

THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH
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Parshat Va'era – וארא פרשת

Pharaoh at the River

Most of the Moses-Pharaoh confrontations took place at an unspecified location (which was, presumably, the royal court). Before the plague of blood (the first of the ten plagues), God commanded Moses to find Pharaoh elsewhere. “Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile (Exodus 7:15).” Though theoretically it would have been possible to effectuate the plague of blood anywhere in Egypt -- since not only did the waters of the Nile itself turn to blood, but so, too, did all the other Egyptian bodies of water (7:19) -- nonetheless it seems appropriate for the plague to have been announced, and first manifested, at Egypt’s chief source of drinking water.

The reader of Scripture is free to wonder whether there is any significance to Pharaoh’s morning presence at the Nile. Before the fourth plague (wild beasts), God again instructed Moses to arise early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as the obstinate and unyielding king “comes out to the water” (8:16). Moreover, the verb יוצא in both 7:15 and 8:16 is in the present, not the future, tense, even though the verse relates to God’s revealing a future event. Be’er Yitzhak understood that Biblical linguistic nuance to signify that Pharaoh regularly went to the river in the morning. Why?

Rashbam suggested that Pharaoh’s morning trips to the Nile exemplified the phenomenon of royals’ enjoying a morning constitutional or leisurely horseback ride. Toledot Yitzhak understood Pharaoh’s behavior to be consistent with the aristocratic tradition of enjoying beautiful water views, thought to be therapeutic for one’s eyes. Avital the Scribe maintained that Pharaoh was an Amgushi, citing Exodus 7:15 and Pharaoh’s presence at the river in support of that assertion (Mo’ed Katan 18a). The Amoraim debated the meaning of Amgushi. Rav held that it means sorcerer; Samuel held that it means blasphemer (Shabbat 75a). Rashi explained that, according to Rav, Pharaoh regularly went to the Nile to practice his witchcraft. According to Samuel, Pharaoh went to the river to mock God by asserting his own greatness and exclaiming, “The Nile is my own; I made it for myself (Ezekiel 29:3).” Pseudo-Jonathan adopted Rav’s reading of the verse, depicting Pharaoh as a diviner.

The Midrash theorizes why God chose blood for the first plague. The Egyptians, including Pharaoh, worshipped the Nile as a god. The Almighty wished to smite the false deity in the presence of its worshippers (Tanhuma Va’era 14). Hapi was the god of the inundation event, the annual flooding of the Nile River. In his classic work *The Dawn of Civilization*, French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero noted that Pharaoh himself would occasionally officiate at the Nile religious rites. Hence, Pharaoh’s visit to the river mentioned in Exodus 7:15 could have been of the kind that aroused God’s wrath.

Ibn Ezra suggested that Pharaoh went down to the Nile River in the summer months – the inundation season - to check the water level. In ancient Egypt, various types of nilometers were used to gauge the flow of water. The simplest was a vertical pole submerged in water with graduated horizontal etchings to measure the river’s elevation. Because of the great importance of the rise in water level, Pharaoh would periodically oversee the measurement himself.

Some scholars have posited a naturalistic explanation for the plague of blood. Nahum Sarna succinctly expressed this point of view: “Abnormally heavy rainfall led to an excessively high rise of the Nile and washed down inordinate amounts of red sediment. The neutralization of this substance was retarded so that the entire river took on a bloody hue. As a result, bacteria washed down from the high mountain lakes, disturbed the oxygen balance and killed off the fish, which produced a foul stench (JPS Exodus Commentary).” In this view, Pharaoh would have wanted directly to observe the height of the river, and not rely on second-hand reports, in light of these extraordinary circumstances.

The best-known interpretation of Exodus 7:15 is that Pharaoh regarded himself as a god and was loath to give the impression that he had bodily needs and excretory functions like a mere mortal (Exodus Rabbah 9:8 and Rashi). He went to the river, which functioned as his outhouse, early in the morning, away from prying eyes. Scripture employs the vague expression “going out to the water,” rather than a more explicit reference to defecation or micturition, consonant with the Torah’s general preference for clean language, euphemism, and the avoidance of vulgarity. In the imperial cult of ancient Egypt, Pharaoh was regarded as the reincarnation of the god Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris. Preserving the myth of his immortality and bolstering belief in his deification were vital to the continuity of the Egyptian religio-political system and the maintenance of dynastic rule.

The “cult of personality” has existed in human civilization for millennia. Of course, it continues to this very day (e.g., in North Korea). The Torah makes clear that our leaders are all too human. They have physical needs. They make

moral errors. When Scripture reports that Moses did not eat or drink for forty days atop Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 9:9), it does so to stress a singular exception to the general rule. The heroes in our national and religious past were flesh and blood like us. It would be a major error if hagiographies about them suggested otherwise. We are bidden not to follow the ways of the Egyptians (Leviticus 18:3). Let us instead be steadfast in refusing even to approach deifying charismatic political leaders who enrapture the masses.