

Today's parashah, *Vaera*, begins with God reminding Moses of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them the land of Canaan. Then God instructs Moses to talk with the Israelite slaves, informing them that God has heard their complaining, remembered the covenant, and promised to free them by punishing Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Next God instructed Moses to approach Pharaoh and demand he free the slaves. When Moses related God's message to the Israelites, they did not listen. He questioned God, wondering how Pharaoh could possibly listen to him, when his own people, who he was trying to help, ignored him?

God answered Moses by appointing Aaron to join Moses to be emissaries of God. God also told Moses and Aaron that God would purposely make Pharaoh "Insensitive" to the requests and warnings, so that God could increase the plagues. Imagine how this must have felt to Moses and Aaron, knowing that they were being sent to try and convince the most powerful person in Egypt when the deck was stacked against them. As we know, Moses and Aaron approached Pharaoh 10 different times, asking that the Israelites be allowed to leave Egypt to worship their god. It is interesting that for the first five plagues, Pharaoh himself chose not to let the slaves leave Egypt. The Torah also says that God could have destroyed the Egyptians along with their livestock during the 5th plague, but chose not to, in order to show God's power to Pharaoh, the Egyptians, those around the world, and likely the slaves. For the rest of the plagues, God hardened Pharaoh's heart while Pharaoh and his advisors remained wicked. This is where the *parashah* ends. It is interesting that Pharaoh and the Israelites were unable and unwilling to listen to God's instructions through Moses and Aaron. But why?

In the Israelites' case, maybe they were unable to listen to Moses and follow God's instructions because they were too burdened by slavery and did not have the necessary hope or faith. They needed to hear and see God's power as proof. How many of us struggle with our faith in God and look for proof, especially in the events of the past year or two? In Pharaoh's case, he refused to concede that there could be someone or something more powerful than himself. It isn't really clear if Pharaoh came to this understanding even after the 10th plague. Was it pressure from the cries of Egyptian people and the loss of his own son that he let the Israelites leave? Did Pharaoh ever really acknowledge and accept the power of God? I wonder if there have been times in our lives when we have had that "Aha!" moment, but didn't yet have the strength, courage or faith to move forward and make necessary changes? We may not have had God holding us back with plagues, but was there something else doing so? Were there times when we were so stubborn in our own thoughts and beliefs that we refused to listen to what others thought, especially those who might have had different opinions?

Hearing these lessons, what can we learn from this *parashah*? One big takeaway is the importance of faith, both in God and in humanity, which can be a big ask in our world today. There are many who look to our future with fear, whether it be of antisemitism, laws enacted or to be enacted by our elected officials, or many other issues. While we may be scared, we cannot close our eyes and ears to the work ahead, as the Israelites

did. We cannot let ourselves become paralyzed by anxiety over things we cannot control. Instead, we must continue to advocate for and pursue justice. It is important to remember the words of *Pirkei Avot*: “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it.” We cannot be like the Israelites, unable to look for a way out of our problems, relying solely on God to save us. We need to look for God in others, those who are doing the same work to heal and repair our broken world. We also need to open our ears and our hearts to those around us and have faith in the good humans in our lives. Think of how much blind faith we have when we set the alarm clock each night. We believe that we will wake up tomorrow, giving us the opportunity to take control of our own lives and change the things we have control over. It means that we need to look at the things that are holding us back, name them, and conquer them so we can step forward. It doesn’t mean we have to ignore what goes on in the world around us, but it does mean that sometimes we have to turn off the chatter of social media and the 24-hour news cycle. We have to step out of our own Egypt and focus on doing what is just and right, to create a better world and future.

Shabbat Shalom.