



Pardes's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Shemot. The Long and Winding Road!

Moses has barely started his campaign against Pharaoh, when he experiences his first failure. He did not anticipate the brutality of Pharaoh. After his initial approach to the Egyptian ruler, Pharaoh, retaliates by making the workload even harder for the Israelite slaves: "I will not give you any straw... but there shall be no decrease whatever in your work." (5:11) This cruel measure is a brilliant tactic as it sows discord between the desperate slaves and their new leader, Moses.

The suffering and disillusioned Israelites attack Moses:

"May the Lord ... punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh ... putting a sword in their hands to slay us." (5:21)ⁱ

Moses is in a difficult place. God's plan has failed, and now his people have lost faith in him and turned against him. In failure and desperation, he turns his frustration to God:

"O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people." (5:22)

Moses lays all the blame on God! But really, what did he expect? Did he think it would be easy? Nachmanides comments:

"Moses knew that God had told him that Pharaoh would not agree to release the Israelites, and it would take many wonders and miracles for him to accede. But Moses thought that the process would be short, and events would follow in quick succession... in a matter of days. But now he saw that 3 days had passed and the Israelites were being beaten, and were suffering, and God was not responding, nor was He communicating with Moses to instruct him what to do – then Moses realised that the process would be long and protracted." (Ramban 5:22)

One Talmudic passage has God accusing Moses of not understanding the meaning of a long, protracted process:

“Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.” (Exodus 5:23).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Woe over those who are gone and are no longer found; as I repeatedly revealed Myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty and they did not question My attributes... I said to Abraham: “Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for unto you I will give it” (Genesis 13:17), and yet, when he sought a place to bury Sarah he did not find one until he purchased it for four hundred silver shekels! And he did never question me!” (Sanhedrin 111a)

Please discuss:

- Is Moses disillusionment understandable?
- Was he correct to “question” God?
- Is God’s critique of Moses in Talmud Sanhedrin a fair one? What might be the difference in expectations between Moses and Abraham?

The Exodus from Egypt is one of civilization’s epic stories of freedom, of emancipation from oppression. On the night of Passover, we celebrate the great victory against despotic enslavement and murderous persecution.

But whereas in hindsight it looks simple, the reality was far more complicated. The road to freedom was a twisting rocky road, with failures and setbacks on the way.

Please Discuss

- How do we deal with setbacks and failures in our lives?

God is teaching Moses the notion that sometimes, human processes take unexpected twists and turns.

- What happens when a quick fix turns into a long process?
- What type of mindset does one need to accommodate a long process?
- Where else does Moses experience this in his own life, and the life of the nation? (Clue: How long did they expect to take to get to the Promised Land? How long did it take?)

Shabbat Shalom!

ⁱ The irony of this line should not be lost and it rings with symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome, as the Israelites suggest that their demand for religious worship is a justified reason for their increased workload. Obviously, the Israelites are already loathsome to Pharaoh and Moses is hardly to blame for that.