

Parashat Bo, 5770, 2010:

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Pharaoh and the Servitude of Evil

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka, and in honor of Gidon Avraham ben Moshe Halevi Kadry becoming a *bar mitzvah*.

So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh and said to him, “So said the L-rd, the G-d of the Hebrews, How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, and they will worship Me. For if you refuse to let [them] go, behold, tomorrow I am going to bring locusts into your borders. And they will obscure the view of the earth, and no one will be able to see the earth, and they will eat the surviving remnant, which remains for you from the hail, and they will eat all your trees that grow out of the field. And your houses and the houses of all your servants and the houses of all the Egyptians will be filled, which your fathers and your fathers’ fathers did not see since the day they were on the earth until this day.” [Therewith,] he turned and left Pharaoh. Pharaoh’s servants said to him, “How long will this one be a stumbling block to us? Let the people go and they will worship their G-d. Don't you yet know that Egypt is lost?” (*Sefer Shemot* 10:3-7, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

Let us briefly review exactly what took place in these verses that appear toward the beginning of our *parasha* (Torah portion):

1. Moshe and Aharon, following G-d’s direct command, presented themselves before Pharaoh.
2. Moshe and Aharon stated Hashem’s question and demand to Pharaoh: “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, and they will worship Me.”
3. Moshe and Aharon explained to Pharaoh exactly what would transpire if he once again refused to accede to the Almighty’s demands, namely, the land of Egypt would be swarmed by an unnatural and heretofore unseen amount of locusts.
4. Pharaoh’s servants recognized the degree of destruction that was imminently going to take place. Therefore, out of the depths of unmitigated despair and dread they declared: “Let the people go and they will worship their G-d. Don't you yet know that Egypt is lost?”

On the surface, Pharaoh's inability to recognize "that "Egypt is lost" is nearly incomprehensible. After all, seven other plagues had already taken place – each one more destructive than the next. Then, too, his servants and advisors clearly recognized their impending fate. Therefore, how could Pharaoh be so utterly "clueless?" On a certain level I believe the answer to this question is easily understood. Pharaoh, like many enemies of our people, represented consummate and unrepentant evil. In fact, his evil was so powerful a force that it blinded him to the reality that was manifest before him. Pharaoh's evil - his *yetzer hara* in the language of *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) - "short-circuited" his normal cognitive abilities and made him a captive of his own blind ambition and perverse perceptions. This evil, in conjunction with the power of his arrogance - and the arrogance of his power - tragically prevented him from seeing even the simplest of truths: "Don't you yet know that Egypt is lost?" Britain's Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks formulated this idea in the following insightful manner:

Pharaoh is in fact (and this is rare in *Tanakh*) a tragic figure like Lady Macbeth, or like Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*, trapped in an obsession which may have had rational beginnings, right or wrong, but which has taken hold of him, bringing not only him but those around him to their ruin. This is signaled, simply but deftly, early in next week's *sedra* [i.e. our Torah portion] when Pharaoh's own advisors say to him: "Let the people go so that they may worship the L-rd their G-d. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?" (10: 7). But Pharaoh has left rationality behind. He can no longer hear them. (*Covenant and Conversation*, Parashat Vaera -16th January 2010 -1st Shevat 5770)

Upon careful analysis, it appears that Pharaoh had three nemeses. The first one was G-d. Thus, he declared with the greatest possible hubris: "... Who is the L-rd [*Hashem*] that I should heed His voice to let Israel out? I do not know the L-rd, neither will I let Israel out." (*Sefer Shemot* 5:2) Herein, Pharaoh denied the dominion of G-d over the world that He had created. Moreover, and as a corollary, he denied Hashem's role as the supreme

force in history. In Pharaoh's twisted world of maniacal evil and egotistical illusion, man, i.e. Pharaoh, ruled the world and controlled human destiny. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. None-the-less, Pharaoh believed that G-d did not really exist – even when His presence could be palpably felt and experienced at the time of the *Eser Makkot* (the Ten Plagues).

Pharaoh's second nemesis was *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe). Moshe was the polar opposite of Pharaoh since he represented all that is righteous and G-d-serving. He actively pursued that which is good, true, and *tahor* (pure) with his entire being. Perhaps most importantly, he fulfilled his G-d-given mission with the greatest humility ever demonstrated by any human being: “Now this man Moses was exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:3) In stark contrast, Pharaoh was self-serving, pursued evil for its own sake, was steeped in every manner of falsehood and machination, and led Egypt and its culture to the 49th level of *tumah* (impurity). It should be emphasized that he did this with some of the greatest audacity and arrogance that the world has ever known.

Pharaoh's third nemesis, as alluded to above, was none other than himself. At each twist and turn in his many encounters with G-d and Moshe, he did his best to try to “outsmart” them and thwart their plan by further obstructing *B'nai Yisrael's* path to physical and spiritual freedom. His passionate pursuit of unmitigated evil led him to fantasize about his own self-proclaimed apotheosis – his own god-like stature. He was truly a crazed and self-absorbed person whose evil obsessions drove him beyond all boundaries of humanity

and normative behavior. Thus, the Midrash tells us, he thought nothing of bathing in the blood of Jewish children or of placing them in the walls of the pyramids to fill the gaps left by inexact construction. He reveled in his supposed absolute freedom and amoral actions. Yet, far from being free, he was a slave to himself and his unfettered desires. As Rabbi Sacks so eloquently states: “Evil has two faces. The first - turned to the outside world - is what it does to its victim. The second - turned within - is what it does to its perpetrator. Evil traps the evildoer in its mesh. Slowly but surely he or she loses freedom and becomes not evil's master but its slave.” (Ibid, underlining my own)

May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) grant us the wisdom and discernment to repudiate any and all aspects of Pharaoh’s amoral and vicious personality. Moreover, may we ever fulfill the beautiful words of King David as found in *Sefer Tehillim* (The Book of Psalms 34:15): “Shun evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.” If we can do this we will we be truly free – for then we will finally be *avdei Hashem* (G-d’s servants). May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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