

Yad Avraham Institute
WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARY SERIES
Parshas Va'eira

January 2, 2008

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

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B"H

Parshas Va'eira

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*
Dean

1. When Is One's Question Not a Lack of Faith?

The Midrash states, "G'd said to Moshe, 'When Pharaoh will ask you for a sign (that you are My agent), it is a proper request.' Why is it a proper request? We find regarding Noach that after he was saved from the Great Flood, G'd had said to him, 'I will never again destroy the world with a Great Flood.' Noach responded, 'Give me a sign that this will be so.' G'd said to him, 'The rainbow in the cloud shall be the sign of My covenant.' We see from this that it is proper to ask for a sign. Chizkiyahu, the king, when he was deathly ill, G'd sent Yishaya the prophet to tell him, 'You will be healed on the third day and you will be able to ascend to the House of G'd.' Chizkiyahu asked the prophet, 'What will be the sign?' Yishaya replied, 'The shade of the steps of the Temple will be cast in another direction. This will be the sign that you will recover.' We also see regarding Yehoshua the High Priest... Therefore a tzaddik has the right to ask G'd for a sign. If a tzaddik, who is devoutly righteous, has the right to ask for a sign from G'd, then definitely Pharaoh, who is evil, also has the right to ask for a sign." Thus, Moshe was told by G'd that when Pharaoh would ask for a sign that he was in fact G'd's agent, he should throw his staff to the ground and it will be transformed into a snake.

During the Great Flood the world was destroyed; however, Noach and his family had been miraculously spared in the ark. In addition, Noach miraculously was able to sustain every species in existence within the confines of the ark. After a twelve-month period, G'd told Noach, who was a tzaddik and the one who found favor in His Eyes, that He would never again destroy the world with a Great Flood. Noach had witnessed all the events unfold exactly as G'd had told him. He understood that he and his family only survived because G'd Willed it so. Yet, despite all this, he asked G'd for a sign to prove that He would never again bring about a Great Flood. Why was this not considered a lack of faith? We see from the Midrash that this behavior was repeated by other

tzaddikim- thus confirming the fact that a tzaddik has the right to ask for a sign from G'd. Seemingly, it should be considered a lack of faith; however, we see that it is a proper request.

Ramban explains that there is a principle that states that the actions of the forefathers is a sign for their progeny. Meaning, the forefathers had experienced and taken certain actions in order to actualize the future on behalf of their descendents. Thus, when Noach asked for a sign of G'd, it was only for Him to respond with a Covenant of rainbow – thus guaranteeing that a Great Flood would never reoccur. Therefore a tzaddik who requests a sign is not considered lacking in faith. However, it is clear from the Midrash that this is not a proper understanding. The Midrash justifies Pharaoh's request for a sign as the devoutly righteous have a right to ask for a sign. What relevance does Pharaoh's request for verification of Moshe's credentials have to all the incidences of the tzaddikim requesting a sign -meaning, if it was to actualize and guarantee the future? If this is so, then why is the request of the tzaddikim not considered a lack of faith?

Chazal tell us that in the generation of Reb Shimon bar Yochai a rainbow was never sighted. This was an indication of the piety of his generation. If a rainbow is sighted, it is an indication that G'd in fact would want to destroy the world because of mankind's unworthiness to continue to exist; however, He does not do so because of His Covenant to Noach. Thus, the Attribute of Justice is subdued.

G'd created the world so that it should exist within the context of a natural order. The order of existence is contingent on the balance between the Attribute of Mercy and the Attribute of Justice. Most times, the Attribute of Mercy supersedes the Attribute of Justice – keeping it at bay- thus allowing existence to continue. However, if the Attribute of Justice becomes overwhelming and the Attribute of Mercy can no longer restrain It, then there will be devastating/catastrophic consequences. When the world was destroyed at the time of the Great Flood, even the

Attribute of Mercy was in agreement that existence had been corrupted to such a point that it could no longer continue. Chazal tell us that man is inclined to evil from the moment he is cast from the womb of his mother. Therefore the natural direction of existence is to gravitate towards destruction due to the evil inclination of man. Thus, under those circumstances, allowing existence to continue despite mankind's failing, is outside of the context of nature and is thus considered miraculous/supernatural. Therefore Noach had a right to ask G'd for a sign because it was out of the realm of the norm for existence to continue despite man's propensity for evil. Regarding Chizkiyahu, his condition was terminal. Within the natural order, he should have not lived. When the prophet Yishaya came to him in the Name of G'd and foretold his recovery, he had a right to ask for a sign since it was outside of the natural order for him live. A tzaddik has a right to ask for a sign whenever the future event is based on something that is outside of the realm of nature.

Pharaoh was an expert astrologer. He had seen in the stars that the Jewish people would forever be entrapped in Egypt. When Moshe approached him as the agent of G'd to ask him to ask for their release, he had a right to request a sign- no less then the tzaddik. The redemption of the Jewish people was something that was outside of the context of nature. It could only come about through supernatural means. Therefore Pharaoh's request for a sign was considered proper.

2. Inner Peace, A Prerequisite for Clarity

The Torah states, "*V'yedaber Elokim - G'd spoke to Moshe and said to him, 'I am Hashem...'*" Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Moshe was addressed by G'd in a formal and reprimanding manner. The appellation of G'd "*Elokim*" is used because it connotes the Attribute of Justice, indicating that Moshe was being judged for a failing. Additionally the term "*v'yedaber- spoke*" is a more formal manner of speech than "*vayomer-said*." Moshe was addressed by G'd in this manner because of an inappropriate question that he had asked.

The Torah tells us that when the Jewish people believed that Moshe was the Redeemer, who would take them out of Egypt, there was a work stoppage. In response to the inactivity of the Jews, Pharaoh ordered that the straw subsidy that was given to them by the government to make bricks should be withdrawn. They nevertheless needed to gather their own straw and fulfill the same quota. Consequently, the predicament of the Jew became

untenable. The Torah states, "**They (Dason and Aviram) encountered Moshe and Aaron... and said, 'May Hashem look upon you and judge, for you have made us putrid in the eyes of Pharaoh...to place a sword in their hands to murder us!'**" Moshe returned to G'd and said, "**My Lord, why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me...G'd said to Moshe, 'Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh...'**"

Rashi cites Chazal who explain the verse, "**Now you will see...**" to mean "Because you questioned My ways...you will see the redemption from Egypt, but you will not witness what I will do to the kings of the seven nations when I will bring them (Jewish people) into the Land." What caused Moshe to ask this question which was considered inappropriate?

The Midrash tells us that after Moshe and Aaron were encountered by Dason and Aviram and were accused for causing the untenable plight of the Jewish people, Moshe lost clarity. This was the basis for Moshe's inappropriate question. The Midrash cites a verse from Koheles, "'The plunderer makes foolish the wise man (*chacham*) and causes him to lose the heart, which is a gift.' What is the meaning of this? When the wise man (Torah sage) engages in many things outside of Torah, it confuses him and removes him from wisdom. As a result, he loses the heart, which is a gift. Meaning he loses the Torah which was given as a gift into the heart of man." Although one may be immersed in Torah study unceasingly and toil for its acquisition, his ultimate retention of the Torah is only a gift of G'd.

Chazal tell us that when Moshe ascended to heaven for forty days and forty nights he was taught the Torah in its entirety every day by G'd. After each day Moshe would forget all that he had been taught by G'd. This process of being taught and forgetting at the end of each day, repeated itself for forty days. However after the fortieth day, Moshe was able to retain what he had been taught. Why did Moshe need to experience this forty-day exercise of studying and forgetting? G'd could have had Moshe retain the Torah in its entirety on the first day. It was to teach Moshe that it is not within the human capacity/intellect to retain and process Torah knowledge. Although Moshe's intellectual capacity and spiritual dimension was unique, even prior to his ascent (he had already brought the ten plagues upon Egypt and split the Sea), it was only because G'd chose to give him the Torah as a gift that he was able to retain it. It is true that one must meet certain prerequisites in order to merit such a gift. He must be humble and willing to selflessly dedicate himself to toil in Torah. As the Gemara in Tractate Taanis states,

“The Torah can only be contained within one who has a humble spirit.” In contrast, one who has an “elevated heart” would not merit such a gift because that person is despised by G’d.

We supplicate G’d in the blessing of (ahava raba) prior to the recitation of the Shema (which is the blessing of Torah), “Our Merciful Father... instill in our hearts to perceive and understand...” The heart on its own does not have the capacity to be able to process or retain the Torah. We are asking G’d to give the heart the function which will enable it to process and retain the Torah.

King Solomon in Koheles is explaining to us that Moshe had made the mistake of asking the inappropriate question only because he was distracted by the encounter/accusations of Dason and Aviram. Thus his heart was disrupted causing him to lose clarity. For that moment, he lost the gift of Torah. This lapse and void had grave and far-reaching consequences. It was because of this lapse that Moshe asked the inappropriate question – thus denying him entry into the Land of Israel. Chazal tell us that if Moshe had entered into the Land, the Temple that he would have built would have never been destroyed. The world would have reached its objective in attaining spiritual perfection. All this was lost because Moshe was distracted and disrupted for a moment.

The Gemara in Tractate Nedarim tells us that Ulah (a student of Reb Yochanon) was traveling with two members of the Mechuzah community (a community in Babylon). Suddenly, one of them slit the throat of his fellow in a state of rage. After committing this senseless act of murder, he asked Ulah the sage, “Are you satisfied with the manner in which I slit his throat?” Ulah responded, “You should cut it a bit more.” Ulah only responded in this manner because he felt that if he would not be in agreement with the act, his life would be in jeopardy. After advising this murderer to further the cut, Ulah was concerned that perhaps he would be considered an accomplice in the act of murder. When he had returned to his rebbe, Reb Yochanon in Israel, he shared with him what had transpired and his concerns. Reb Yochanon had said to him that he had nothing to be concerned about because the murderer through his initial act had already killed his fellow. However, Reb Yochanon remarked to his student Ulah that he was amazed that a Jew could be agitated to such a point that he would kill a fellow Jew. The Torah states in the curses, “There (Babylon), I will give you an agitated/enraged heart.” Reb Yochanon had believed that this act of murder had taken place in the Land of Israel. Ulah responded by saying, “We had not yet crossed the Jordan when the murder had taken place.”

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that the Torah sages in Babylon were called “maklos - rods” and the Torah sages in Israel were called “noam - pleasant.” The Torah of Babylon was the equivalent of “rods” because the scholars engaged in it had to force their position upon one another rather than being interested in one another’s understanding. They tolerated one another but did not have a true interest in understanding one another. In Israel, the scholars had a true interest in one another’s position – thus elucidating the Torah to a more advanced level. Why was the nature of the Torah scholars in Babylon less accommodating than the nature of the Torah sages in the Land of Israel?

Based on the Gemara in Tractate Nedarim – that the Jew who lives in Babylon will have an agitated heart – the Torah sage in Babylon is thus compromised in his capacity to consider another’s opinion. However, the sage in the Land of Israel, where there was a “tranquility/inner peace”, had a greater capacity to embrace and consider another’s position. This is the understanding of the Gemara in Tractate Bava Basera, “*Avirah D’arah Machkim* – The atmosphere of the Land wizens.” Meaning, because there is an inner peace and tranquility of heart in the Land of Israel, one has greater relevance to wisdom because the heart is not disrupted. Since Moshe’s heart was disturbed through the confrontation with Dasam and Aviram, it caused a distraction/disruption of his heart. This manifested itself in a lack of clarity that caused him to ask an inappropriate question.

In order for one to maintain an inner peace, tranquility, and confidence, one must be connected to Torah in a significant manner. This can only be achieved if one follows the dictum of the Mishna in Pirkei Avos which states, “One must make his Torah study primary and his livelihood secondary.” It is only when one assumes this perspective on life will his heart be worthy to receive the gift of Torah.

3. *The Consequences of Man’s Actions*

The Torah states, “**G’d spoke to Moshe and said to him, ‘I am Hashem (YKVK). I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov as Keil-Shakai (Name of G’d), but My Name Hashem (YKVK) I did not make Myself known to them.’**” Ramban explains that G’d appeared to the Patriarchs only as *Shakai* and not as *Hashem (YKVK)*. G’d related to the Patriarchs through the Name ‘*Shakai*’, which is an appellation that connotes that He alters nature on their behalf without a disruption of the

natural order regarding existence as a whole. For example, during the time of famine, He redeemed them from hunger. During the time of war, He protected them from the sword and death. He gave them wealth and glory, despite the predicament of the world. We find throughout the Torah that if one adheres to the Word of G'd and performs the mitzvah, he will be blessed. If he transgresses the Word of G'd, then the curses will come upon him. Within the context of nature, no blessing/reward will come upon a person when he performs a mitzvah. No curse/punishment will come upon the individual who transgresses when he sins. In order for reward and punishment to manifest itself in the physical realm G'd's intervention is needed. It is a concealed miracle which is not obvious – even to the recipient of the reward or punishment. It is only through G'd's altering of nature that this is able to take place. If G'd would allow man to experience life based on his personal predicament as it is ordained through the Zodiac, his actions (positive or negative) would not add or detract from what has been predestined for him within the natural order.

With the explanation of Ramban we are able to understand the Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin. The Gemara tells us that until the time of the Great Flood, there was no illness, aging, or suffering in the world regardless of the behavior of man. The world experienced continuous bounty and blessing because there was no consequence for man's misbehavior. However, after the Great Flood, this changed – blessing and curse came upon man based on his actions. If one of the basic tenets of creation is that the world was created with a system of reward and punishment, why was this not evident during the period prior to the Great Flood?

Ramban asks, “Why does the Torah not discuss reward and punishment in the World to Come? It only discusses reward and punishment which manifests itself in the physical. It is because reward and punishment manifesting itself in the physical world is something that is unnatural. G'd must intercede and alter nature, in a concealed manner, in order to bring about the consequences of man's actions. In contrast, reward and punishment in the spiritual realm is obvious and a natural consequence of one's actions. The fact that the soul merits eternal life and will cleave to G'd, because of one's adherence to His Will, is a natural consequence of the fulfillment of a mitzvah. Conversely, if the individual fails spiritually/violates the Word of G'd, he will fade into spiritual oblivion in the World to Come. Therefore the Torah does not need to discuss something that is understood.”

It is true that the world was created as a setting for reward and punishment – so that man could advance himself or be diminished based on his choice. However the consequences of his actions were meant to be limited to the World to Come (one's share in the World to Come). Until after the generation of the Great Flood, G'd did not intercede with existence to alter it. Thus, man continued to sin unceasingly without experiencing any consequences. As a result of G'd's non-intervention, humanity and the world became corrupted to the point that it needed to be destroyed. It reached a level of impurity that was beyond rehabilitation. Therefore G'd brought the Great Flood to destroy existence. In response to humanity's failing, G'd instituted a new order – the consequences of man's spiritual successes and failings (mitzvos/transgressions) would be manifested in the physical. This would provide man with a context in which he will understand that there are consequences to his actions. Hopefully, causing and encouraging him to gravitate to choose the mitzvah and refrain from transgression.

Now we are able to understand the difficulty of Noah's mission to convince mankind that they must repent. The objective and purpose of the building of the ark was to attract world attention. It was for mankind to ask Noah about what he was doing. He would reply to them, “G'd will destroy this world with a Great Flood if you do not change your evil ways and repent.” They deprecated and mocked him by saying, “If G'd will bring destruction, it would only be on you and your family.” They were oblivious to his admonishment and rebuke. Since the beginning of mankind until that moment, humanity never experienced anything negative as a result of their misbehavior. Noah's admonishments were seen as absurd. Since the predicament of existence was determined by the Zodiac – unrelated to their actions- the astrological readings indicated that no harm would come to them. Given this reality, convincing and impacting upon his generation to repent was truly a daunting task.

4. The Gift of Choice

The Torah states, “**and He (G'd) hardened the heart of Pharaoh.**” Rambam explains in the Laws of Repentance, that during the first five plagues in Egypt, Pharaoh had the ability to choose to repent. However because he rejected G'd, despite the fact that he had witnessed five revealed/uncontested miracles, He withdrew Pharaoh's power of free choice. From that time onward Pharaoh no longer had the ability to repent. He no longer had the power of choice because he chose, through his arrogant and obstinate behavior, to forfeit the privilege of choice. Ramban and Sforno explain the hardening of

Pharaoh's heart to mean that G'd gave Pharaoh the inner strength and stamina to be able to withstand the overwhelming devastation that came upon Egypt. G'd wanted Pharaoh to be able to repent through his own volition and send the Jewish people out of Egypt, rather than being compelled to send them out. Therefore, G'd hardened Pharaoh's heart/strengthened him so that he would be in a position to make the choice to repent as a result of his own free will.

Sforno, adds that although Pharaoh had free choice throughout the first nine plagues, during the tenth plague (killing of the first born) and when he and his subjects pursued the Jewish people into the Sea, they had forfeited their power of choice. The killing of the first-born and the closing of the Sea on the Egyptian army was to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians for all that they had done. When the Torah states, "**and G'd hardened the heart of Pharaoh**" regarding these two events, it means that G'd had actually withdrew from Pharaoh and his subjects the power of choice. Repenting was no longer an option that was available to them. Pharaoh and his people were to experience punishment because they had previously rejected all of the opportunities that were presented to them to see the Hand of G'd.

Sforno explains that the purpose of strengthening the heart of Pharaoh was, "So that he should know that G'd had performed all of these miracles on behalf of man so that he should be able to repent. However, the only time witnessing these miracles has value, is if they motivate one to introspect and reflect upon one's behavior." If one experiences suffering and tragedy and does not take pause to introspect, he will not repent. It is only when one is willing to consider that his situation is attributable to his own misbehavior that he has a chance of repenting. However, if one is not willing to do this, he can no longer be saved. He will only experience punishment and suffering without rehabilitation.

5. Inappropriate – Although Permitted *(from Shemos)*

The Torah tells us that Pharaoh's daughter had gone to immerse herself in the Nile and had noticed a box floating in the water. When she realized that it contained a newborn child she said, "**This is one of the Hebrew children.**" Subsequently, she sought out a Jewish wet nurse. Rashi cites Chazal who explain, "Pharaoh's daughter had sought out many Egyptian women who attempted to nurse the child; however, he would not nurse from any of them. It is because he would ultimately be the one to speak with the Divine Presence." It would have been inappropriate for the mouth that suckled from an

Egyptian woman to be the same mouth to engage with the Divine Presence. However, the Midrash indicates a different understanding.

The Midrash continues, "A Jewish woman should not nurse a gentile child. However a gentile woman may nurse a Jewish child in her domain. Meaning, when the gentile woman dwells with the Jewish family and partakes only of their food, she is able to nurse a Jewish child. G'd said, 'In the future, the mouth of this tzaddik (devoutly righteous) will speak with Me. What will the Egyptian women say? 'This person who speaks to the Divine Presence was nursed by me.' It was because of this that He invalidated their breasts to Moshe." We see from the Midrash that the reason Moshe would not nurse from the Egyptian women was not because it was inappropriate to nurse from a gentile, but rather, because of what would be said by the Egyptian women who nursed him. According to the Midrash, if there would have not been a concern for what the Egyptian women would say, even Moshe who was meant to speak with G'd would have nursed from them.

The Torah tells us that Rivka, our Matriarch, was initially barren. It was only as a result of G'd responding to Yitzchak's supplications that she was able to conceive. Why was Rivka not able to conceive until G'd performed a miracle? Ohr Ha Chaim HaKadosh explains that before Rivka had left the home of her family, her brother Lavan, who personified evil together with her mother, had given her a blessing, "**You should multiply into the tens of thousands...**" If Rivka was able to conceive naturally, then the Jewish people that would have descended from her would have emanated from Lavan's blessing. Since evil breeds evil, the Jewish people cannot be in any way attributed to the blessing of Lavan. Therefore G'd caused Rivka to be barren. Thus, Lavan's blessing had no relevance to his sister Rivka because she was not able to naturally conceive. The basis for her being able to conceive was only as a result of G'd's intervention – thus the origin of the Jewish people is unrelated to Lavan or his mother. Similarly, one would think that Moshe, the most special and holy Jew to ever live, should not suckle from a non-Jewish woman because his existence would be determined by an impure source. However, the Midrash states differently.

Moshe miraculously survived the Nile because he was meant to be the Redeemer. It was not because of the box in which he was placed by his mother nor was it because of Pharaoh's daughter extracting him from the water. Moshe would have survived even if he were not nursed at all. G'd Himself would have provided him with

sustenance. Thus, the one who nursed Moshe was in fact irrelevant to his survival. However, if the Egyptian women were to claim that he survived and eventually engaged with the Divine Presence because of their involvement, it would have been considered a disgrace.

The pedigree of the Jewish people, who are G'd's Holy People, cannot be attributed in any way to impure origins. The Gemara in Tractate Chagiga tells us that a gentile who engages in Torah study is liable for the death penalty. It is because the Torah is considered to be the "betrothed" of Yaakov. As the Torah states, **"The Torah was commanded by Moshe. It is the "morashah (heritage)" of Yaakov..."** The Gemara states that the word should not be read "morasha" but rather "me'orasa" which means, "betrothed." When a gentile engages in Torah study, it is the equivalent of engaging with another's betrothed. The Torah was given only to the Jewish people because they were the only nation who emanated from purity and sanctity – the holy Patriarchs. Because the Jewish people are unique and special they were therefore the only ones chosen to receive G'd's Torah. Since the Jewish people represent G'd in existence because they are His people, even when something is considered permitted, if it could be perceived by the world in a context that could be considered as inappropriate for G'd's people, it must be avoided. As we find regarding Moshe, although it was permitted for him to nurse from a non-Jewish woman, G'd did not allow him to do so because of its inappropriateness vis-à-vis his future relationship with G'd.