

*Yad Avraham Institute*

Weekly Torah Commentaries Series

Portion of Va'eira

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**Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita**

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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**B"H**

## Va'eira

*Presented by*

**Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita**  
**Dean**

### ***1. Moshe's Exceptional Attribute was the Basis for His Failure***

The Torah tells us that after Moshe had proven that he was G'd's agent, who would take them out of Egypt, the Jewish people acknowledge him as such and they immediately ceased working. In response to their defiance, Pharaoh ordered that the straw subsidy that was provided to them by the government to make bricks should be withdrawn and they must gather their own straw and meet the same quota. Consequently, the predicament of the Jew became precarious and 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 (the exodus)..."** to mean "Because you questioned My ways...you will see the redemption from Egypt, but you will not (in the future) merit to witness what I will do to the seven nations of Canaan when I will bring the Jewish people into the Land." The Torah attests to the fact that Moshe was the most humble man who ever walked the face of the earth. He had totally negated himself to G'd and would thus never question His Word. If so, why did Moshe confront G'd by asking, "Why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me?" Seemingly, this is inconsistent with Moshe's persona and demeanor to speak to G'd in this manner.

The Midrash cites a verse in Ecclesiastes, "Exploitation makes the wise man foolish..." When the wise man engages in various endeavors he can become confused and act foolishly." Eitz Yosef in his commentary on the Midrash explains that Moshe reacted to G'd's dictate as he had, because Dason and Aviram had openly castigated him for the predicament of the Jewish people.

They had accused him of being the cause of bringing greater hardship and suffering upon the Jewish people.

Dason and Aviram were the ones who had initially informed on Moshe to Pharaoh after he had killed the Egyptian, thus causing him to flee Egypt. They were the ones who sought to continuously provoke the Jewish people against Moshe and the Word of G'd. They had attempted many times to usurp his authority as G'd's spokesman. When they had accused him of making the predicament of the Jewish people unbearable, he was greatly pained. It was not because he was concerned for his own reputation or image in the eyes of the Jewish people, but rather for how it reflected upon G'd. Their accusations were in essence were saying that Moshe was not G'd's agent but rather he had taken his own initiative to bring this about. Moshe, understanding the nature of these two individuals and their potential to undermine his credibility and consequently put the Jewish people in a compromised and culpable position, he confronted G'd in an inappropriate manner as an expression of his pain and concern. The ultimate result of their accusation would bring about a desecration of G'd's Name (chilul Hashem). Moshe could not tolerate this.

Moshe was an individual who lived his life selflessly for G'd, to bring about a sanctification of G'd's Name (kiddush Hashem). When Moshe came to Egypt as the Redeemer of Israel, he did so as G'd's agent. Thus, the ramifications of his actions and statements were meant to bring about kiddush Hashem and not desecration of His Name. Although the fate of the Jew had become more tenuous, rather than improving, it was not considered to be an issue until Moshe was castigated by Dason and Aviram. Before the comments of Dason and Aviram, Moshe had no reason to approach G'd. However, after their severe reproach and accusation, Moshe realized that because of the nature of Dason and Aviram, which was extremely contentious, it would result in a desecration of His Name. Therefore, Moshe, because of his sensitivity to G'd's Glory, approached G'd in pained state and expressed himself in an inappropriate manner. This is an example of the "exploitation of the wise man." It was because of Dason and Aviram's distortion of truth that Moshe was

compelled to speak to G'd in an inappropriate manner. He was seeking an understanding in order to elucidate and clarify to the Jewish people the reason for the intensification of the bondage rather than its cessation. He did not want it to be perceived for a moment that he was not truly G'd's representative. Because Moshe allowed himself to react to the statements of others, he was exploited and thus denied entry into the Promised Land.

We find another example of Moshe's exceptional sensitivity to chilul Hashem. This was demonstrated regarding his sending of spies into the Land. The Jewish people had approached Moshe prior to the moment they were about to enter into the Land. They had said to him, "We want send spies into the Land to avert a desecration of G'd's Name. G'd had promised us that when we enter into the Land we will find houses filled with all goodness (wealth). Do you think that the nations of Canaan would not bury their wealth before we enter into the Land, so that we should not be able to locate it? If this should happen, the word of G'd will not be fulfilled, thus causing His Name to be desecrated." The Jewish people's understanding of the temperament and sensitivity of Moshe, could only present their request in this manner. They understood that if they asked to send spies to determine if the Land was conquerable, it would have been rejected by Moshe because this would have been a demonstration of their lack of faith. They had ensnared Moshe with the threat of chilul Hashem in order to bring about their own objective. G'd's response to Moshe was, "**Send for yourself spies...**" Meaning, "I permit you to send spies, but I do not endorse it." On one hand Moshe's sensitivity to chilul Hashem was one of his greatest attributes. However, on the other hand it was the basis for his failure.

## ***2. Evading Truth***

The Torah states regarding the plague of frogs, which was the second of the ten plagues, "**Pharaoh summoned Moshe and Aaron and said, 'Entreat Hashem that He remove the frogs from me and my people...Moshe said to Pharaoh, '...when should I entreat for you...to excise the frogs from you and from your houses?'...and Pharaoh said, 'Tomorrow.'**" The plague of frogs brought havoc upon Egypt. The people were inundated with frogs in every aspect of their lives. Their homes, ovens, and even their innards were devastated by frogs. It was a menace that could not be tolerated. It disrupted the lives of the Egyptians. If this is so, then why did Pharaoh not want Moshe to remove the

frogs immediately? Why did Pharaoh say "tomorrow" when he could have said "immediately?"

Sforno explains that regarding sorcery, when an incantation is initiated its effect cannot be halted until the incantation completes its course. However, if something is brought about by the Hand of G'd it can be retracted immediately if G'd allows it to be. Just as G'd Wills it to be He Wills it to cease. When Pharaoh had witnessed the first two miracles of blood and frogs that Moshe had brought about he summoned his sorcerers to replicate what Moshe had done. Thus, he attributed the miracles to witchcraft, rather than a Divine source. The basis for Pharaoh's rejection of Moshe's credibility as G'd's agent is that he attributed the miracles of Moshe to sorcery. When Moshe had asked Pharaoh, when would he like to have the plague of frogs cease, he did not want to be confronted with irrefutable proof that it was G'd and not sorcery. He thus chose to say "tomorrow."

Pharaoh was willing to endure together with his people another day of this devastating plague so that he should not be forced to acknowledge G'd and submit to His Will. He had believed that he was divine and thus did not want to believe otherwise. He preferred to evade the truth in order to perpetuate his own delusion that he was truly in power, rather than recognizing that all that he was only stemmed from G'd. People most often chose to evade the truth in order for them to maintain their belief that they are truly self-sufficient and "self-made" individuals. By maintaining this posture, they need not be beholden or appreciative of anything outside of themselves. There is no sense of indebtedness.

The Torah tells us that before the Jewish people entered into the Land of Israel Moshe had told them that after they will receive their portion of the Land they will succeed to a great degree and become secure in the Land. He had forewarned them, since the natural tendency of man is to attribute his material success to his own initiative, they must be fully aware of this human pitfall. As he had said to them, "**You will come to say, 'The power and the strength of my hand has brought about all of this wealth...'**" Despite the fact that the Jewish people had witnessed forty years of miracles in the desert, which were predicated by the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea, they nevertheless remained susceptible to this delusion. Moshe, on the other hand, who was the most humble man who ever walked the face of the earth expressed his humility by saying, "What are we?" Meaning, that "I am nothing." It was because of this level of negation that Moshe merited to be G'd's spokesman and the conduit of Torah to the Jewish people.

### 3. *Being A Proper Communicator*

The Torah tells us in the Portion of Shemos that G'd instructed Moshe to present himself to Pharaoh as His agents and request that the Jewish people be released from their bondage. The Torah states, **"Afterwards Moshe and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, 'So said Hashem (YKVK), the G'd of Israel, Send out My people that they may celebrate for Me in the wilderness.'" Pharaoh replied, "Who is Hashem (YKVK) that I should heed His voice to send out Israel? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Israel!"**

The Midrash tells us that when Pharaoh was told that **"Hashem, the G'd of Israel"** wanted the Jewish people to be freed, he consulted his compendium of deities but did not locate the deity of "YKVK (the four letter Name of G'd)." Pharaoh thus responded, **"I do not know Hashem."** Moshe then said to Pharaoh, **"The G'd of the Hebrews (*Elokei Ha'Ivrim*) happened upon us..."**

It is interesting to note the different appellations for G'd that Moshe used and their significance. When Moshe initially presented himself to Pharaoh he used the appellation "YKVK" in conjunction with "G'd of Israel." However after Pharaoh could not identify "YKVK", Moshe referred to Him as the "G'd of the Hebrews (*Elokei Ha'Ivrim*)." Moshe no longer referred to G'd as "YKVK," and the Jewish people were no longer referred to "Israel" but rather "Hebrews." What is the significance of the change of reference?

The Midrash states, "Moshe and Aaron said, 'Perhaps Pharaoh hardened his heart because we did not presents ourselves to him as G'd had told us to. G'd had initially told us to represent ourselves as the agents of 'the G'd of the Hebrews'; however, we chose the appellation of **'Hashem(YKVK), the G'd of Israel.'** This is the reason he rejected our request.' Because of this Moshe and Aaron altered their initial presentation and referred to themselves as the agents of "the G'd of the Hebrews."

Sforno explains that the appellation of "Hashem (YKVK)" represents G'd not only as the Creator but also as the One who continuously maintains existence. Meaning, G'd continues Wills the world's existence and is involved in every aspect of creation even after He had brought it into existence. The appellation "YKVK" connotes G'd as "I was, I am, and I will be." It represents Him as the Infinite and Omnipotent Being. This concept of "YKVK" diametrically opposed to the belief and understanding of the pagans of Egypt.

Ramban explains that there were idolaters who believed that G'd created the world; however, because of His exalted state of being as a Creator, He only has relevance to Creation but not to the minutia of every day existence. He handed over the governance of the world to the "hosts of heaven." These were powers that He had created such as the sun, moon, stars, and other powers as deities/powers to manage the ongoing maintenance of existence. G'd had no relevance to the finite.

A deity/power is a finite being that was created to interact with a finite creation. This was the basis for the pagan beliefs of Egypt. When Moshe and Aaron presented themselves as the agents of "YKVK," the Infinite Being, who is not constrained by the limits, Pharaoh, as a pagan, did not have the capacity to believe what was being presented to him. Based on his orientation and perspective of existence, "YKVK," the Infinite G'd and Supreme Being, has no relevance to mankind or existence. In addition, Moshe and Aaron referred to Him as the G'd of Israel and not the G'd of the Hebrews. Yaakov, our Patriarch was given the name "Israel" after he had defeated the archangel of Esav. It is a name that established him as the one who lords over angels and man. Although Yaakov was a physical being, his dimension was spiritual. He transcended the physical world. The Jewish people who are his descendants possess that same characteristic. Initially, the Jewish people were known as "Hebrews" which is an appellation that identifies them based on origin ("Hebrew" means "from the other side of the river."). Pharaoh, who believed that existence was limited to the physical, the appellation of "Israel" was something that he could not accept. Therefore, Moshe and Aaron restated their representation. They told Pharaoh that they were the agents of "the G'd of the Hebrews." They understood that in order to effectively communicate to an individual, it must be within the capacity of that person. Because they did not do so initially, they were rejected.

Ramak writes in the Tomer Dvorah that a Jew must reflect all of the Attributes and behaviors of G'd regarding the physical world. When the Jew conducts himself within this specific context, G'd in turn relates to the world in kind to provide overwhelmingly positive influences that reflect the behavior of the Jewish people. G'd interacts with existence continuously in order to do Good to it. His wisdom permeates every aspect of creation. Just as a spiritual influence is transmitted to affect things in within its own capacity and not more, so too when one communicates wisdom to another, it should be within the capacity of that individual and not beyond. Thus, we can appreciate and understand Moshe and Aaron's concern

why Pharaoh had rejected their credentials as G'd's agents. It was not only because it was something that he could not comprehend, but rather in order to merit Divine Assistance, the communication needed to be within the criteria that G'd had set in place (doing it as He does).

Rather than using the initial terminology that G'd told them to use with Pharaoh, Moshe and Aaron chose to introduce themselves on a more lofty level. However, since their presentation was beyond his limitation, they were rejected.

#### ***4. When Is One's Question Not a Lack of Faith?***

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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.

## 5. *The Consistency of Pharaoh's Behavior*

The Torah states at the beginning of the Portion of Shemos, **"Yosef died, and all his brothers and that entire generation. The Children of Israel were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong - very, very much so; and the land became filled with them. A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yosef..."** Rashi cites the argument between Rav and Shmuel as to whether the "new king" of Egypt was the same Pharaoh who knew Yosef, but had instituted a new mandate and acted as if he did not know him. Or, in fact, the Pharaoh was indeed a "new king" who did not know Yosef.

It is difficult to understand how Pharaoh or the Egyptian people could actually believe that the Jewish people were a threat to the security of Egypt. It was Yosef, the Viceroy, who had saved the Egyptian civilization from destruction and extinction during the time of the great famine. It was due to Yosef's overseeing of the sale of grain during the famine that caused Egypt to become the wealthiest nation in the world. This was because Egypt had been the source of all grain in the world. The Torah tells us that the Egyptian people, after the death of Yosef and his family, could not tolerate the Jewish people. As the verse states, **"They became disgusted because of the Children of Israel."** After Pharaoh and the Egyptian people had benefited from Yosef to such a degree, how was it possible that they should act with such cruelty as to

subject their descendants to slavery of unbearable proportion?

The Torah tells us that after Yosef was reunited with his brothers, he asked them to send for his father to come to Egypt with the entire family. Pharaoh instructed the brothers to say to Yaakov, **"...And let your eyes not take pity on your belongings, for the best of all the land of Egypt- it is yours."** Pharaoh had seemingly demonstrated a unique level of generosity towards Yosef's family by suggesting that Yaakov should not even consider inconveniencing himself by bringing his personal belongings to Egypt because all will be provided for him. This appears to be contradictory to the behavior of Pharaoh who had directed the bondage against the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us that after Yaakov had transported his family and all of his belongings across the river, he had returned to retrieve small earthenware vessels that he had left behind. Why would Yaakov, who had been exceptionally wealthy, consider returning for objects of such inconsequential value? The Gemara in Tractate Chulin states, "A tzaddik values his material possessions more than his life." A tzaddik, because he cannot not justify stealing even under the most dire circumstance, safeguards and values all of his possessions. He understands that even the smallest item was gifted to him by G'd. Since everything that the tzaddik possesses has relevance to his existence he therefore cannot minimize any of his material endowment. Based on this perspective, Yaakov was not willing to leave any of his possessions in Canaan, although he was told by Pharaoh that all his needs would be addressed and accommodated.

The Midrash tells us that when Yosef's ten brothers initially entered Egypt to purchase grain during the famine, they did so through ten gates because their presence of being would cause people to take notice. When they were seen together, they had the aura of royalty. When Pharaoh became aware that Yosef's brothers had come to Egypt, he was pleased. This pleased Pharaoh because initially when Yosef was introduced to him by the wine steward, he did not refer to Yosef by name but rather he provided Pharaoh a rather lengthy description; **"a youth (fool), a Hebrew, and a slave of the chamberlain of the butchers."** Rashi cites the Chazal who explain that the wine steward referred to him as a "slave" in order to prevent Yosef from rising to a prominent position in the Egyptian government because it was written in the protocols of Egypt that a slave cannot rule and may not even wear regal garments. Despite the profile that Yosef was given by the wine steward, he was appointed to be the

Viceroy of Egypt. Pharaoh insisted that although the wine steward and others had viewed Yosef in this manner, it had no validity. In truth, Yosef came from a family of princes and royalty. However, Pharaoh could not substantiate his belief until Yosef's brothers had come to Egypt. Thus, Pharaoh and his servants were elated when they became aware that Yosef's brothers had come to Egypt and that they projected a royal image.

The principle and perspective that a tzaddik values his possessions more than his life is perceived by the pagan and gentile as a sign of lowliness. One who descends from royalty is magnanimous and pompous because of his status. Pharaoh, understanding the belief and perspective of Yosef, understood that Yaakov would want to transfer to Egypt all of his personal effects and possessions. This did not bode well with Pharaoh because it would refute all of his efforts to establish and confirm that Yosef was truly royalty. Pharaoh's seemingly generous gesture is unrelated to his goodness and benevolence; but rather, it was selfish and self-serving.

Pharaoh was a monarch who did not possess the capacity to be appreciative or giving. As the Torah tells us that "a new king rose who did not know Yosef." His cruelty knew no bounds. He therefore instituted the bondage of Egypt against the Jewish people.