

Weekly Words of Torah

Let Our People Go: Parshat Va'era

Framing

This week's Torah portion is perhaps the quintessential jumping off point for talking about freeing the hostages still held captive in Gaza. As God metes out the first seven of the ten plagues, God instructs Moses to demand freedom for the Israelite slaves, over, and over, and over. "SHALACH ET AMI!!" is Moses' rallying cry as he introduces five of these seven plagues - providing the glaringly clear and just reasoning behind each upcoming onslaught.

Access Points

- **Hamas is like Pharaoh:** While we often focus on the theologically difficult idea that God hardened Pharaoh's heart against freeing the slaves, in this parsha there is actually only one mention of God affecting Pharaoh's heart; in fact, there are eight mentions of Pharaoh being hard-hearted, stiff-hearted or having a toughened heart on his own, without God causing that to be. On the verse 7:14 ("God said to Moses: Pharaoh is כָּבֵד לֹב; he refuses to let the people go"), the 19th-century central European scholar Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman delineates three increasingly bad levels of apathetic, unsympathetic insensitivity to the needs of others, based on the three different root words used in the parsha: k.v.d, q.sh.e, and ch.z.k. Hoffman's psychologically astute comments not only describe Pharaoh; they seem to aptly fit the disposition of Hamas towards anyone but themselves.
- **The Gazan people, like the Egyptians of old, are desperately suffering:** Not only did Pharaoh's refusal to free the slaves from bondage keep the Israelites suffering terribly; his refusal plunged his own people into appalling and gruesome circumstances. During the plague of blood (7:14-25), the Egyptians had no water. During the plague of frogs (7:26-8:10), their homes were infested. During the plague of lice (8:12-15), they were ravaged by vile bugs. And so on. In the same way, the people of Gaza are also being devastated by their leaders. They have no food. They have no clean water. The very earth is infected by sewage, so disease and fungus are running rampant. But Hamas do not care - the Hamas heart is the worst kind of hard. During the Passover seder, we temper our freedom celebration and acknowledge the terrible suffering of the Egyptians by removing a drop of wine for each of the ten plagues. Perhaps, each Shabbat, as we light candles for the hostages, we might also remove drops of wine from our kiddush cups in acknowledgement of the Gazan people.
- **The mind games played by Hamas during the ceasefire and release of some hostages are reminiscent of those played by Pharaoh:** Over and over, Pharaoh refused to free the slaves; when a plague got too difficult to bear, he acknowledged God and announced he would let them go; however, after Moses prayed for the plague to end he changed his tune and "hardened his heart." One can imagine the frustrating, sickening, roller-coaster ride experienced by the slaves as he played these mind games, because we were also attacked by the same type of psychological warfare used by Hamas during the ceasefire. Will they release any captives today? Will they do it at the time they said they would, or make up some reason why they won't? Will they or won't they send out those hostages on the day's list? In 9:17, God says to Pharaoh: עוֹדָךְ מְסֻתּוֹלָל בְּעַמִּי לְבַלְתִּי שְׁלַחם - "You are still מְסֻתּוֹלָל my people by not setting them free." The commentaries explain the word מְסֻתּוֹלָל in ever stronger language: You are still showing yourself haughty against my people (Samuel David Luzzato); You are still treading on my people (Rashi); You are still thwarting my people (Rashbam). Samson Raphael Hirsch goes in a different direction, and understands the word מְסֻתּוֹלָל as: You have completely distanced yourselves from humanness. In other words, Pharaoh and Hamas, your choices and your behavior have turned you into animals. You are no longer human.

Call to Action

This week, social media posts, calls to elected officials, and signs at rallies can zero in on these age-old but completely contemporary words: LET OUR PEOPLE GO. Moses said it five times in this week's Torah portion. Make sure to post, call, and protest five times as well.

Closing Intention

At the beginning of the parsha (6:9), when Moses comes to the Israelite slaves and tries to assure them that God will indeed redeem them from bondage, they don't listen to him "בְּמִקְצָר רִיחַ וּבְמַעֲבָדָה קָשָׁה." This is translated in various ways, from the more metaphorical ("due to lack of patience"; "due to anguish of spirit"; "due to crushed spirit") to the more physical and concrete ("due to shortness of breath").

While the Israelite slaves of old had run out of breath, our beloved family members held hostage have nearly run out of time. Our voices must ring out loud and true this week - LET OUR PEOPLE GO. NOW.