

D'var Torah for Parshat Vaeira
January 16, 2021; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
Doug Brook

Every year, I ask my students why we read the Torah over and over again, year after year. I then ask my students' blank faces if they've ever seen a movie more than once. They all say yes. I then ask if they noticed anything different in the second viewing. They all say yes. That's because there's always something new for us to find, whether it's because we know what's coming so we notice other things, or because we're in a different place in life than last time whether being a different age or having new experiences. That's why we read the Torah over and over again, year after year. To find new things, new relevancies to our *current* lives.

With this week's Torah reading, we can look back at the plagues in Egypt and, perhaps, learn something from them – with an eye toward how we might someday look back on the plague wrought during the year 2020 and, perhaps, someday find something to learn from it. It's too soon right now, of course. You can't judge a recipe until the meal is served, and three weeks into 2021 this particular plague, unfortunately, isn't quite ready to let my people go.

To look at this week's Torah reading, and spare you more of my mixed metaphors, I've called in some help. As nearly a couple of you might recall, I have an occasional translation project, translating the works of Rabbi Moshe Chafetz who lived in Venice in the late 1600s and early 1700s. R. Chafetz is mainly known for his 1710 Torah commentary, *Melechet Machashevet*, and I asked if it's okay for his opinions there to help us out today. He didn't voice any objection, so here we go.

I'll skip through some plagues mainly because R. Chafetz does. Of what he does comment on, I'll leave out just some of his thoughts about frogs and hail merely because they go on for a couple pages. So, we'll focus on five short excerpts.

We'll start in the beginning, but in Exodus. It's just before the plagues started. It's a Tuesday, and partly cloudy over the Nile River valley, when the Big G gives Moses and Aaron marching orders before they go to Pharaoh. The day before the first plague, they go to Pharaoh for the staff-turning-into-serpents episode of Sunday School fame. R. Chafetz focuses on a particular piece of the Big G's instructions for this.

“When Pharaoh will speak to you saying “give a wonder”: (7:9)”

R. Chafetz cites the Rabbi Isaac Abravanel, who construed that Pharaoh would *ask* for a wonder from them – from (just) themselves to prove that they are prophets.

In any case we still need to know how they went before Pharaoh and gave the sign and the wonder without (him) asking them as God said and threw their staffs and they become snakes?

This and another thing that the passage *didn't say* "when Pharaoh *asks* from you a sign or wonder?"

Therefore R. Chafetz says that God commanded them that from themselves they will give the wonder without Pharaoh asking, in order to prove they are prophets. And the Big G said “when Pharaoh will *speak* to you” as if to say on the day that you will speak to Pharaoh about whatever thing will happen to come up and give him a wonder and they did this so they will be feared in front of him:

In other words, Abravanel said the Big G wanted Moses and Aaron to do a miracle themselves to prove they're prophets. R. Chafetz points out that the Torah says “when Pharaoh will *speak to you*” not “ask you.” R. Chafetz says they weren't to wait for Pharaoh to *ask* them to prove they're prophets – rather that when they're *talking* about whatever, they should just do the miracle of their own initiative, so it's more than just proving they're prophets, it's so they'd be *feared* as prophets.

Of course, either way, it didn't work because Pharaoh's magicians also knew a snake trick. But R. Chafetz's interpretation makes it a much stronger move.

The Big G then commands Moses and Aaron to go the next morning and meet Pharaoh by the Nile. Using the snake-staff from the day before, he was to change the water – not replacing it with Folgers Crystals – but instead turning it into blood. The Big G told Moses to quote Charlton Heston and say to Pharaoh:

Let my people go that they may serve me in the desert and here you would not listen until now: (7:16)

R. Chafetz points out that many wondered about Moses' words here. Because where are the signs and the wonders and the mighty hand that did things to Pharaoh until now, so that Pharaoh will listen to his words? And the aforementioned when Moses and Aaron came before him for the first time they spoke to him in entreating language "let us go please for three days (and so on)" (3:18) and so promised afterward to return to his slavery.

And we said that God, blessed be He, spoke to him severely about this and commanded him to speak to Pharaoh courageously to take them from Egypt in his force. Here now Moses presents the words of God and said to Pharaoh "let my people go" and it means that he will send everyone without any conditions to return "and they may serve me in the desert" and will not work for you anymore. “And here you would not listen until now” as if to say the question like this "you would not listen to me not today":

To summarize, R. Chafetz asks where are the signs and wonders and mighty hand already. Earlier, when Moses and Aaron first came to Pharaoh, they asked nicely to just let everyone go for three days to worship in the desert promising they'd then come back to Pharaoh's pyramid scheme. Now, after the snake charming failed to rattle Pharaoh, the Big G wants Moses to be more forceful saying “let my people go” without any condition

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of returning after a few days. Also, specifically saying “and they’ll serve me in the desert” to specifically tell Pharaoh they ain’t coming back to work for him afterward.

That also didn’t work, and we eventually get to the fourth plague, where Egypt was infested with beasts. Pharaoh told Moses and Aaron to make a sacrifice to the Big G to end the plague. Moses replies they’d have to leave town for three days to do it, as he’d originally asked before the plagues started. Moses says that their sacrifice would be an abomination to Egyptians and the Egyptians wouldn’t want to see it. So, then Pharaoh says he’ll let them leave town to worship in the desert, but...

Only you shall not go very far away, entreat for me: (8:24)

Why does Pharaoh say this? Sounds like he just doesn’t want them wandering too far off and escaping. It’s a trust exercise. Or is it?

R. Chafetz says this doesn’t mean Israel won’t go far away to journey as Moses and Aaron already said to Pharaoh as "three days journey" (8:23). Rather Moses and Aaron’s intention seems to be to say that they’re not allowed to pray in the land of Egypt because it’s full of idols, and they need to go outside the city to pray to God about the frogs.

(Yes, R. Chafetz has a little typo there. We’re two plagues past the frogs. But same idea.)

Chafetz continues, saying Therefore Pharaoh said to them to not go very far away and to not delay praying for him, rather go quickly and just immediately outside the city. Because if they are delayed in any way, the plague won’t go away.

Put another way, R. Chafetz says that Pharaoh wasn’t saying Israel can’t go three days away. First, Moses and Aaron in the previous verse put it on the Egyptians that the Israelites’ worship would offend the Egyptians, to not insult Pharaoh by saying it’s the Egyptians’ idolatry that is the problem. They’re giving Pharaoh an “it’s not you, it’s me” moment. On top of that, R. Chafetz says Pharaoh – in saying to not go far – is concerned about urgency, not distance. On a three-day trip it’ll be a lot longer before they arrive and pray and the plague is lifted than if the Israelites just commute to a shul in the suburbs.

Of course, they went, they prayed, the fourth plague went away, and so did Pharaoh’s alleged moment of compassion. Soon, after all the Egyptian cattle was killed by disease in plague five, the Big G had Moses sprinkle ashes toward heaven in front of Pharaoh, and it rained down on all Egypt causing boils on all Egyptians, man and beast. Then the Torah reports something R. Chafetz found interesting.

And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils for boils were on the magicians and on all Egyptians: (9:11)

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R. Chafetz says that in the previous plagues the magicians were clever (enough) to also do them with their own magic, and they dared to compare themselves to Moses to say “we're just like you.”

But in this plague they couldn't stand and rise up before Moses in reply, defeated to remove the boils. Also, there was no creature in Egypt that didn't have boils on it. Given that, how will they also bring boils on anyone like Moses did, if already the “boils were on the magicians and on all Egyptians”? God had touched every man and woman; nobody was clean.

So, in previous plagues the magicians could pretend to do similar things to make Moses – or, by extension, the Big G – seem no more powerful than them. But this time, they couldn't pretend to remove the boils. Beyond their own affliction, this time the magicians couldn't even try to give boils to anyone since everyone had them. So, it's not just that the magicians couldn't stand before Moses because they had boils – it's that the magicians couldn't stand before Moses pretending to be equals as they had tried until now.

The Torah doesn't specifically say how the boils went away, but given how Moses made it rain with boils, presumably the Big G sent a bottle of moisturizer to squeeze out over the land. Then came the seventh plague, hail. After Pharaoh pleaded, Moses caused the hail to stop. To the surprise of everyone who hadn't paid any attention until then, Pharaoh returned to normal. Specifically, the Torah says:

And he sinned yet more and hardened his heart he and his servants: (9:34)

This is the second time Pharaoh is referred to as sinning amid all this. The first time was just a few verses earlier, when the hail started, and Pharaoh said it about himself: “I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked.” (9:27).

R. Chafetz says the addition of "sinned" was because he caused "his servants" to sin. And the hardening of their hearts in his reasoning is to say that it was all a thing of nature:

So, this is the second time Pharaoh's referred to as sinning. This time, it refers to his sinning as having hardened the hearts of his servants as well, not just his own. R. Chafetz says that Pharaoh hardened his servants' hearts by telling them the hail and thunder and rain was all just a natural event, not an act of the Big G.

Looking at these five instances amid all the plagues, is there a common theme? A big unifying answer? Perhaps. Perhaps not. That's the whole point – see what you take away from them. And different people will take different things away from each, or maybe take nothing at all. And they could all be correct.

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Early in “Fiddler on the Roof,” one of the Village People – I think the one dressed as a policeman – says to Tevye, “he’s right, and he’s right? How can they both be right?” Tevye looks at him and says, “you know what? You’re also right.”

In our first commentary today, Abravanel offers an interpretation of the Big G’s instructions to Moses for the snake trick, saying what to do when Pharaoh asks for a miracle, that it’ll be a test to prove they’re prophets. Chafetz points out that the text says “speak to you” and not “ask you,” and interprets this as Moses and Pharaoh could be talking about anything and Moses should just take the initiative – unprompted – to do the snake trick, not just to prove they’re prophets but to become feared as prophets. Chafetz’s comment just potentially leaves Pharaoh with a more forceful impression. Abravanel and Chafetz both use the same verse to get to essentially the same meaning – that Moses and Aaron need to do the snake bit to image themselves as prophets. How they get there is what’s different. So, both of them are right and even share a similar outcome, even though they take different routes to get there.

In our second commentary, Moses says “let my people go” and that the Israelites will go worship the Big G. R. Chafetz says that this is a more forceful approach than before. Moses’s earlier plea to go just for three days and return had been rejected. Now, Moses raises the stakes by telling – “let my people go” – instead of asking. He also asserts that the Israelites will go out there to serve someone else, with no promise of returning to Pharaoh’s rule as he’d offered before. One could say Moses was wrong and after not succeeding earlier should have tried more to compromise. One could say Moses was right to raise the stakes, or even that it wasn’t up to him as he was just following orders. A lot of plagues resulted from the latter, and there’s no telling what might have happened from the former. Both lines of thought have some basis for consideration.

When Pharaoh tells Moses to go and worship in the desert, but to not go far, and to pray for him, an easy common interpretation is this is Pharaoh trying to keep them near so they don’t escape. R. Chafetz points out that it could just be urgency to pray sooner so the plague ends sooner. Those sound very different, but they don’t contradict. Each one is valid and brings its own lesson from the same verse. Biblical double entendre.

When the magicians were covered in boils, it literally sounds like they couldn’t “stand before Moses” because they were, you know, boiling. Sure. R. Chafetz expands the “standing” to also mean that they could no longer stand up to Moses because unlike in previous plagues they couldn’t re-create what Moses did. Two meanings, no contradiction, richer results.

R. Chafetz’s final commentary here plays on something I teach my students. Torah trope – the little symbols that give us the melody – are much more than music. They’re punctuation. The Torah scroll has no punctuation, so sequences of trope symbols indicate which words group into a phrase together. This can significantly impact meaning – even where sentences end and begin. The example I always use is the phrase “it’s time to eat, Grandma.” Of course, if you remove that comma, you get “it’s time to eat Grandma.” Big difference. Similarly, in this verse, the trope tells us that “he sinned yet more” is

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separated from “and hardened his heart he and his servants.” What if the phrases were trope-punctuated differently? “he sinned yet more and hardened his heart” as one phrase, separate from “he and his servants” could significantly change what his sin was, and what happens here with the servants.

In all five of those instances, there are multiple answers – all of which can be valid, none of which contradict. They don't exactly agree, but they can coexist. The exploration to get there, therefore, ends up more important than trying to reach one absolute answer.

Last Monday, the Alabama Crimson Tide won its 18th national championship. We reached Chai Tide, if you will. Coach Saban has famously built the program around The Process – how you prepare all week is what matters. The Process itself is the focus. If you practice hard enough, plan well enough, work with each other, and conduct yourselves in a productive way all week, the results take care of themselves on the field after services every Saturday, which is why I seldom stick around for Kiddush from Labor Day through Thanksgiving. Six championships in twelve years. Winningest coach in history. Something works here.

The Process can apply anywhere. It's what I impart to my students. If they practice consistently and build things one piece at a time, the end result – in their case getting up at services and leading or chanting – is easier, better, and maybe even accidentally more enjoyable for them. If they don't follow the process, it becomes a cram which is less fun and usually gets lesser results. Every bar or bat mitzvah I've ever taught has made a couple little mistakes in the service that they never made in sessions. The process is designed to prepare them for the unexpected and spontaneous, not just the rote of what is expected. If they prepare the best they can, even slightly overachieve their skills or the work ethic they came in with, in my book they did great. And sometimes in their book, too.

It's all about the process. About the journey – and letting where it leads take care of itself and benefit from the quality of how we journey. It applies to finding new lessons from the Torah. It applies to the Ten Plagues and the 2020 Plague. It applies to football. It applies to education. It applies to merciful discourse about my D'var Torah over lunch today. And if it can apply to that, it can apply to anything.

Shabbat Shalom. And Roll Tide.

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