

Pharoah Looks for a Blessing

Rabbi Yaakov Bieler
Parshat Bo

Why would Pharoah wish to be blessed by those who have destroyed his country?

Once the Egyptians comprehend the nature and scope of the tenth and final plague (Shemot 12:30), Pharoah realizes that he has been defeated. God is no longer interested in hardening Pharoah's heart,¹ but rather allows him to grant the Jewish people their request, i.e., to leave Egypt temporarily² in order to worship HaShem. It is at this point that Pharoah makes a strange appeal. (Shemot 12:31-32) "And he (Pharoah) called to Moshe and Aharon in the night, and he said: Rise up and go out from among my people, you and the children of Israel and go and serve God in accordance with your words. And also your sheep and also your cattle take, as you have said, and go 'U'Beirachtem Gam Oti' (and bless me also)." Egypt was in shambles, the rivers polluted, the animals decimated, the crops destroyed, the people had suffered all sorts of indignities, including the deaths of all of Egypt's firstborn, even Pharoah's son. Why would Pharoah think to ask for a blessing from the Jews who ostensibly were the cause of all of Egypt's ills?

The Rabbis assume that Pharoah even wants sacrifices offered on his behalf.

Even more curious is the Rabbinic view that Pharoah sent along with the Jews Egyptian animals³ to be sacrificed for his sake once the Jews reached their intended destination and worshipped God. According to this line of interpretation, the appeal for a personal blessing in 12:32 was not merely a desire that words be incanted for his sake; the ruler also intended that sacrifices be offered to apparently appease God's Wrath that the ruler deduced was directed towards him for his repeated obstinacy. The interpretation that sacrifices were included in Pharoah's request is based upon 10:25, in which Moshe, responding to Pharoah's reticence to allow the Jews to take their animals into the desert, states caustically that not only will the Jews eventually leave with their herds, but "Even you will put into our hands sacrifices and whole burnt offerings and we will offer them to our God."⁴ The Rabbis posit that this prediction was not simply bravado in reaction to Pharoah's refusal to give in, but that it actually came true, as did everything else about which Moshe warned Pharoah. Can such a complete turnaround be imagined, with Pharoah now proactively desiring that the God Who he has so resolutely opposed, should accept prayers and offerings for his benefit?⁵

Yet another insincere "God-fearer"?

RaShI, based upon the Mechilta, suggests that Pharoah's request that Moshe bless and atone for him was purely a matter of self-interest.⁶ Knowing that he himself was also a firstborn—12:29 suggests that just as the future king of Egypt was a firstborn⁷ and therefore died during the tenth plague, this was true of Pharoah himself—Pharoah imagined that the final plague had yet to run its course.

He thought that unless something extraordinary was done to protect him by means of a special request made of God to interrupt the effect of the plague, Pharaoh too would die. Pharaoh assumed that praying for a plague to cease its destructiveness was within Moshe's power since with regard to at least some of the other plagues, Moshe had been able to bring them to an end—see 8:8, 26-27; 9:33; 10:18-19⁸—and therefore he could reasonably expect Moshe would be able to halt the plague of the firstborn as well. While God, via Moshe, already had told Pharaoh in 9:16, prior to the plague of hail, that He Was Interested in keeping Pharaoh alive in order to witness the Divine Power behind the various plagues, Pharaoh could reasonably think that the demonstration was now complete, and there was no longer any purpose being served by his continued survival.⁹

A figurative rather than a literal “blessing”

Probably due to the incongruousness of positing that Pharaoh would ask Moshe for a blessing after all that had transpired, HaKetav VeHaKabbala understands Pharaoh's request for a “blessing” from Moshe, not as a desire that some sort of ritual performance be undertaken on Pharaoh's behalf, but rather as a description of the state of affairs that will apply to Pharaoh and his nation once the Jews have left. This commentator reads the relevant verses as follows:

Shemot 12:31-32

And he called to Moshe and Aharon in the night and he said, “Rise up and go out from the midst of my people, you as well as the Jewish people and go and worship the Lord as you have said. Also your flocks and your herds take as you have spoken, and go *and once this all happens*, you will also *have* blessed me.

A certain symmetry will then have been achieved, with the Jews being blessed by no longer being in servitude, and Pharaoh being blessed by being free of the destructions and punishments that have plagued him and his people for as long as the Jews were not permitted to leave. Pharaoh's sigh of relief upon being finally being freed of this destructive class of wills, is all the blessing that he required at that point. However, one could still wonder that given the extent to which Egypt had been so thoroughly destroyed, is it not too late for the cessation of further destruction to be considered a blessing, at least in the short term?

A “blessing” to undo the harm that resulted from the ten plagues.

Following a similar line of thought as that of HaKetav VeHaKabbala, but taking it one step further, R. S.R. Hirsch understands Pharaoh's request for a blessing as the hope that once the Jews leave, “all the wounds that I and the land have suffered on your account will be healed.” R. Hirsch attributes to the Egyptian ruler the supernatural wish for a return to the exact state of affairs, albeit temporarily, without the presence of Jewish slaves, prior to when all of the plagues began. Precedents upon which Pharaoh may be relying are two stories in Beraishit.

When Sara was first taken for a wife by Pharaoh, and then again by Avimelech, God Sent plagues against these rulers and their households in order to defend Sara's honor. Although 12:17 does not specify the nature of the plague that affected Pharaoh, RaShI extrapolates from what happened to Avimelech and his retinue as listed in 20:17-18,¹⁰ that a similar type of infirmity affected Pharaoh and his servants. While the text never states explicitly that these plagues came to an end once Sara was returned to Avraham, there is no reason to think that the Divinely Induced discomfitures persisted past that point. The Tora even more clearly conveys the cause-and-effect relationship between the removal of the objectionable situation and the cessation of the miraculous punishments with respect to the incident in Gerar. In 20:7, Avimelech is told by God in a dream that only if he returns Sara, will Avraham pray for him and thereby spare him from the death that he has incurred by taking this holy man's wife. It is possible that the first symptoms of the disease that was to lead to his death had already begun to be noticed, and that these infirmities disappeared once Avimelech released Sara. However, the relatively small scale of Divine punishments in the two cases in Beraishit is hardly comparable to what would be required for Egypt to be returned to normalcy. Could Pharaoh have expected the dead to be brought back to life, the herds of animals miraculously replenished and the crops instantly regenerated simply because he wished it to be so? Yet he could have thought that it was worth asking, in the spirit of "wonders/miracles never cease."

Was the blessing really intended for the Egyptian people as a whole?

The most psychologically interesting pair of explanations, in my opinion, focuses upon how Pharaoh understood his relationship with his subjects. On the one hand, RaMBaN on Shemot 12:32 mentions that despite the fact that Pharaoh only refers to himself when requesting Moshe's intercession with God, a blessing for the king constitutes a blessing for the entire country. Therefore Pharaoh's mentality was "as goes Pharaoh, so goes all of Egypt." This approach would suggest that Pharaoh not only regretted what he had done to the Jews, but also for the pain that he had caused his subjects. Not only would he like to return to God's Good Graces, but he also desired his people to similarly benefit.

On the other hand, Ta'am VaDa'at is far less charitable vis-à-vis Pharaoh. Picking up on the theme that RaShI cites with respect to the possible continuation of the plague of the firstborn, the commentator writes, "Here also we see the egocentrism of Pharaoh, in that he requested that he be blessed, since his main concern was his personal welfare, lest he be punished as a firstborn. But for his people he asked nothing, because he did not care about them in the least." According to this view, Pharaoh continues to consider only himself. Had he been the least bit empathic, he could never have hardened his heart during the first five plagues,¹¹ not necessarily due to any humane sensibilities regarding the Jewish slaves, but rather out of compassion for his Egyptian constituents who were suffering as a result of his obstinacy.

To what extent can a person separate his own needs and concerns from those of his followers?

Pointing out the dimension of compassion and empathy that is raised when attempting to explain Pharaoh's request of a blessing from Moshe, raises the general issue of the dichotomy between individuals being concerned for themselves in contradistinction to their concern for their family, community, and nation. Is self-preservation one's ultimate value, even when extreme hardship is thereby caused for his/her fellow citizens and/or family members? How altruistic is a leader expected to be? In the case of Pharaoh, was the ruler's reluctance to give in a result of not wishing to forgo his personal power and public image, or was the principle of the preservation of Egyptian sovereignty uppermost in his mind? All of us face dilemmas of this sort in one form or another, and the Tora could be challenging us to assure that we take the high road with regard to such questions as much as possible.

¹ In Shemot 11:1, prior to the plague of the Firstborn, HaShem already informs Moshe that this will be the last plague before the Jews will be allowed to leave. Verses 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10 all describe God's hardening Pharaoh's heart, thereby making it impossible for him to comply with Moshe's demands.

² No indication had been given by Moshe to Pharaoh that he was requesting anything other than permission for the people to travel three days into the desert in order to offer up sacrifices to HaShem, before returning to Egypt—see Shemot 3:18; 5:1, 3; 7:16; 8:23-24.

³ Assuming that this view is accepted, it is interesting to speculate as to which types of animals were sent. Would Pharaoh have included among these animals the very animals that the Egyptians worshipped and the Jews used for their Paschal sacrifices? See Shemot 8:22.

⁴ Chizkuni on 12:32 interprets the inclusionary words, "GAM Tzonchem GAM Bekarchem" (ALSO your sheep, ALSO your cattle) as indicators that in addition to the herds belonging to the Jews, Pharaoh's herds would also be taken along so that they could be sacrificed for his atonement.

⁵ According to RaMBaN on 10:25, the question regarding whether sacrifices were offered for Pharaoh, at least from the perspective of Moshe, is a non-issue. This commentator is of the opinion that although Moshe may have indeed said such a thing to the Egyptian ruler, it was in the heat of the moment, and he never intended to follow through and actually offer such sacrifices. And even if Pharaoh ultimately thrust upon him animals for this purpose, Moshe never ended up offering them, in the spirit of (Mishle 21:27) "The sacrifices of evildoers are an abomination." RaMBaN posits that Moshe, and God, for that matter, wished for Pharaoh to receive the retribution that he had fully earned, and that forgiveness was not being proffered to him. Once God began to harden Pharaoh's heart in 9:12, in effect preventing him from repenting and allowing the Jews to leave as a result of his free will, repentance was closed to him forever. By extension, the blessing would then probably not have been invoked, either.

HaEmek Davar differs sharply from RaMBaN regarding this matter, and feels that it would have been a transgression of "Geneivat Da'at" (deliberately misleading another

individual) had Moshe appeared to agree to offer sacrifices without the intention of actually doing so, regardless of the latter's previous reprehensible actions against the Jews. This commentator therefore insists that Moshe did pray and offer sacrifices just as Pharaoh had requested. Furthermore, the commentator suggests that this took place at Mt. Sinai, which was the first place, once the Jews emerged from Egypt, that the Tora records that they offered sacrifices—see 24:5 ff. (In fact, the first mention of sacrifices after the Exodus appears in 18:12, when Yitro visits the encampment and reunites Moshe with his wife and children. However, the chronology of this story depends upon a dispute centering on the principle “Ein Mukdam U'Me'uchar BaTora” [there is no chronological order to the stories in the Tora]. RaShI on 18:1 states that the events that caused Yitro to decide to come to the Jewish encampment took place and are recorded before Yitro arrives, i.e., the splitting of the sea (14: 3-31) and the defeat of Amalek (17:8-16) (as opposed to the giving of the Tora, which happened later). RaMBaN points out that this is only one side of an argument appearing in Mechilta and Zevachim 116, where an alternate interpretation, i.e., that Yitro came following the giving of the Tora (19:1 ff.), is also advanced. RaMBaN prefers the latter interpretation for contextual reasons. If we follow such a line of reasoning, the sacrifices mentioned in chapter 24 preceded those discussed in chapter 18.)

Nevertheless, even HaEmek Davar is ready to entertain a middle position between the extremes of RaMBaN and his own originally stated perspective, when he adds that Moshe may have originally fully intended to offer Pharaoh's sacrifices so that he could be granted atonement, but when the Egyptians later decide to chase the Jews to the Sea in order to destroy them in 14:1 ff., Moshe felt released from his commitment due to Pharaoh's duplicity. Ironically, RaMBaN on 14:4 notes that Pharaoh's request that Moshe pray for him reflects the fact that at that time, he clearly had no intention to chase the Jews once they left. It is for this reason that in 14:4, 17 the text emphasizes that the decision to pursue the Jews by the Egyptians was the result of God once again Hardening Pharaoh's heart. For Moshe to therefore decide that Pharaoh did not have a blessing or sacrifices coming to him as a result of the incident at Yam Suf, is not entirely fair, if in fact Pharaoh had nothing to do with that decision. Yet how would Moshe know this, because whereas God Informs him about the hardening of the heart vis-à-vis the plagues, he is not told anything about why Pharaoh chooses to pursue the people once they were in the desert. It would be logical to conclude that since he had been told only that the Jews would travel three days in order to worship and then return to Egypt, when it became clear that this was not the case (Shemot 14:5) he felt betrayed and wished to mete out punishments to the Jews.

⁶ This would put Pharaoh in a similar category to (9:20) “HaYareh Et Devar HaShem” (those that feared the Word of God) with respect to the hail. According to the Midrash, these were the same people who nevertheless were also ready to provide the animals that they saved from Divine Destruction to help pursue and kill the Jews at the Sea of Reeds. See the essay “Irreligious Fearers of God” for Parashat VaEra <http://text.rcarabbis.org/parshat-vaera-irreligious-fearers-of-god-by-yaakov-bieler/>.

⁷ The language of 12:29 states that the victims of the plague included the firstborn son of Pharaoh “who sits on his throne.” RaShBaM and Chizkuni interpret the phrase to connote “who would have eventually sat on the throne”, i.e., succeeded the present Pharaoh, had he outlived him.

⁸It is interesting to note that from the Tora text, only in some cases, i.e., frogs, wild animals, hail, and locusts, was Moshe called upon to pray that the plagues stop. While it could be surmised that even though the Tora does not explicitly say so, this was true with regard to all the plagues, following the principle of “Divrai Tora Ani’yim BeMakom Echad VeAshirim BeMakom Acher” (the words of Tora are meager in one place and more extensive in another)—see MaLBIM on Divrai HaYamim 1 23:22; ShLA HaKadosh Tora SheB’Al Peh, 1 Kellal HaMidot 9—yet it is possible that whether or not Moshe had to do something to call off a plague might have been a function of that particular phenomenon. Perhaps the rivers turned into blood for only one week and then automatically reverted back to water; the lice eventually dissipated on their own; the boils receded without a call for Divine Intervention; and the darkness, like the bloody rivers, lasted only for a week.

⁹A controversy is recorded in the Midrash regarding whether or not Pharoah survived the drowning of his army at the Sea of Reeds. The Mechilta on 14:28 cites R. Yehuda’s opinion that Pharoah drowned along with the rest of his horsemen, as opposed to the view of R. Nechemia, who based upon the terminology in the verse “Ad Echad” (until the last one—but the question is whether this is inclusive or exclusive, i.e., including Pharoah, or up until but not including Pharoah) surmised that Pharoah did not drown with the rest of his army. The assumption that Pharoah survives casts him in the role of a Jewish “Ancient Mariner” (see Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner”), destined to bear witness throughout his life to the Power of HaShem and the types of miracles that allowed the Jews to leave Egypt. This leads to the Midrash’s position that posits that the king of Ninveh was actually Pharoah (e.g., Midrash Sechel Tov on Shmot 14) and the reason why he was so quick to accept Yona’s warning and led his people in repentance was because he had already lost one kingdom when he ignored Moshe’s rebukes those many years before.

¹⁰“And Abraham prayed unto God; and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maid-servants; and they bore children. For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife.”

¹¹Blood, frogs, lice, wild animals, bubonic plague, boils.