

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vaera
January 1, 2022 *** 28 Tevet, 5782

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3242/jewish/Vaeira-in-a-Nutshell.htm

G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the “four expressions of redemption,” He promises to take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai; He will then bring them to the land He promised to the Patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, “Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness.” Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron’s staff turns into a snake and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians. The waters of the Nile turn to blood; swarms of frogs overrun the land; lice infest all men and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities; a pestilence kills the domestic animals; painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating hail. Still, “the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses.”

[Haftarah in a Nutshell:Ezekiel 28:25-29:21.](#)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/619492/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's *haftarah* begins with a mention of the ingathering of the exiles, echoing G-d's promise mentioned in the Torah portion: "I will take you out of the suffering of Egypt." The prophet then goes on to discuss the decimation of Pharaoh and Egypt, reminiscent of the primary theme of the Torah portion—the devastation G-d wrought upon Egypt.

Ezekiel begins with a description of what will occur during the ingathering of the exiles. "When I gather in the house of Israel from the peoples among whom they have been scattered, and I have been sanctified through them in the eyes of the nations, then shall they dwell on their land that I gave to My servant, to Jacob. And they shall dwell upon it securely..."

The prophet then proceeds to convey a prophecy regarding Pharaoh and Egypt, foretelling the fall of the Egyptian empire. Egypt merited this punishment for two

reasons: a) They had reneged on their promise to come to Israel's aid against the attacking Babylonians. b) They had incredible arrogance, considering themselves un-reliant on G-d, instead attributing their success to the bounty their deified Nile afforded them. Therefore, Ezekiel warns: "And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and in ruins, and they shall know that I am the Lord! Because he [Pharaoh] said, 'The river is mine, and I have made it.'" G-d warns that the land of Egypt will be empty and desolate for forty years, after which G-d will return the people to the land to reinhabit it, but it will no longer be an important nation to be reckoned with. The *haftorah* ends with another prophecy wherein G-d informs Ezekiel that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, will be the one to conquer Egypt and take its spoils. This as a reward for his effort in defeating the wicked nation of Tyre.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Freewill \(Vaera\) by the Rabbi Sacks z"l Legacy Trust](https://rabbisacks.org/freewill-vaera/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/freewill-vaera/>

The question is ancient. If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it was God who made Pharaoh refuse to let the Israelites go, not Pharaoh himself. How can this be just? How could it be right to punish Pharaoh and his people for a decision – a series of decisions – that were not made freely? Punishment presupposes guilt. Guilt presupposes responsibility. Responsibility presupposes freedom. We do not blame weights for falling, or the sun for shining. Natural forces are not choices made by reflecting on alternatives. Homo sapiens alone is free. Take away that freedom and you take away our humanity. How then can it say, as it does in our parsha (Ex. 7:3) that God hardened^[1] Pharaoh's heart?

All the commentators are exercised by this question. Maimonides and others note a striking feature of the narrative: For the first five plagues we read that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart. Only later, during the last five plagues, do we read about God doing so. The conclusion they draw therefore is that the last five plagues were therefore a punishment for the first five refusals, freely made by Pharaoh himself.^[2]

A second approach, in precisely the opposite direction, is that during the last five plagues God intervened not to harden but to strengthen Pharaoh's heart. He acted to ensure that Pharaoh kept his freedom and did not lose his resolve. Such was the impact of the plagues that in the normal course of events a national leader would have no choice but to give in to a superior force. As Pharaoh's own advisers said

before the eighth plague, “Do you not yet realise that Egypt is destroyed?” (Ex. 10:7) To give in at that point would have been action under duress, not a genuine change of heart. Such is the approach of Yosef Albo^[3] and Ovadiah Sforno.^[4] A third approach calls into question the very meaning of the phrase, “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” In a profound sense God, Author of history, is behind every event, every act, every gust of wind that blows, every drop of rain that falls. Normally however we do not attribute human action to God. We are what we are because that is how we have chosen to be, even if this was written long before in the Divine script for humankind. What do we attribute to an act of God? Something that is unusual, falling so far outside the norms of human behaviour that we find it hard to explain in any way other than to say, surely this happened for a purpose.

God Himself says about Pharaoh’s obstinacy that it allowed Him to demonstrate to all humanity that even the greatest empire is powerless against the hand of Heaven (Ex. 7:5; 14:18). Pharaoh acted freely, but his last refusals were so strange that it was obvious to everyone that God had anticipated this. It was predictable, part of the script. God had actually disclosed this to Abraham centuries earlier when He told him in a fearful vision that his descendants would be strangers in a land not theirs (Gen. 15:13-14).

These are all interesting and plausible interpretations. It seems to me, though, that the Torah is telling a deeper story, one that never loses its relevance. Philosophers and scientists have tended to think in terms of abstractions and universals. Some have concluded that we have freewill, others that we don’t. There is no conceptual space in between.

In life, however, that is not the way freedom works at all. Consider addiction: The first few times someone gambles or drinks alcohol or takes drugs, they may do so freely, knowing the risks but ignoring them. Time goes on and their dependency increases until the craving is so intense that they are almost powerless to resist it. At a certain point they may have to go into rehabilitation. They no longer have the ability to stop without external support. As the Talmud says, “A prisoner cannot release himself from prison.” (Brachot 5b)

Addiction is a physical phenomenon, but there are moral equivalents. For example, suppose on one significant occasion you tell a lie. People now believe something about you that is not true. As they question you about it, or it comes up in conversation, you find yourself having to tell more lies to support the first. “Oh what a tangled web we weave,” Sir Walter Scott famously said, “when first we practise to deceive.”

That is as far as individuals are concerned. When it comes to organisations, the risk is even greater. Let us say that a senior member of staff has made a costly mistake

that, if exposed, threatens the entire future of the company. They will make an attempt to cover it up. To do so they must enlist the help of others, who become co-conspirators. As the circle of deception widens, it becomes part of the corporate culture, making it ever more difficult for honest people within the organisation to resist or protest. It then needs the rare courage of a whistle-blower to expose and halt the deception. There have been many such stories in recent years.[5] Within nations, especially non-democratic ones, the risk is higher still. In commercial enterprises, losses can be quantified. Someone somewhere knows how much has been lost, how many debts have been concealed and where. In politics, there may be no such objective test. It is easy to claim that a policy is working and explain away apparent counter-indicators. A narrative emerges and becomes the received wisdom. Hans Christian Anderson's tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, is the classic parable of this phenomenon. A child sees the truth and in innocence blurts it out, breaking the conspiracy of silence on the part of the monarch's counsellors and townspeople.

We lose our freedom gradually, often without noticing it. That is what the Torah has been implying almost from the beginning. The classic statement of freewill appears in the story of Cain and Abel. Seeing that Cain is angry that his offering has not found favour, God says to him: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Gen. 4:7). The maintenance of freewill, especially in a state of high emotion like anger, needs willpower. As we have noted before in these studies,[6] what Daniel Goleman calls an 'amygdala hijack' can occur in which instinctive reaction takes the place of reflective decision and we do things that are harmful to us as well as to others.[7] That is the emotional threat to freedom.

Then there is a social threat. After the Holocaust, a number of path-breaking experiments were undertaken to judge the power of conformism and obedience to authority. Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments in which eight people were gathered in a room and were shown a line, then asked which of three others was the same length. Unknown to the eighth person, the seven others were associates of the experimenter and were following his instructions. On a number of occasions the seven conspirators gave an answer that was clearly false, yet in 75 per cent of cases the eighth person was willing to agree with them and give an answer he knew to be false.

Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram showed that ordinary individuals were willing to inflict what appeared to be devastatingly painful electric shocks on someone in an adjacent room when instructed to do so by an authority figure, the experimenter.

[8] The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by Philip Zimbardo, divided participants into the roles of prisoners and guards. Within days the 'guards' were acting cruelly and in some cases abusively toward the prisoners and the experiment, planned to last a fortnight, had to be called off after six days.[9] The power of conformism, as these experiments showed, is immense. That, I believe, is why Abraham was told to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house. These are the three factors – culture, community and early childhood – that circumscribe our freedom. Jews through the ages have been in but not of society. To be a Jew means keeping a calibrated distance from the age and its idols. Freedom needs time to make reflective decisions and distance so as not to be lulled into conformity.

Most tragically, there is the moral threat. We sometimes forget, or don't even know, that the conditions of slavery the Israelites experienced in Egypt were often enough felt by Egyptians themselves over many generations. The great pyramid of Giza, built more than a thousand years before the Exodus, before even the birth of Abraham, reduced much of Egypt to a slave labour colony for twenty years.

[10] When life becomes cheap and people are seen as a means not an end, when the worst excesses are excused in the name of tradition and rulers have absolute power, then conscience is eroded and freedom lost because the culture has created insulated space in which the cry of the oppressed can no longer be heard.

That is what the Torah means when it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Enslaving others, Pharaoh himself became enslaved. He became a prisoner of the values he himself had espoused. Freedom in the deepest sense, the freedom to do the right and the good, is not a given. We acquire it, or lose it, gradually. In the end tyrants bring about their own destruction, whereas those with willpower, courage, and the willingness to go against the consensus, acquire a monumental freedom. That is what Judaism is: an invitation to freedom by resisting the idols and siren calls of the age.

[1] Three different verbs are used in the narrative to indicate hardening of the heart: k-sh-h, ch-z-k and k-b-d. They have different nuances: the first means 'harden,' the second, 'strengthen,' and the third, 'make heavy.' [2] Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuvah 6:3. [3] Albo, Sefer Ikkarim, IV, 25. [4] See Ovadiah Sforno's Commentary to Ex. 7:3. [5] On Enron, see Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron, New York: Portfolio, 2003. [6] See Beyond Nature, a Covenant & Conversation piece on parshat Noach. [7] Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence, New York: Bantam, 1995. [8] Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View, New York: Harper & Row, 1974. [9] Philip G. Zimbardo, The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil, New York: Random House, 2007. [10] Toby Wilkinson, The Rise and Fall of

Ancient Egypt, London: Bloomsbury, 2010, pp. 72–91. It has been calculated, based on a ten-hour working day, that one giant block of stone weighing over a ton, would have to be transported into place every two minutes of every day for twenty years.

[Call God Into Being: Parashat Va'era 5782 by Rabbi Aviva Richman](https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/calling-god-being)

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/calling-god-being>

Sometimes we need a new name for God. The ways we've known God so far may feel limited, inadequate, or even disappointing. In Parashat Va'era, Moshe is lucky enough to have God disclose a new name, one that will usher in redemption.

Learning new names for God that represent a different kind of relationship, or new ways for God to show up in the world, is not generally so straightforward.

Sometimes we have to be proactive, whether out of gratitude or desperation, and call God into being in new ways.

When Moshe first meets God at the burning bush, he asks God's name (Exodus 3:13). His query reminds us that God has many different names throughout Torah, revealed at different times or to different people. Often a query about a divine name is dismissed.¹ Here, God responds cryptically saying "I will be what I will be," and then adds, "YHVH the God of your ancestors, God of Avraham, God of Yitzhak, and God of Ya'akov," described as an everlasting and abiding name (3:14-16). Yet, in Parashat Va'era, God explains that the name by which the patriarchs knew God was different than the name Moshe will come to know.

[Exodus 6:2-3](#)

²*Elohim spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am YHVH, ³but I appeared to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov as El Shaddai, while my name YHVH was not known to them."*

In one understanding, the difference is that God as the name "El Shaddai" did not fulfill the promises made to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov—and yet, they never criticized God's ways.² Moshe gets mad when God's promises of redemption backfire (at the end of Parashat Shemot, 5:22-23), but he will come to know a different side of God, who fulfills promises. Up until now, being in relationship with God has been synonymous with disappointment. Now, God is ready to show up in a new way.

In contrast to Moshe, to whom God divulges divine names, others proactively name God. Hagar names God out of gratitude after a divine being saves her son Yishmael, and speaks of "God of my seeing/being seen (³). (א-ל רואי) There is something subversive in Hagar's act of naming God, an act that a parent generally does for a child, coming from a position of power.⁴ A name expresses a vision for what someone is or could become, and from the perspective of a parent also

contains an element of expectation for what a person **should** strive to become. When Hagar invents the name “God of my seeing/being seen,” she is not only articulating gratitude for this divine encounter, but also calling on God to live up to this name in an ongoing way, seeing and caring for vulnerable people.

There is another kind of human initiative in naming God that does not stem from gratitude, but from doubt and desperation. In *midrash* traditions, we find that both Avraham and Hannah call on God with new names, stemming from their respective experiences of infertility. According to the Talmud, Hannah invokes God by a new name, which no one had used before.

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 31b

“[Hannah] said: YHVH Tzeva’ot” (1 Samuel 1:11). Said R. Elazar: From the day the Holy Blessed One created the world, no one called the Holy Blessed One “Tzeva’ot (hosts)” until Hannah came and called God Tzeva’ot. Said Hannah before the Holy Blessed One, “Master of the world, from all the hosts of hosts that You created in Your world, would it be hard for You to give me one son?”

Hannah calls on Adonai Tzeva’ot, God of hosts, who created a world teeming with creatures and must have the capacity to give her just one child.⁵ This name is not merely descriptive—it is strategic. She demands that God show up for her through this quality of abundance. Her frustration and anger about not having a child lead her to engage with God on new terms. Although she cannot birth a child, she can generate a new name for God.

Intriguingly, a parallel tradition exists about Avraham, in an almost identical formulation. Avraham too calls upon God in a way no one had before, this time as Adonai:

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 7b

Said R. Yohanan in the name of R. Shimon ben Yohai: From the day the Holy Blessed One created the world, no one called the Holy Blessed One “Adon (master)” until Avraham came and called [God] Adon. As it is said, “[Avraham] said, ‘Adonai Elohim, how will I know that I will inherit it [the land of Canaan]?’” (Genesis 15:8).

Some commentaries focus on dominion (אֲדֹנָי) as Avraham’s name for God because of his evangelism, convincing others of God’s existence and power.⁷ But in this scene, he questions God about how the divine promise to inherit the land will come true when he has no heir. God’s reassurance rings hollow when God has not fulfilled even the most basic part of the promise, “behold, you have not given me a child!” (15:3). The directness of this speech is paralleled by Moshe pointedly saying to God that the promise of redemption has backfired, “You have not saved your people!” (Exodus 5:23). Contrary to the interpretation we saw above—that asserted

patriarchs did not criticize God's ways even when promises were unfulfilled—Avraham **does** seem critical of God in this moment.

What could be the meaning of a name that focuses on God's dominion if it is in fact born out of Avraham's frustration, disappointment and perhaps even doubt about God? One *midrash* links this name to God's capacity to overcome "fate," in those times seen as what was inevitable because of astrological signs. In this reading, Avraham was destined to be infertile based on astrology, but God had power over this fate.⁸ The point of the name Adonai is to say "God is my master—not fate." Like Hannah, in the context of Avraham's infertility, this aspect of God is not something he has personally experienced yet. Unlike Hagar coming up with a name for God after an encounter that has demonstrated the divine capacity of generosity, Avraham is calling upon God to show up for him in a new way that defies his fate of infertility. It is not responsive, but proactive.

Avraham's naming of God as "Adon" becomes our legacy. The Gemara relates that Daniel, generations later, used the same name when praying in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, invoking the merit of "the one who called God Adon."⁹ Based on the trajectory traced here, this merit of Avraham is not an unquestioning faith but stems from speaking with God honestly about his doubts and disappointments, and generating a new name for God to become what Avraham needs. Our inheritance of "the God of Avraham" is not at all static. Rather "the God of Avraham" is one who is called into being based on our honesty and initiative to name who God must be and what God must do.

We can bring this posture of "calling into being" into our relationships more broadly when we are deeply disappointed with others, or with the world. Sometimes a new mode will emerge of its own accord, like God revealing this name in Parashat Va'Era. But when a new, redemptive facet of someone's personality, or our society, doesn't simply volunteer itself, we don't have to give up. From acknowledgment of our disappointment and doubt, we can summon the courage to name what it would mean to show up differently. We can call others, and even ourselves, into new ways of being and acting.

[Note from Aviva Richman:](#) I hope you have been enjoying my reflections on the weekly *parashah* so far. [In a few weeks, I'll be delivering this year's Dr. Eddie Scharfman Memorial Lecture on Zoom on Monday, January 10 at 7:30 PM Eastern.](#) The lecture -- called "Words That Make or Break Our World" -- will explore the power of words, both their potential to heal and danger to harm, as well as the idea stated in the Book of Proverbs, that "death and life are in the power of the tongue." I look forward to offering a vision of Torah as it relates to our words, and I'd love for you to be there. [You can learn more and sign up to join me on January 10.](#)

¹ See, for example, Ya'akov when fighting the man at the River Yabbok (Genesis 32:30), and Manoah asking the angel who spoke to his wife (Judges 13:17-18).

² See Rashi to Exodus 6:3 and Ramban's explanation in his comment to v. 2. See also Shemot Rabbah 6:4.

³ On this scene and its importance to Hagar and Yitzhak, see R. Shai Held's essay on Parashat Hayyei Sarah, "Isaac's Search: On the Akeidah and its Aftermath," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/isaacs-search>.

⁴ R. Avital Hochstein speaks of this subversive quality poignantly in her essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha, "'She Called God by Name': Between Seeing and Hearing in the Meeting of Hagar and the Angel," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/she-called-god-name>.

⁵ One version of this midrashic tradition (Pesikta Rabbati 43) has her say these words in a time of pilgrimage, when all of the people and their sons come to the sanctuary, and she is gazing upon these multitudes of people.

⁶ The midrash is responding to the discrepancy between God's introduction in v. 7 ('אני ה') and Avraham's response in v. 8 ('א-דני ה'), and reads into this that Avraham creates this name for God that has not yet been used by any person.

⁷ See Maharsha to Berakhot 7b: שהיה ראש אמונה לפרסם בעיני הבריות אדנותו ויכלתו שבעולם. And also Rashba's Perushei Ha-Haggadot to Berakhot 7b: ועל כן קראו אברהם לקב"ה אדון, שמתוך כך נודע לאנשי דורו החכמים בחכמת האיצטגנינות כי יש אדון עליהם לבטל כוחם, ונודע שהוא האדון המשגיח והיכול

⁸ Rashba discusses this extensively on Berakhot 7b in his Perushei Ha-Haggadot, based on Bereshit Rabbah 44:10 and Nedarim 32a: ובאמת כי יש למזלות השמים שלטון בעולם... והיה אברהם מכח מזלו אינו ראוי להוליד, זולתי שנתגבר ויצא מתחת מערכת הכוכבים ונתעלה במעשיו ונדבק לסיבה העליונה ה' יתברך שהוא אדון הכל

⁹ Continuation of Berakhot 7b: אמר רב: אף דניאל לא נענה אלא בשביל אברהם, שנאמר: "זעתה שמע אלקינו אל תפלת עבדך ואל תחנוניו והאר פניך על מקדשך השמם למען א-דני" (דניאל ט:יז). למענך מבעי ליה! אלא - למען אברהם שקראך אדון

[Taking Time to Catch Our Breath by Rabbi Jessica Fischer](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vaera-jessica-fischer-moraltorah/)

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vaera-jessica-fischer-moraltorah/>

I moved to Manhattan when I was 18. As a suburban kid from Ohio, it was hard to imagine I could ever adapt to the new culture I had landed in — my clothes weren't right, I was way too polite, and I did not have the grit to push my way onto a crowded subway car. But I was really good at one thing: walking down the street like the world depended on my arrival at my destination. Finally, I had found a place where my speed was normal!

In a recent [article](#), Dr. Quill R Kukla describes the way urban environments produce

disability, using “pace bias” as an example: “It had never occurred to me that my own pride in my fast pace, and my frustration with those who moved or talked slowly (whether because of biological or cultural differences), was a form of ableist bigotry.” Kukla goes on to explain the ways that pace bias is physically built into our urban environments, not just our attitudes.

Like Kukla, I, too, take pride in my speed — in the way I walk, talk, and accomplish tasks — and I had never considered the way my own valuation of that pace devalued others. Our society and the physical spaces we inhabit also champion pace bias, encouraging us to do more and get there faster.

Our tradition describes our enslaved ancestors as being brickmakers and brick layers, the labor used to construct cities for the glory of Pharaoh. This oppressed people — like so many oppressed peoples after them — was tasked with erecting the very architecture of their oppression.

In VaEra, Moshe approaches the Israelites with a message of hope and redemption. To his surprise, they did not listen “*mikotzer ruach* — because their spirits were low — from harsh labor.” (Exodus 6:9)

Literally, “*kotzer ruach*” means a shortness of spirit. It conveys an intolerable depth of anguish, a complete lack of energy or strength. Rashi teaches that when one is suffering this way, it is hard to breathe. The air comes in short gasps and a person can’t take the full breaths needed to inflate the lungs and bring rejuvenation.

Of course, if they couldn’t breathe — couldn’t even pick their heads up — how could they be expected to listen? How could there be room in their lungs and hearts for hope when they were suffering under harsh labor?

When God revealed to Moses that God is prepared to fulfill God’s covenant with our ancestors, God said, “I have now heard the moaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians have enslaved.” (Exodus 6:5)

God could hear the Israelites even when they could not breathe.

As I read Kukla’s analysis of the ways physical spaces are designed for the physically strong, I heard echoes of those cries. The more the Egyptians demanded of their slaves — the harsher the labor — the more they gasped for breaths. Kukla notes, “City spaces don’t just *happen* to be fast paced,” they become that way when a society values the speed and the output that results.

When we learn that our Israelite ancestors were afflicted by *kotzer ruach*, we must consider the ways our physical spaces, our programs, and our values are designed for certain populations at the exclusion or oppression of others. We must charge ourselves to hear the moans of the breathless, and commit to creating space for everyone to catch their breath. (*Jessica Fisher serves as a rabbi at Beth El Synagogue*)

Center in New Rochelle. Ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, she was a T'ruah Israel Fellow in 2016-2017.)

A Message That Will Be Heard by Rabbi Dr. Oren Steinitz

<https://truah.org/resources/oren-steinitz-parshat-vaera-moraltorah/>

“Just as it is a mitzvah for a person to deliver a message that will be heard, so is it a mitzvah for a person not to deliver a message that will not be heard.” (Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot, 65b).

This statement, attributed to Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon, is often challenging for activists, and anyone with strong opinions. Often quoted in the context of the mitzvah of *tochecha*, “rebuke,” the Gemara basically tells us that even if you *know* that you are right, sometimes, probably more often than you think, there is no point in opening your mouth. When you are faced with people who have no intent to listen, it is preferable to remain silent rather than cause more antagonism towards your cause. Rebuke is important, the rabbis tell us, but it is equally important to know when, where, and how to deliver it.

The days and weeks following the November elections provided us with a fantastic example of this situation. I kept asking myself: How is it possible that so many people were seemingly fine with supporting a regime that showed nothing but contempt for human rights; an administration that sympathized with white supremacists, that put children in cages, whose criminal disregard for scientific evidence cost thousands of human lives? Especially puzzling was the fact that the administration actually increased their support among populations that suffered from their policies the most. Why was our message not heard? Where were all those people during these last four years? Can't they see that they are acting against their own best interests? “It should not have been this close,” people kept telling me.

Parshat VaEra may clue us in to why our message seems to be falling on deaf ears. At the beginning of the portion, God tells Moses to go to the Israelites, and remind them of the promise made to their ancestors — God will free them from the labor of the Egyptians and bring them to the Land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses does what he was told and goes on to deliver the message to the Israelites. However, despite the fact that this should have been joyful, promising news of a real change, his words are not heard; the Israelites ignore him.

The Torah does not leave us in the dark regarding the reason for Moses' lack of success, telling us that the Israelites did not listen due to “*kotser ruach v'avodah kasha*,” a phrase which the JPS translates as “their spirits crushed by cruel bondage” (Ex. 6:9). While the JPS translation certainly makes sense, a more direct translation would be “due to their impatience caused by hard labor.” Rashi, the

eleventh century biblical commentator, goes even further and interprets the phrase “*kotser ruach*” to literally mean “shortness of breath.” The Israelites worked so hard, he tells us, that they simply could not breathe. Nobody will take the time to listen to your message, negative or positive, when they are literally gasping for air.

We all know that Moses has the Israelites’ best interests in mind. We all know that he *is* an Israelite himself. But as far as the Hebrew slaves are concerned, he is an outsider; a “functionally-Egyptian” prince who grew up in Pharaoh’s palace with a silver spoon in his mouth. He may have Hebrew blood flowing in his veins, but at the end of the day, he grew up benefiting from his fellow tribesmen’s hard work and crushed spirit. He may have loads of good intentions, but he is not the one who is out of breath.

Only four verses later (Ex. 6:13), God once again commands Moses and Aaron to approach the Israelites, as well as Pharaoh, and tell them that God will deliver them out of Egypt. What changed? Why bother repeating a message when it was already rejected? Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (d. 1926) tries to solve this by noting slight variations between the verses, suggesting that Moses’ message was radically altered the second time around (*Meshech Chochmah, VaEra*, 9). Moses’ first message focused on the Divine promise of a full redemption in the Promised Land, while his second message focused on an urgent need — getting out of Egypt. Yes, Moses’ first message sounded fantastic, but to an enslaved people, struggling with every breath, it sounded like a fantasy. Something that only a rich kid who grew up in the palace can be concerned with. When Moses focused on their immediate struggle, he sounded less privileged and arrogant, and more understanding of the people’s urgent needs.

I admit, the idea of diluting our messages to make them more palatable sounds dishonest, paired with a healthy dose of arrogance. This is not what I think Moses did, and not what I believe we should do. It is not about diluting our message, it is about meeting people where they are and making ourselves care about their immediate struggles just as much as we care about the big picture, about a full redemption. Maybe then we’ll be able to fully fulfill the mitzvah of delivering a message that will be heard. (*Rabbi Dr. Oren Z. Steinitz serves as the spiritual leader of Congregation Kol Ami in Elmira, NY, and as an adjunct professor of Halakha and Rabbinics in the ALEPH Ordinations Program.*)

Yahrtzeits

Craig Miller remembers his mother Roberta Miller (Riva bat Henka & Shmulick) on Sun. Jan. 2nd (Tevet 29).

Blossom Primer remembers her mother Esther Rappaport on Tues. Jan. 4th (Shevat 2)

