

Torah Sparks for VAERA

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Summary of Vaera

In this week's parasha, G-d is depicted as telling Moshe the true Divine name, Yud - Hey - Vav - Hey, saying that G-d had appeared to our ancestors as El Shaddai. Moshe is promised that G-d will bring the people forth from Egypt. The people do not listen to Moshe because their spirits have been downtrodden. Moshe and Aaron go before Pharaoh, and Aaron throws down his rod and it turns into a snake. Pharaoh's magicians do the same, turning their rods into snakes, but Aaron's rod swallows their rods.

With this we begin the story of the Ten Plagues. This parasha tells the story of the first seven plagues; the story of the last three plagues is told next week. Moshe and Aaron meet Pharaoh at the Nile River early in the morning. Aaron strikes the river with his rod and the river turns to blood. All the fish die. This plague is followed in this week's reading by frogs, lice, swarms of flies or wild animals, cattle disease, boils, and a fiery hail. Each time Pharaoh hardens his heart, and refuses to let the Israelites go.

The plagues seem to come in sets of three. The first of each three is preceded by Moshe asking Pharaoh to let the people go, with a warning about what is to come. The second is done in front of Pharaoh. The third is done outside Pharaoh's presence. The plagues build up toward a climax, ending next week with the slaying of the Egyptians' firstborn sons.

For the first group of plagues, the Torah says that Pharaoh hardened his heart or the heart of Pharaoh was hardened. Only after the sixth plague does it say that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart. It seems that if someone does the wrong act often enough, it becomes second nature, as if G-d is doing it.

How to Face Dictators

(Exodus 8:16) And the Lord said to Moses, "Early in the morning present yourself to Pharaoh, as he is coming out to the water, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: Let My people go that they may worship Me.'"

- A. "Present yourself" (hityatzeiv – literally "stand up") Being a man of great humility, Moses was accustomed to bow to all men in greeting. Therefore the Lord found it necessary to command him explicitly to "stand before Pharaoh." "When you go before Pharaoh," the Lord told Moses, "stand erect before him and do not bow to him in greeting, for you are not to show him even the slightest sign of deference." (*Or HaHayim (Rabbi Hayyim Ibn Attar), 1696-1743, Morocco and Israel*)
- B. Only in the morning did (Pharaoh) go out to the water, because this wicked one used to boast that he was a god and did not need to relieve himself; therefore he used to go early in the morning to the water [when there was no one to see him]. G-d, therefore, told Moses to catch him just at the critical moment. (*Shemot Rabbah 9:8*)
- C. Avitol the scribe said in the name of Rav: The Pharaoh of Moses' era was a cubit [tall]. His beard was a cubit, and his male member a cubit and a handspan... to fulfill that which is stated, "[G-d rules over the kingdom of man] and He appoints the lowest of men over it" (Daniel 4:14) (*Talmud Moed Katan 18a*)

What do You Think?

The Moroccan sage, the "*Or HaHayim*," implies that when confronting a tyrant one should not cower but defiantly stand as an equal. The passages from *Shemot Rabbah* and *Mo'ed Katan* make fun of tyrants, but only in their literature, not in front of them. They mock the Pharaoh's feeble attempt to present himself as a god by urinating in private yet the Egyptians are taken in by this ruse. And the Talmud even allows us to imagine the great and terrible Pharaoh as a tiny man with a disproportionate penis. What do you suppose their authors had in mind? Do you think that mockery or defiance is an effective tool against tyrants and tyranny? Consider how different the Arab Spring has been, which began with a Tunisian food vendor setting himself on fire. Other despots were removed from power only after many people were shot and killed. Why hasn't Asad of Syria been toppled? How have the leaders of other totalitarian regimes in the Middle East, like Iran and Saudi Arabia, been able to remain in power? Would mockery of them been a better tool of the population? How fortunate we are to live in a democracy. But even we have trouble getting rid of some leaders, who deserve to be deposed.