

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Va'eira
January 13, 2024 *** 3 Shvat 5784

[Va'eira in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3242/jewish/Vaera-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The name of the Parshah, "Va'era," means "and I appeared" and it is found in Exodus 6:3.

G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the "four expressions of redemption," 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)

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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

The Birth of History by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/the-birth-of-history/>

The parsha of Vaera begins with some fateful words. It would not be too much to say that they changed the course of history, because they changed the way people thought about history. In fact, they gave birth to the very idea of history. Listen to the words:

God said to Moses, "I am Hashem. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E-I Shaddai, but by My name 'Hashem' I did not make Myself fully known to them. Ex. 6:2-3

What exactly does this mean? As Rashi points out, it does not mean that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah did not know God by the name Hashem. To the contrary, God's first words to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house," were said using the name Hashem.

It even says, just a few verses later ([Gen. 12:7](#)), *Vayera Hashem el Avram*: "Hashem appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So God had appeared to Avram as Hashem. And in the very next verse it says that Avram built an altar and "He called on the name of Hashem" ([Gen. 12:8](#)). So Avram himself knew the name and had used it.

Yet it is clear from what God says to Moses that something new is about to happen, a Divine revelation of a kind that had never happened before, something that no one, not even the people closest to God, has yet seen. What was it?

The answer is that through Bereishit, God is the God of Creation, the God of nature, the aspect of God we call, with different nuances but the same overall sense, *Elokim*, or *E-l Shaddai*, or even *Koneh shamayim va'aretz*, Creator of heaven and earth.

Now, in a sense, that aspect of God was known to everyone in the ancient world. It's just that they did not see nature as the work of one God but of many: the god of the sun, the god of the rain, the goddesses of the sea and the earth, the vast pantheon of forces responsible for harvests, fertility, storms, droughts, and so on. There were profound differences between the gods of polytheism and myth and the one God of Abraham, but they operated, as it were, in the same territory, the same ballpark.

The aspect of God that appears in the days of Moses and the Israelites is radically different, and it's only because we are so used to the story that we find it hard to see how radical it was.

For the first time in history God was about to get involved in history, not through natural disasters like the Flood, but by direct interaction with the people who shape history. God was about to appear as the force that shapes the destiny of nations. He was about to do something no one had ever heard of before: bring an entire nation from slavery and servitude, persuade them to follow Him into the desert, and eventually to the Promised Land, and there build a new kind of society, based not on power but on justice, welfare, respect for the dignity of the human person and on collective responsibility for the rule of law.

God was about to initiate a new kind of drama and a new concept of time. According to many of the world's greatest historians, Arnaldo Momigliano, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, J. H. Plumb, Eric Voegelin, and the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, this was the moment when history was born.

Until then, the basic human drama was struggling to maintain order against the ever-present threats of chaos, whether through natural disasters, foreign conquest, or internal power struggles. Success meant maintaining the status quo. In fact, religion in the ancient world was intensely conservative. It was about teaching people the inevitability of the status quo. Time was an arena in which nothing fundamentally changed.

And now God appears to Moses and tells him that something utterly new is about to occur, something the patriarchs knew about in theory but had never lived to see

in practise. A new nation. A new kind of faith. A new kind of political order. A new type of society. God was about to enter history and set the West on a trajectory that no human beings had ever contemplated before.

Time was no longer going simply to be what Plato beautifully described as *the moving image of eternity*. It was going to become the stage on which God and humanity would journey together toward the day when all human beings – regardless of class, colour, creed, or culture – would achieve their full dignity as the image and likeness of God. Religion was about to become not a conservative force but an evolutionary and even revolutionary one.

Think about this: Long before the West, the Chinese had invented ink, paper, printing, porcelain manufacture, the compass, gunpowder, and many other technologies. But they failed to develop a scientific revolution, an industrial revolution, a market economy, and a free society. Why did they get so far and then stop? The historian Christopher Dawson argued that it was the religion of the West that made the difference. Alone among the civilisations of the world, Europe “has been continually shaken and transformed by an energy of spiritual unrest.” He attributed this to the fact that “its religious ideal has not been the worship of timeless and changeless perfection but a spirit that strives to incorporate itself in humanity and to change the world.”^[1]

To change the world. That is the key phrase. The idea that – together with God – we can change the world, that we can *make* history, not just be made by it, this idea was born when God told Moses that he and his contemporaries were about to see an aspect of God no one had ever seen before.

I still find that a spine-tingling moment when, each year, we read Vaera and recall the moment history was born, the moment God entered history and taught us for all time that slavery, oppression, injustice, are not written into the fabric of the cosmos, engraved into the human condition. Things can be different because we can be different, because God has shown us how. ^[1] Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, New York: Doubleday, 1991, p. 15.

Va'era: The Earth is the Lord's by Dr David Goldblatt and Edited by Grow Torah

<https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2021/12/29-parshat-vaeira-the-earth-is-the-lords>

Over the past few years, the ten plagues have lost some of their oomph. The story of Hashem administering awesome natural disasters on a group that individually are largely innocent, but collectively guilty, has simply lost some of its novelty. The weather we have started to experience the past few years is alarmingly Biblical: hailstorms in the midst of wildfires, flooding at alarming rates, and destructive landslides are just among some events. [1]

But even so, revisiting the public demonstration of Hashem's dominion over the natural world as expressed by the ten plagues (seven of which appear in our portion Va'era) can help reflect on modern man's place in the world and humanity's role in the current environmental predicament.

The last plague in our parsha, hail, was qualitatively much harsher than the ones preceding it. Hashem's forewarning was correspondingly the longest and most severe until then. But the strength and severity of this warning is balanced by Divine compassion for the Egyptians. Hashem urges them to bring in their servants and animals from the field to spare them from destruction. The God-fearing among the Egyptians heeded and lived, while the heedless perished. [2]

According to the Chizkuni, it is this Divine compassion that moved Pharaoh to repent, albeit temporarily, for the first time following a plague.[3] Pharaoh summons Moshe and declares: "This time I have sinned; The Lord is the Righteous One; and I and my people are the villains." [4] Here Moshe describes how he will leave the city and spread out his hands to heaven, upon which Hashem will stop the hail "that you may know that the earth belongs to the Lord." The power of Moshe's prayer, and Hashem's ability to stop the unprecedented torrential hail and thunder when asked nicely, displays the supernatural, miraculous quality of Hashem's control over meteorological phenomena. [5]

The Daat Mikra commentary (Israel, 20th century) explains "'That you may know': Your request will be granted, and the plague removed, not because you can be trusted to fulfill your promise to let the people go, but rather so that it will be proved to you and you will know that the earth is under Hashem's control, and He can do what He wants with it—at His word it hails, and at His word it ceases." [6]

The plagues were expressions of Hashem's power over the earth. They were intended as a reproof to the arrogant Pharaoh and a demonstration to the Egyptians of the limits to his power and the fallacy of their trust in him. Hashem's display of power and mercy during the plague of hail was enough to bring about a temporary change of heart in Pharaoh, but by that time, his sins and stubbornness had already set him and his nation on the road to ruin.

Many commentators also contrast our verse with the verse from Tehillim: "The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He has given to man." [7] Psikta Zutra reconciles the two verses by specifying that humans' dominion over the earth is conditional on their following the will of Hashem. If they do so, they are granted the earth for their use and enjoyment; if not, the land reverts to Hashem. [8]

Even when the earth is given over to human dominion, humankind does not have free reign to do whatever it wants with it. The need for careful, considerate, and

compassionate stewardship of natural resources is emphasized time and again throughout the Torah. [9]

Our current climate bears frightening similarities but maintains critical differences from the ten plagues. Modern “plagues” include water stress, depletion of freshwater, decimation of ocean fish stocks, wildfires, and more. [10]

But this time, these “plagues” have not been wrought directly by Hashem but are instead anthropogenic. [11] The power structures that are on display in the plagues have certain resonances: Pharaoh has the ultimate power, while his people bear the punishment equally. Although they might be taskmasters, or involved in the enslavement of Bnei Yisrael in some way, we assume most of the Egyptians were innocent or repentant on some level. So too, we are aware how the power structures of our society leave some with far more ability to effect change. Along those lines, contemporary climate change involves an additional unfairness: though we assume that every Egyptian had a shelter, what would have happened if there were God-fearing Egyptians who had nowhere to bring their cattle? In our case, there are indications that the poorer parts of the world will experience more extreme consequences of climate change while having less technological and financial wherewithal to cope with them.[12]

We lack immediate Divine warnings and mercy here. But just as the present and looming environmental catastrophes are the result of human action, scientists and others have warned, again and again, of calamity from the continued degradation of the environment. Hashem is unlikely to cease climate change with prayer as he did for the plagues. Humans caused these, humans are warning about them, and therefore it is incumbent on humans to stop it.

The land is both ours and Hashem’s—and extreme weather so awesome that it asserts Hashem’s dominance should also inspire us to examine the control we exercise over the earth. Let us be inspired at each tier of power represented in the plague narrative: in the faithful, caring, and reasonable response of individual Egyptians making sure their communities and animals heed the warnings and are safe, at those in control, with greater power to change the outcomes, and ultimately in Hashem’s mercy and dominion over Earth. Let us work towards and pray for a collective heeding of the mounting environmental warning signs. Let us change course in time to avoid consigning ourselves to the same fate as the Egyptians. Let us pave the way to redemption. (*David L. Goldblatt received degrees from Brown University and Yale University and a doctorate in environmental science from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH). He is currently a research consultant in energy and the environment for industry, ETH, and other universities.*) [1] Fire and Ice: California Wildfire Makes Its Own Hail | The Weather Channel [2] Shemot 9:19-21 [3] Hezkuni on Shemot 9:27 [4] Shemot 9:27 [5] Sforno on Shemot 9:29 [6] Shemot, Mossad Harav Kook

Publishers (Commentary by Amos Chacham), Jerusalem 1991, p. 246 (translation by the author). [7] Tehillim 115:16 [8] Psikta Zutra on Shemot, 9:29, s.v. vayomer eilav

[9] See, for example, Ibn Ezra on Tehillim 115:16. [10] For a recent overview assessment, see Global Environmental Outlook 7, 2022, UNEP <http://www.unep.org/geo/> [11] However, even the plagues are Hashem's reaction to human actions and therefore could be considered anthropogenic. The potential this shows for human behavior to affect the course of human history should reinforce our sense of the importance of the influence of current human activities on the planet's ecological destiny. [12] See the IPCC Report on Climate Change and Land.

Va'eira: Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart? - Table of Five

Edited by Salvador Litvak, The Accidental Talmudist

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2021/01/13/why-did-god-harden-pharaohs-heart-vaeira/>

Our Sages teach that God's messengers, the angels, help a person in the direction she or he chooses to go, for good or for evil. How does this relate to Pharaoh's hardened heart?

So Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the LORD had foretold through Moses. -Ex. 9:35

Miriam Yerushalmi, CEO SANE, Counselor, Author

The Torah warns us not to blindly follow our heart's desires. The name "Israel" is an anagram of Rosh Li, "my head," indicating that our mind is capable of ruling over our heart and controlling our destructive passions. Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, allowed himself to become captive to the wicked desires of his heart, which overrode his intellectual capacity.

Tanya explains that the title "Pharaoh" is connected to the word periah, "removing" as used in relation to the mitzvah of bris milah, removing the skin through circumcision. Rather than control his desires, Pharaoh smothered his heart in layers of sin after sin in such a thick covering that he brought upon himself timtum halev, a spiritual hardening of the heart.

We can take steps to prevent this from happening to us. Foremost among them is the bedtime routine of Shema, which includes a nightly examination of our deeds, likened to "flossing" our heart, cleaning it of the accumulation of plaque-like sins and creating space for the return of our spiritual sensitivity. This nightly repentance is like a wind that pushes away the thick clouds and lets the sun's rays shine brightly. The rest of the bedtime service comprises prayers and Psalms that remind us of G-d's presence and protection in our lives, and strengthen our determination to do better the next morning. It's like taking vitamins to protect

against spiritual insensitivity. So, say Shema tonight, and drift into sleep joyfully, knowing that your head is over your heart, and in G-d's hands.

Rabbi Adam Kligfeld, Senior Rabbi, Temple Beth Am

It is an uncomfortable theology to imagine any human, even Pharaoh, as a pawn or marionette, activated exclusively by God's will. Even more so, when punishment seems to come as a result of behavior ostensibly beyond one's control. No ethical question hovers more ponderously over the Exodus story than this one: how could a benevolent God, one whose omnipotence could have secured the Israelites' freedom without any attendant, and undue, Egyptian suffering, seemingly willfully punish Pharaoh for a heart that God had hardened? In our verse, it is clear that God predicted this hardened heart. In other verses, it is God doing the hardening. S'forno (among others) attempts to explain this conundrum by saying that God was not flexing muscle in order to preen, but rather to show Pharaoh (and the world) the power and import of teshuvah, atonement. Each time Pharaoh's heart hardened, he was invited (forced?) to become a penitent, thus transforming him from tyrant to a pseudo-model.

A more convincing, and psychologically astute, reading is that in life, habits are hard to break. The first time Pharaoh's heart is hardened, the Torah makes it clear it is by his own doing. Only after a pattern of cruel obstinacy is established does the language switch towards God as the cause. As if to say: God's world is one in which your own negative behaviors will endure, and resist change. By inference, every compassionate deed you do creates a pattern, and legacy, of goodness.

Rabbi Avraham Greenstein, AJRCA Professor of Hebrew

The verb that begins this verse (yehezak = stiffened) belongs to a special class of verbs in Hebrew. It is a stative verb, a verb that indicates a state of being rather than a volitional action. The implication of this for our verse is that not only did Pharaoh not stiffen his own heart here, but even his heart took no part in its own stiffening. It simply became stiff, as God had foretold and decreed. Puzzlingly, this is in contrast to the previous verse wherein Pharaoh "hardened" his own heart. The verb in that verse (yachbed) is both causative and volitional. Pharaoh was intent on rendering himself insensible to the requests of the Hebrews and to the suffering the plagues were bringing upon his nation.

The Seforno offers an explanation to this seeming incongruity. It is based on the Talmudic axiom that a person is led to wherever he or she wants to go (Makot 10b). Pharaoh resolved to remain hard-hearted, but he was concerned that the toll of the upcoming plagues would overwhelm him and soften his temperament towards the Hebrews. To address this, God helped Pharaoh remain true to his convictions despite the impact of the plagues.

We can glean from this an important and encouraging lesson. Even if we have doubts about whether we can remain true to our positive resolutions, we must trust that God will facilitate the purest intentions of our hearts. Our task is merely to steel our hearts to struggle for good.

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[Lt. Yoni Troy, IDF officer](#)

This verse marks the turning point in the great exodus when G-d takes away Pharaoh's free choice to make an example out of him and the Egyptians. This story raises many theological questions regarding free choice and repentance. We all have free choice and the option to repent — even Pharaoh — but there are limits. Under pressure, Pharaoh will say anything to get out of trouble. However, he isn't sincere.

The IDF unit I command includes many soldiers from difficult backgrounds with little motivation to serve beyond their legal obligation. Faced with soldiers who come from backgrounds of abuse, grew up in broken homes, or have parents suffering from emotional or drug-related problems, and more, I have learned that harsh militaristic discipline often backfires. Punishing these kids in an educational way, sometimes just talking to them, helps them grow into soldiers, then, eventually, functioning citizens.

However, there are red lines. When a soldier goes too far, I reach a turning point similar to the one in our text. At that moment, a statement must be made with harsh militaristic discipline, forcing the soldier to pay for the egregious actions. Judaism teaches that repentance doesn't give you a free pass. Sinners must still pay for their transgressions. This nuance fine-tunes our understanding of free choice. We must acknowledge the world's limits. We must remain sensitive to our actions to try moving the world forward to a better place and not G-d forbid, move the world in the wrong direction, Pharaoh-like.

Aliza Lipkin, Writer and educator, Maaleh Adumim, Israel

Moshe was instructed by God to lead the Jewish nation in the greatest Exodus of all time. Moshe demurred and only after much coaxing was God able to convince him to accept the mission with the assistance of his brother Aharon. Moshe and Aharon approached Pharaoh requesting that he allow the slave nation to embark on a three-day journey into the wilderness to serve God. Pharaoh not only refused the request but intensified the workload on the slaves.

The Jews were left depleted of energy and bereft of hope, thus rejecting subsequent messages delivered by God through Moshe and Aharon. Moshe, having his fear of failure confirmed, regresses back to questioning God as to his own capabilities. It was at this point that God informed Moshe that he would harden Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh began a pattern of acquiescing to the demands to release the people after each plague only to harden his heart and change his mind each time. It was this ongoing obstinacy in the face of justice by Pharaoh that seemed to embolden Moshe and increased his confidence progressively after each plague.

The first six plagues were a joint effort by God, Moshe, and Aharon as necessitated by Moshe's insecurities. The seventh plague begins with Moshe taking the staff and ends with him reaching his hands to the heavens. He had finally gained the confidence to become the willing instrument of God. As the Pasuk states, Pharaoh's heart was hardened as Hashem had spoken through the hand of Moshe.

YAHRTZEITS

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Richard Cohen remembers his mother Ida Cohen on Tuesday January 16th

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Alice Solomon remembers her father Leo Blitzler on Friday January 19th

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