million, could not even have murdered many people in gas chambers. They measure the dimensions of the chambers, project mathematically the number of people who could be compacted into the room, the time it takes biologically for poison gas to kill, the time to drag out corpses. It all is scholarly, serious, mathematical, scientific. And their result is that the Holocaust never happened. We respond: Balderdash.

We know the Shoah did happen. We still are proximate enough in time to know that Palestinians are an invented people. We see the scholarship of others, and we choose to follow our eyes, our ears, our percipient witness. And so it goes with this week's *parshah*.

We know it happened. The Vilna Gaon teaches on *pasuk* 6:6 that the Torah emphasizes that the experience took place openly, as G-d outstretched His arm and the Jews left with a raised hand in the midst of the day (12:51, 14:8) to assure publicity. It was handed down to me by great-grandparents who heard from their grandparents that *their* grandparents had related it to them at Seder time in the names of *their* grandparents. From the time of Sinai, amid thunder and lightning, we have been handing down the account, generation to generation, in one of our most timeless observances. It has been every Jewish generation's mandate to tell the story of *y'tzi'at Mitzrayim* with emphasis as though we were there.

There is room in Judaism for debating and questioning almost anything. But existential questions are different. We exist pursuant to the Torah; therefore we are. There was a Holocaust. Judea and Samaria always were part of the People of Israel. And we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt until HaShem took us out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. On issues going to the core of our existence, there is only one truth. We are the descendants of those whom G-d began liberating in this week's *parshah*.

Shabbat Shalom.

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