

There are a couple things I find both curious and humorous in this week's Torah portion. It has to do with what it says about the magicians of Egypt. At God's command, Moses and Aaron, the text seems to imply, turned pretty much all the water in Egypt into blood. And then it says that the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. I wonder how we are to make sense of this. If all the water in Egypt has been turned into blood by Moses and Aaron, then where did the magicians get their water?

Nevertheless, assuming that they did have some plain clear water that was not yet changed into blood, then it's very odd to me that they would elect to change possibly the last remaining supply of water into blood. Doing that solved nothing. It only contributed to the problem at hand. I can just hear Pharaoh saying to them, "Why did you do that? We needed *that* water."

It seems to me, that if the magicians wanted to prove their cleverness and the superiority of *their* powers, and really show off for Pharaoh, why then didn't they try to change the blood back into water? That would have been way more impressive than what they did.

The same with the second plague. Frogs are literally everywhere. And the magicians make even *more* frogs come up on the land? Again they made matters worse. Making the frogs disappear: *that* would have been the smarter thing to do. I can imagine Pharaoh again saying: "Guys, really?! What were you thinking?" I'm surprised Pharaoh let them live.

I can imagine Pharaoh's relief when after the third plague of lice arrives, the magicians come to him and tell him: "We just can't do it; we can't make more lice." "***They can't make more lice!!!***" We aren't told why they couldn't make their own lice. I don't know, maybe they were limited to making creatures that had four legs or less...

Well, enough of my attempts at some light-hearted humor. Allow me now to return to my usual intense seriousness. If I were to title this message I might call it The Weight of Words. What is it that causes what we say to have weight or not, to make an impact upon the listener or not? I am referring to weight that is positive and constructive, not negative like saying something unkind or demeaning. When words have the right kind of weight, they penetrate the ears of the listener, they are taken seriously by the listener, and they are remembered by the listener.

HaShem tells Moses in Exodus 6:6: **"Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'"**

These are magnificent words; they are weighty words because they are the very words of God Himself. God made eight wonderful and exciting promises to His people. Yet verse 9, the very next verse, says: **"Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery."** Moses had spoken to them the very words that God told him to say and yet the words did not have weight upon their ears? Why? Was that Moses fault? Was it because his speaking was halting or boring? No, the problem wasn't with Moses, but with the people. Their harsh life of slavery and bondage under the Egyptians had broken their spirit. When people's spirit is broken they cannot listen even to the words of God.

In this case, the spirit of the people of Israel was broken due to the harshness of life under Egyptian rule. But other things can break the spirit, too, such as poverty, hunger, sickness, unhappiness or traumatic loss. When the spirit is broken, the hope-filled words of HaShem somehow don't get through to the heart. And regardless of whatever it is that breaks someone's spirit, the fact is that the person with a broken spirit can't help it. You can't simply will a broken spirit into a place of repair and responsiveness. So there's a helplessness that envelopes anyone who has a broken spirit. So what can be done about this?

Earlier in chapter 6 God says something very interesting and significant to Moses. He said: **"I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shaddai, God Almighty. But by my name *Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh* I did not make myself known to them."** What is the LORD saying here, especially in view of the fact that we find the four letter name of God 165 times in the book of Genesis?

In Genesis God made promises to the patriarchs that He did not fulfill in their lifetimes. The sages tell us that here at the time of the Exodus God did something totally new. He broke in upon human history for the first time and completely shattered the status quo in order to pour out His compassion upon the helpless people of Israel. The patriarchs knew God as the Almighty Sovereign, but Israel as a people would now know Him as a mighty and compassionate and beneficent Deliverer. They would now know Him as the One Who fulfilled the promises spoken to the patriarchs. They would see HaShem's promises to the patriarchs unfold in real time before their own eyes.

But try to imagine how distant these promises made to the patriarchs had seemed to these helpless slaves. If they knew the promises at all, they were kept alive and spread by word of mouth. Today we have the promises of God filling a book that is over 1200 pages long. Yet, how do we regard the promises in this book? Are we able to listen to them and hear them as promises that have been made to us personally by HaShem? Or is our spirit broken as well?

After the people of Israel did not listen to Moses because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery what happened next? The very next word in verse 10 is "so." That means that this is what God did next in response to Israel's broken spirit. **"So the LORD said to Moses: 'Go in, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the people of Israel go out of his land.'"** And we know that this first meeting between Moses and Pharaoh was the beginning of everything that followed - the ten plagues, the refusals of Pharaoh, the near total destruction of the land of Egypt, the judgments of HaShem upon all the gods of Egypt, all of these things culminating in the departure of the people of Israel out of Egypt.

When Moses' words did not weigh upon the people of Israel because their spirit was broken, did this stop God from being able to help them? No, God turned his immediate attention away from the spirit-broken slaves and onto the *slavedrivers* who were, in fact, the enemies of God and of His people, Israel. This meant that for a certain amount of time, nothing seemed to be happening as far as the Hebrew slaves could tell. And at first, things became even worse for the people of Israel. Pharaoh had his taskmasters increase the workload on the Hebrews. But God, HaShem, through Moses and Aaron, was proactively taking steps against the perpetrators of Israel's bondage.

In other words, just because it doesn't seem like God is working doesn't mean He's isn't working. HaShem's work of deliverance can be a very complicated and multi-faceted feat. But finally there comes a point when the actions of HaShem begin to come into view. News of the plagues became known in Goshen where there were no plagues. (Ah, that's where the magicians got their water. The water in Goshen was fine!)

If we believe in the God Who is there, then we also should be thanking Him and watching expectantly for the signs of His working. I call this kind of sign a "God thing." I learn of some good turn of events in someone's life and I say, "That sure sounds like a God thing!" A God thing is when something breaks in upon someone's reality and somehow interrupts the status quo to turn things around and change the direction of what's happening *in a good way*.

I have experienced these kinds of turn around events for over thirty years in my work as a piano technician. Here's what I mean. I work for a piano dealer. Someone comes into one of our stores, carefully selects a piano, pays a significant sum of money for it, and waits excitedly for the moment it is delivered to their home. A quality grand piano today can cost \$20,000.00 or more. And when someone spends that kind of money for a piano, they expect it to be *perfect!* But things happen. Things can go wrong. And there are times when that \$20,000.00 piano arrives in a home and there's something the matter with it, something that the buyer doesn't like about it. And he or she is very unhappy. Often they are ready to send it back and cancel the whole deal. That's where I come in. It is my job to go to that home, discern and rectify the issue, give a plausible explanation for why it happened, and turn an unhappy customer into a satisfied one who wants to keep the piano. It can be a very touchy situation. But more often than not, by the grace and favor of God, I successfully manage to turn sour events around and essentially save the deal.

And I've noticed something through these experiences. When I meet the owner of a problematic piano for the first time, I realize that they don't know me at all. I haven't secured their trust. The only assurance they have is that my company sent me. That's a good thing. That helps. But, what may in fact be a very minor issue with their piano is, to them, a big issue. Me talking about the issue, I've learned, doesn't really change their perspective. I usually can't change their feelings of dissatisfaction by what I say. So the first thing I do is to turn my attention away from the piano owner and onto the piano itself. I fix the problem. And when they see that their issue has been rectified, *then* my words have weight, they can hear what I've said, and they are able to change their minds about sending the piano back.

When Moses began to call down the plagues upon Egypt, with each plague his stature before Pharaoh and before the people of Israel grew. His words carried increasing weight. And though the people of Israel were broken in spirit before the first plague happened, by the time of the tenth plague, they are ready to obey HaShem's instructions through Moses to slaughter the passover lambs and to paint their doorposts and lintels with the blood of the lambs. They have even asked their Egyptian neighbors to give them costly parting gifts, and they are packed and ready to leave Egypt for good. Their spirit is no longer broken. The God of ancient promises has now become the compassionate God of their now Who truly does care for His people and has come down

to rescue them as He long ago promised to do.

Back to us in this present day. The manuscripts that comprise our Bibles were written more than 1900 years ago. The recorded promises of HaShem are ancient promises to us as well. Are we having trouble navigating the promises of HaShem in this highly technological post modern world? Is our spirit broken?

Let us be encouraged by the story of Vaera that our compassionate God and Father is mindful of us and is working, often in unseen ways, and He is proactively going after those forces that have kept us, His beloved children, in bondage, brokenness, and despair.

It is my hope and prayer that the year 2018 will find you at the receiving end of HaShem's work of salvation and deliverance. And may we come to know Him by a new Name as Israel did. Shalom!

