

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Vaera  
January 25, 2025 \*\*\* 25 Tevet, 5785

Va'era in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3242/jewish/Vaera-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3242/jewish/Vaera-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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](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

[Vaera: Freedom and Truth by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/freedom-and-truth/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/freedom-and-truth/>

Why did Moses tell Pharaoh, if not a lie, then less than the full truth? Here is the conversation between him and Pharaoh after the fourth plague, arov, "swarms of insects"[1]:

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land." But Moses said, "That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us? We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, as He commands us." Exodus 8:27-28

Not just here but throughout, Moses makes it seem as if all he is asking for is permission for the people to undertake a three-day journey, to offer sacrifices to God and then (by implication) to return to Egypt. So, in their first appearance before Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron say:

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival to Me in the wilderness.'"

Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go."

Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or He may strike us with plagues or with the sword." Ex. 5:1-3

God even specifies this before the mission has begun, saying to Moses at the Burning Bush: "You and the elders of Israel will then go to the king of Egypt. You must tell him, 'The Lord, God of the Hebrews, revealed Himself to us. Now we request that you allow us to take a three-day journey into the desert, to sacrifice to

the Lord our God” (Ex. 3:18).

The impression remains to the very end. After the Israelites have left, we read:

The king of Egypt received news that the people were escaping. Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds regarding the people, and said, “What have we done? How could we have released Israel from doing our work?”

Ex. 14:5

At no stage does Moses say explicitly that he is proposing the people should be allowed to leave permanently, never to return. He talks of a three-day journey. There is an argument between him and Pharaoh as to who is to go. Only the adult males? Only the people, not the cattle? Moses consistently asks for permission to worship God, at some place that is not Egypt. But he does not speak about freedom or the Promised Land. Why not? Why does he create, and not correct, a false impression? Why can he not say openly what he means?

The commentators offer various explanations. Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto (Italy, 1800-1865) says that it was impossible for Moses to tell the truth to a tyrant like Pharaoh. Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenburg (Germany, 1785-1865, Ha-Ktav veka-Kabbalah) says that technically Moses did not tell a lie. He did indeed mean that he wanted the people to be free to make a journey to worship God, and he never said explicitly that they would return.

The Abarbanel (Lisbon 1437 – Venice 1508) says that God told Moses deliberately to make a small request, to demonstrate Pharaoh’s cruelty and indifference to his slaves. All they were asking for was a brief respite from their labours to offer sacrifices to God. If he refused this, he was indeed a tyrant. Rav Elhanan Samet (Iyyunim be-Parshot Ha-Shevua, Exodus, 189) cites an unnamed commentator who says simply that this was war between Pharaoh and the Jewish people, and in war it is permitted, indeed sometimes necessary, to deceive.

Actually, however, the terms of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh are part of a wider pattern that we have already observed in the Torah. When Jacob leaves Laban’s house, with all his family, we read: “Jacob decided to go behind the back of Laban the Aramean, and did not tell him that he was leaving” (Genesis 31:20). Laban protests this behaviour:

“How could you do this? You went behind my back and led my daughters away like prisoners of war! Why did you have to leave so secretly? You went behind my back and told me nothing!” Gen. 31:26-27

Jacob again has to tell at best a half-truth when Esau suggests that they travel together after the brothers’ reunion: “You know that the children are weak, and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for even one day, all the sheep will die. Please go ahead of me, my lord” (Gen. 33:13-14).

This, though not strictly a lie, is a diplomatic excuse.

When Jacob's sons are trying to rescue their sister Dina who has been raped and abducted by Shechem the Hivite, they "replied deceitfully" (Gen. 34:13) when Shechem and his father proposed that the entire family should come and settle with them, telling them that they could only do so if all the males of the town underwent circumcision.

Earlier still we find that three times Abraham and Isaac, forced to leave home because of famine, have to pretend that they are their wives' brothers not their husbands because they fear that otherwise they will be killed so that Sarah or Rebecca could be taken into the king's harem (Gen. 12, Gen. 20, Gen. 26).

These six episodes cannot be entirely accidental or coincidental to the biblical narrative as a whole. The implication seems to be this: Outside the promised land Jews in the biblical age are in danger if they tell the truth. They are at constant risk of being killed or at best enslaved.

Why? Because they are powerless in an age of power. They are a small family, at best a small nation, in an age of empires. They have to use their wits to survive. By and large they do not tell lies but they can create a false impression. This is not how things should be. But it is how they were before Jews had their own land, their one and only defensible space. It is how people in impossible situations are forced to be if they are to exist at all.

No-one should be forced to live a lie. In Judaism, truth is the seal of God and the essential precondition of trust between human beings. But when your people is being enslaved, its male children murdered, you have to liberate them by whatever means are possible. Moses, who had already seen that his first encounter with Pharaoh made things worse for his people – they still had to make the same quota of bricks but now also had to gather their own straw (Ex. 5:6-8) – did not want to risk making them worse still.

The Torah here is not justifying deceit. To the contrary, it is condemning a system in which telling the truth may put your life at risk, as it still does in many tyrannical or totalitarian societies today. Judaism – a religion of dissent, questioning, and "arguments for the sake of heaven" – is a faith that values intellectual honesty and moral truthfulness above all things. The Psalmist says:

"Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place? One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken My name in vain nor sworn deceitfully." Psalms 24:3-4

Malachi says of one who speaks in God's name: "The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips" (Malachi 2:6). Every Amidah ends with the prayer, "My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from

deceitful speech.”

What the Torah is telling us in these six narratives in Genesis and the seventh in Exodus is the connection between freedom and truth. Where there is freedom there can be truth. Otherwise there cannot. A society where people are forced to be less than fully honest merely to survive and not provoke further oppression is not the kind of society God wants us to make. [1] Some say the *arov* was a plague of wild animals.

Moses's Lessons in Interfaith Dialogue  
by Claire Davidson Bruder & Sherouk Ahmed

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/mosess-lessons-in-interfaith-dialogue/>

*In the first week of 2025, the Washington Theological Consortium hosted a weeklong interfaith dialogue program at the United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. Third-year JTS rabbinical student and Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue program manager Claire Davidson Bruder participated in this program, alongside other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim seminary students. The following d'var Torah is a collaboration between Claire and Sherouk Ahmed, a chaplaincy student at Bayan, an Islamic graduate school in partnership with the Chicago Theological Seminary.*

In Parshat Va'era, God reveals Himself to Moses and appoints Moses as His prophet. This exchange is a turning point in the story of the Exodus: God has heard the Israelites crying out from slavery and remembered the covenant He made with them. It is Moses who will be His messenger to Pharaoh, Moses who will demand that Pharaoh let God's people go. Because Moses is nervous about his ability to be a convincing leader in the face of such odds, especially given his speech impediment, God instructs him to bring his brother Aaron. They will use magic to prove the pair's connection to God: Aaron is to throw his staff down in front of Pharaoh, and his staff will become a serpent. Even though it works and the staff does in fact become a serpent, Pharaoh remains a non-believer. He summons his magicians, and they are able to perform the same feat. Aaron's serpents—God's serpents, really—prove to be stronger, and they devour those created by the Egyptians. Yet Pharaoh still refuses to recognize God's power.

In the Quranic telling of this story, Pharaoh's magicians are convinced by Aaron's[1] staff-serpent eating their own, understanding this means that God is on Moses and Aaron's side (Surat Taha [20:70]). Pharaoh immediately threatens them with violent amputation and crucifixion if they follow the God of the Israelites. Pharaoh is alarmed; he assumes that Moses and Aaron have come to dispossess him of his kingdom and accuses Moses of having been the magicians' leader all along. And he does so despite knowing his accusation could not possibly be true: he had made a deal with the magicians to grant them special status should they

triumph over Moses and Aaron (Surat Ash-Shu'ara [26:41-42]). But that's the thing about false narratives—they don't have to be true at all to be damaging.

Like Moses approaching Pharaoh, Jews and Muslims are constantly being asked to prove themselves in today's world. Harmful stereotypes about the two groups abound: Jews are greedy, Muslims are terrorists; Jews control the media, Muslims oppress women. And neither group is free from the threat of violence. Visibly religious Muslims and Jews are attacked on the street, even in "tolerant" cities like New York; our houses of worship are targeted both by threats and by real physical violence; American politicians and others in power denigrate us to the media. Yet we continue to stand strong with dignity and constantly advocate for ourselves and our religious needs in the face of false accusations and assumptions about us.

As part of the Quranic version of the story, we are privy to God's guidance to Moses and Aaron. He tells the pair: "Go forth . . . and never falter in remembering Me" (Surah Taha 20:42). Relinquishing our religion, beliefs, or convictions will not protect us. God tells Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh, but also to "speak to him mildly" when doing so (Surah Taha 20:43-44). God cautions Moses and Aaron not to panic, but to stand strong in their faith and be dignified. It is not fair or reasonable that Jews and Muslims have to continually prove their worth and importance and yet, it is our reality. And we must find ways to contend with that reality in order to keep ourselves and our communities safe.

One of the most meaningful and powerful ways that we have found to manage that painful reality is through interfaith connection and dialogue. At the Washington Theological Consortium's Abrahamic Dialogue program, we were able to connect with each other and with other Jews, Muslims, and Christians. We had the privilege of attending each other's houses of worship, spending Jummah together at a mosque and Shabbat morning at a shul. At the mosque, we visited with the imams and had the opportunity to learn about historical and contemporary challenges facing their communities. So too at the shul we connected with community leaders to discuss that week's parashah, the Joseph story, and its role in both of our traditions. The two of us even received an aliyah together at the synagogue, an honor of a lifetime for both of us.

Our week of connection was not always easy. Any time different groups get together, there are sore points. As one of our professors put it, there is no such thing as interfaith dialogue conducted on an even playing field: there are always power imbalances, and we have to be aware of how they impact us. Furthermore, there are countless other challenges when it comes to interfaith dialogue: How do people conduct dialogue with those whom their religion preaches are damned? How do LGBTQ people interact with those who do not believe their marriages are legitimate? How do we put aside centuries, or in some cases millennia, of pain and intercommunal violence in order to build trust? The reality is that we must face

these hard questions if we want to build any sort of meaningful connection.

Since October 7, 2023, fostering these connections has become increasingly difficult. The heightened political tensions between Jewish and Muslim communities around the world were evident within our group of twenty-odd participants. Some had lost loved ones in Gaza, others had lost loved ones in Israel or knew individuals taken hostage. The challenge is not just political tension, but also real, deep emotion and heartbreak over our personal and communal losses. What we learned, though, throughout the week is that trying to avoid these conversations would do nothing but strain our communication. It was only by having the hard conversations, those that make all of us uncomfortable, that we could forge meaningful relationships. It was only when everyone could be fully authentic that we could support one another.

We must recognize that Jews and Muslims, though our beliefs, rituals, and some of our politics may differ, are faced with increasing bigotry in our society. Like Moses, we are constantly asked to prove ourselves to an unfriendly audience. And so we should take our lessons from Moses too. We should show up in the world as our authentic selves, remain dignified, and most importantly, rely on each other. In a time like this, when it is harder every day to be a Jew or a Muslim in America, we must rely on one another as siblings, just as Moses relies on Aaron, to get through. We must take our challenges, the things that could divide us and allow them to make our relationships stronger. *(Claire Davidson Bruder is a student at The Rabbinical School of JTS and Sherouk Ahmed is a student at the Bayan Islamic Graduate School at Chicago Theological Seminary)*

[1] In the Quranic version, it is Moses who asks God to send Aaron with him, because of his speech impediment.

[VaEra: From Hard Servitude to Open Ears by Rabbi Yosi Gordon  
https://truah.org/resources/yosi-gordon-vaera-moraltorah\\_2024\\_/?  
eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=30279913-3219-476b-9dfa-23a518a9a959](https://truah.org/resources/yosi-gordon-vaera-moraltorah_2024_/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=30279913-3219-476b-9dfa-23a518a9a959)

It's hard for me to listen. I have too much to say. I have too little time. I have too much to do. I have too little strength to wrench myself from anything that would save me from listening. I don't want to listen. I already know, or I don't care, or — it's not me. It's you.

We are the People Who Don't Listen. We can love God, pray to God, even believe in God. Listen to God? That's asking a lot.

I actually made bricks, once, many years ago, helping kitah hey (class level 5) in a Jerusalem school. We picked handfuls of weeds, poured water on the ground, and mused it all together to make weedy mud. Then we shoveled it into rectangular frames and went home to do Shabbat. A hot Shabbat. Sunday morning came and

we discovered our framed, weedy mud had become bricks. It was fun.

Years ago, I also visited Egypt in May. The temperature at 2:00 p.m. was 115°. It felt like no time for making bricks. It was, however, a time to understand the second parshah in Exodus as it recounts: “Moses spoke thus to the Children of Israel. But they did not hearken to Moses, out of shortness of spirit and out of hard servitude.” (Exodus 6:9, translation found in “The Five Books of Moses” by Everett Fox). They did not hearken. They did not heed. They did not listen.

It was hard to listen. Even without contemporary obstacles like glaring screens, beeping phones, complicated plans, and ever-changing demands, it was hard for our ancestors to listen. We have workarounds for phones and schedules. Do we have workarounds for shortness of spirit and hard servitude?

The midrash says that the Israelites were short on faith. (Exodus Rabbah 6:5) Their lot was fixed and God apparently wasn't helping, so they joined up with the pagan idolaters. Will Herberg explains:

Pagan idolaters worship nature in its many manifestations and nature doesn't give a damn. Nature will not save the slave. In fact, it is nature that made them slaves. It is only natural that a god-man become Pharaoh, that water cannot become a living being, and that a slave must remain forever a slave. (It is unnatural that the waters of the Nile flow with blood.) If slaves couldn't count on God's salvation, at least they could ingratiate themselves to the gods of nature-going-nowhere. It doesn't take much spirit to do that. It's best for the short of spirit. (“Judaism and Modern Man”)

The midrash goes on to say that “servitude” was not hard labor, but the serving of pagan (Egyptian) idols. Idolatry is why they couldn't listen.

Idolatry is not simply the worship of sticks and stones, or it would have no relevance to our times. Idolatry is absolute devotion paid to anything short of the Absolute. The object of idolatrous worship may be, and generally is, partly good; but since it is not God, it is necessarily a good that is only partial, and relative. What idolatry does is convert its object into an absolute, thereby destroying the partial good within it and transforming it into a total evil.

We who serve the idols of today have no spirit to listen to whispers and echoes of salvation. We dare not hearken to the call of larger visions. We have miles to go before we sleep, games to play, words to say, bricks to break.

There are moments — they happen to us all — when we know that we, God-willing, can make a difference. We hear something in the news or learn of a friend's struggle. We're reminded of something that happened years ago, or imagine the possibilities of the future, and it gives us pause. In the silence that “still, small voice” calls us to respond, to take a stand, or to lend a hand.



Sometimes it's just about being there with someone. Do we let those moments pass? It is, after all, hard to listen.

Will Herberg correctly notes that all idolatry is really self-idolization: the projection of ourselves into an externality and the worship of that projection. The cure for that perversity is found in listening, an act that demands that we step outside ourselves and recognize the other. *(Rabbi Yosi (Joel) Gordon grew up in Green Bay, WI, and graduated from the University of Wisconsin and the Jewish Theological Seminary Rabbinical School. He studied at Hebrew University and the Hartman Institute and has taught in Jewish schools in St. Paul, MN, and Los Angeles, CA. He is currently running Yosi's School, an online program of Jewish and Hebrew studies for children and adults. (yosis.school@gmail.com))*

[Va'eira: Holy Brothers—Greatness of Moses and Aaron by the Accidental Talmudist](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/featured-app/2025/01/20/holy-brothers/)  
<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/featured-app/2025/01/20/holy-brothers/>

That is Aaron and Moses, to whom the Lord said, “Take the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions.” Ex. 6:26

They are the ones who spoke to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to let the children of Israel out of Egypt; they are Moses and Aaron. Ex. 6:27

In Torah portion Vaera, God reveals himself to Moses and instructs him to bring the Israelite slaves out of Egypt. God appoints Moses' older brother Aaron to help him carry out this monumental mission.

Sometimes in the Torah Aaron is mentioned before Moses, and at other times Moses is mentioned first. According to Rashi, this teaches that both men are of equal significance. Rashi's conclusion seems perplexing. Aaron, the “man of peace,” was certainly an exceedingly wise and righteous individual. But Moses was the greatest prophet who ever lived, as we know from the third-to-last line in the Torah: “And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.” (Deut. 34:10) How can it be said that Aaron was as great as Moses?

To answer this question, Rabbi Benjamin Rose brings down a teaching from Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, one of the greatest Jewish sages of the last century. Rabbi Feinstein explains that Moses is indeed greater than Aaron, but the brothers are of equal significance because each lives up to his potential. God put every one of us in this world to accomplish our own special and unique mission. Some people's mission brings fame and glory while others fulfill their purpose in a more quiet and humble way. Both Moses and Aaron fulfilled their holy missions and lived up to their potential, so in a sense they were indeed equally great.

A famous story is told of Zusha of Hanipol, a saintly Hasidic rabbi, who was crying on his deathbed. His devoted students reassured him that his many righteous

deeds would surely bring him a great reward in heaven. Zusha answered them, “I’m afraid because when I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won’t ask me, ‘Zusha why weren’t you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham?’ I’m afraid I will be asked, ‘Zusha, why weren’t you more like Zusha?’”

May we each live up to our God-given potential and be authentically ourselves in the best possible way!

[Va'eira: Moses Was Grateful – Helped by River And Earth by Salvador Litvak](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/featured-app/2025/01/21/vaeira-moses-was-grateful/)  
<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/featured-app/2025/01/21/vaeira-moses-was-grateful/>

God said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and raise your hand over the water of Egypt—over their rivers, their canals, their ponds, and all their other bodies of water—and they will turn into blood. (Ex. 7:19)

God said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Raise your hand with your staff over the rivers, the canals, and the ponds, and make the frogs come up over Egypt.’” (Ex. 8:1)

God said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Raise your staff and strike the dust of the earth, and it will turn into lice all throughout Egypt.’” (Ex. 8:12)

Why are the first three plagues of Egypt – blood, frogs, and lice – instigated by Aaron rather than Moses? Rashi points out that the first two plagues require striking the Nile river – the same river that saved Moses when he was a baby by carrying him to the safe embrace of Pharaoh’s kind daughter. The third plague required striking the earth – the same earth that Moses used to bury the Egyptian officer that was beating a Hebrew slave. Moses owed the river and the earth deep gratitude, explains Rashi, so it would have been inappropriate to strike them.

But water and dirt are inanimate objects that don’t have the capacity to have their feelings hurt. So why is it so important for Moses to show them gratitude? Rabbi David Fine teaches that gratitude is not centered around the recipient “**but is rather a character trait that should be built up and living inside of us regardless of who the receiver is.**” Gratitude is a key element of Moses’ character no matter who or what the recipient. And if it’s important to show gratitude to inanimate objects, how much more so should we show gratitude to the people in our lives! \*\*\*\*\*

### Yahrtzeits

Rebecca Greene remembers her father David Schwartz on Sat., Jan. 25

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her grandmother Rose Rosenfeld on Mon., Jan. 27

Craig Miller remembers his mother Roberta Miller on Wed., Jan. 29

Primer Blossom remembers her mother Esther Rappaport on Fri., Jan. 31

