

God's Speech of Salvation

By Rav Elchanan Samet

I. A RENEWED MISSION

At the end of last week's parasha (Shemot ch. 5), the mission of Moshe and Aharon to redeem Bnei Yisrael had reached a point of crisis: not only was Pharaoh refusing their demand outright, but as a result of their audience with him he had even intensified the Jews' labor. The officers of Bnei Yisrael, beaten and bewildered, appeal in vain to Pharaoh, then redirect their complaint to Moshe and Aharon, who in turn address it to God (4:22-23): "Why have You dealt badly with this nation? Why then have You sent me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done [even more] evil to this nation, and You have not saved Your nation at all."

God's answer to Moshe concludes parashat Shemot (6:1): "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh, for he will send them out with a strong hand, and with a strong hand will he banish them from his land."

This response prepares us for the beginning of the battle - the plagues that will eventually force Pharaoh's hand. However, this battle does not start here, at the beginning of parashat Va'era (6:2), but only much later (7:8). The intervening section seems like a sort of "time-out." Is this only a literary break in the action (which does not reflect any real events that took place in the meantime, but rather is meant only to prepare us for the new developments in the plot), or did something new happen here?

Obviously, the genealogical lists found in the middle (6:14-27) of the unit under discussion are a literary break. The rest of the narrative in this unit - both what precedes the genealogical lists and what follows - sounds familiar, since it bears a striking resemblance to the episode of the burning bush in parashat Shemot (3:1-4:17). However, despite the many similarities (e.g. God's hearing the cry of the people, His promise to save them from servitude and to bring them to Canaan, Moshe's protest that he is not a suitable candidate to serve as God's messenger, and God's solution of sending Aharon to speak for Moshe), a careful examination reveals that the dialogue at the burning bush and the one in our parasha are not identical.

The mission given to Moshe at the burning bush with relation to Bnei Yisrael achieved its objective (4:31): "The nation believed; and when they heard that God had remembered Bnei Yisrael and that He had seen their suffering, they bowed and prostrated themselves." The similar mission given to Moshe in our parasha, on the other hand, is a failure (6:9): "And Moshe spoke thus to Bnei Yisrael, but they did not listen to Moshe for anguish of spirit and for hard labor." Clearly, this "anguish of spirit" results from the ADDITIONAL hard labor that was heaped on Bnei Yisrael at the end of parashat Shemot. Thus we have before us two different missions at two different times and in different circumstances. In other words, there is a real break in the midst of the plot, during which time a renewed mission is given to Moshe and Aharon.

In fact, both at the burning bush and again in our parasha, Moshe is given a twofold mission: he is sent both to Bnei Yisrael and to Pharaoh. At the burning bush, the discussion between God and Moshe focused on the mission to the nation (while the mission to Pharaoh received only three verses out of a total thirty-nine). This mission to the nation was successful, while the mission to Pharaoh was a failure. In our parasha, however, the relationship between the two missions changes: here the preparation for Moshe's appearance before Pharaoh occupies a central place. In our parasha, too, Moshe is entrusted with a mission to the nation, and this fails; but the mission to Pharaoh eventually succeeds.

The need for a new charge to Moshe to approach Pharaoh is quite understandable: his first mission had been a total failure, and his claim before God (4:23) that "Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done [even more] evil to this nation" requires a divine response. Indeed, this new mission to Pharaoh is presented in much greater detail than the first, with an emphasis on Pharaoh's refusal to accede and the LONG process that is destined to change his mind (7:1-5).

But why the need for a renewed mission to the nation? It is true that the nation is in crisis as a result of the hard labor that has now been added, but what new element is there in what God tells them that was not already said in the first mission? And what is the purpose of a new mission to the nation, when the nation is in no condition to absorb the message, since they are so embittered and anguished by their suffering?

We shall be able to deal with these questions only after examining in depth God's speech at the beginning of the parasha (where He instructs Moshe what to tell Bnei Yisrael). In order to discern what is novel about this speech, we will analyze its structure, style and ideas.

II. STRUCTURE OF THE SPEECH: DIVISION INTO TWO HALVES

A monologue inserted in the middle of a biblical narrative is generally a carefully organized and carefully worded piece of rhetoric designed to impress a certain message upon its target audience (e.g. Yehuda's monologue at the beginning of Vayigash). The monologue opening parashat Va'era appears at a critical juncture in the story of the redemption from Egypt, being preceded by the crisis that befell Moshe and Bnei Yisrael, and followed by the beginning of the battle against Pharaoh and Egypt. This is God's programmatic statement, where He indicates the objectives for His actions from now onwards. As we shall see, this monologue is a literary gem. First, let us present it in such a way as to highlight its structure (A-B-B1-A1):

(2) And God spoke to Moshe and He said to him:

I AM GOD

*(3) I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov as E-I Shad-dai, but by My name H-V-Y-H I was not known to them.

(4) I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their dwelling in which they dwelt.

** (5) I have also heard the groaning of Bnei Yisrael who are enslaved by Egypt, and I have remembered My covenant.

(6) Therefore tell Bnei Yisrael:

I AM GOD

** And I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I shall save you from their bondage,

And I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

(7) And I shall take you to Me for a nation, and I shall be for you a God,

And you will know that I am the Lord your God who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt.

* (8) And I shall bring you to the land which I promised by My hand to give to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and I shall give it to you as a heritage;

I AM GOD.

This monologue is composed of two halves: the first half is what God tells Moshe, and it starts with "I am God." The second half is what Moshe is commanded to tell Bnei Yisrael, and this starts and concludes with "I am God." Thus the words "I am God" form a clear framework: they stand at the opening and at the conclusion of the entire speech, as well as at its exact center, like a central axis: there are fifty words in the first half (before the middle appearance of "I am God") and fifty words in the second half following it. (This phenomenon - the numerical equivalence of two halves - exists in some small literary units, where it expresses the equality of the two halves.)

What distinguishes each half from a linguistic point of view? There are two outstanding phenomena, which both derive from a common reason. Firstly, the verbs in the first half are in the past tense (e.g. "I appeared"), while those in the second half are in the future tense (e.g. "I shall take out"). Secondly, the first half refers to Bnei Yisrael in the third person ("I have heard the groaning of Bnei Yisrael"), while in the second half they are referred to in the second person ("I shall take you out").

The common reason for these phenomena is that in the first half, God is giving Moshe an explanation based on the events of the PAST, as a result of which Moshe is commanded to ADDRESS BNEI YISRAEL and to speak to them in the second person, informing them of God's plan of action IN THE FUTURE. There is a cause and effect relationship between the two halves, explicitly indicated at the end of

the first half: "THEREFORE tell Bnei Yisrael..." Because of the past events recorded in the first half, God will save them in the future (as He promises in the second half).

The first half refers to two different past time periods: the period of the Patriarchs (6:3-4) in the distant past, and the period of the Egyptian enslavement (6:5) in the recent past. In fact, we can pinpoint the latter reference: it refers back to the "many days" during which "the king of Egypt died and Bnei Yisrael sighed because of the bondage" (2:23-25). The word "na'aka" (groaning) appears in the Torah in only these two locations: "And God heard their groaning" (2:24), and "I have heard the groaning of Bnei Yisrael" (6:5).

As for the second half – does it refer to the distant or immediate future? Here too, God's plan covers two time periods in the future: the exodus from Egypt (v. 6-7) in the immediate future; and the arrival in the Promised Land (v. 8) in the more distant future.

Thus, each half is composed of two parts which are distinguished from one another in terms of content and time-frame. There are also various stylistic markers delineating the division of each half into two parts. For example, the first part of the second half of God's speech is enclosed by the phrase "I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt" at its beginning, and "...who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt" at its end.

III. THE PARALLEL BETWEEN THE TWO HALVES

A clear chiasmic parallel exists between the two units that comprise each half. (It will be helpful to refer back to the structural division of this speech appearing above at the beginning of section II of this shiur.) The unit with which the speech opens (A) corresponds to the one with which it concludes (A1) both in content and in language:

1. both mention the three Patriarchs by name;
2. the covenant regarding the giving of the land in unit A is mentioned as an oath ("by My hand") in A1;
3. the phrase "to give the land" appears in both A and A1;
4. unit A1 completes unit A in that Eretz Canaan, the "land of [the Patriarchs'] dwelling," becomes in A1 a "heritage" for their children.

Aside from these linguistic and thematic connections, unit A serves as the reason in the distant past for unit A1, which will be the result in the distant future: God's covenant with the Patriarchs to give them the land is the reason that He will bring their children to the land and give it to them as a heritage.

The two middle units of the monologue, B and B1, likewise correspond to one another in content and in language: both units mention the words "Egypt" and "enslavement" (avoda), and both mention the suffering of Bnei Yisrael. Here, too, there is a causal link between B and B1: God's hearing of Bnei Yisrael's groaning and His remembrance of the covenant (B) are the reason, in the recent past, for the result that will be revealed in the near future: God's coming redemption of Israel from Egypt.

Hence, in both halves, God's HIDDEN actions in the past will bring about REVEALED results in the future, in the form of His intervention in history.

Let us now examine a slightly different division of the monologue, based on its subject matter:

Units A-A1, which are located on the outer boundaries of the speech, deal with the covenant of the land that was made with the Patriarchs, and its realization in the future through the giving of the land to their descendants.

Units B-B1, located at the center of the speech, deal with the suffering in Egypt and the redemption from it.

According to this division, each pair of units numbers 51 words. (This division counts all the appearances of the words "I am God.") The equal number of words in each half - reached through both of the above methods of division - is certainly not coincidental. It simply reinforces our division of each half into units and our indication of the overall chiasmic parallel.

What is the thematic significance of the double identical word-count that we have discovered? The monologue deliberately gives equal weight to different processes. In the division into halves around a central axis (explained in section II above), the text emphasizes the equality between the events of the past and their results in the future. The past is not insignificant in relation to the future; it contains within itself with foundations upon which the future will be built.

In the chiastic division of the monologue according to subjects, the text is giving equal weight to the redemption from Egypt and to the inheritance of the land. The exodus from Egypt is not only a necessary technical precondition for the inheritance of the land; it is a crucial step in the relationship between God and Israel (see verse 7), since it is only based upon the exodus that the realization of the Patriarchal covenant of the land can come about. Furthermore, in both of these historical processes the name of God is revealed as the God of history Who fulfills His plan within it and in relation to it. ("I am God" serves as bookends of the A-A1 framework, and as the center of B-B1.)

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SPEECH IN ITS CONTEXT

Now that the structure of the speech has revealed to us its ideational components and the multi-faceted connection between them, we return to the question of the significance of this monologue in its context: what new element does it introduce in comparison with what God already said at the burning bush? And why is this innovative news given to Moshe and Israel specifically now, during the "break" between the crisis at the end of parashat Shemot and the beginning of the battle against Pharaoh that is about to take place?

God's speech here changes our perspective of the exodus and its significance for Bnei Yisrael from what it has been until now. At the burning bush, God's principle motive in desiring to redeem Israel seems to be saving them from their suffering:

"And God said: I have surely seen the suffering of My nation who are in Egypt and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their pain... And now, behold, the cry of Bnei Yisrael has come before Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which Egypt oppresses them." (3:7-9)

The purpose of the redemption is to improve the situation of Bnei Yisrael – firstly by freeing them from enslavement, and thereafter by bringing them to a good land. The mention of the Patriarchs (3:6, 3:15-16) serves to explain God's empathy for their children. Furthermore, the land is mentioned not as the goal of the redemption, but rather as part of the good which God wishes to bestow upon His suffering nation; it is referred to merely as "a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (3:8). The Patriarchal covenant of the land is not mentioned even once!

The perspective revealed in God's speech at the burning bush can be explained on two levels.

1. The immediate motive for God's wish to redeem His nation is indeed the "anguish of spirit owing to hard labor" (see Shoftim 10:16). The suffering of His children, which has reached the limits of what they can bear (see 2:23-25), is what causes God to respond to their pleas – independently of any far-sighted historical commitments.

2. The most pressing question involved in creating the initial contact between God and His afflicted nation, raised by Moshe at the burning bush in a number of forms, is the expected skepticism of Bnei Yisrael (4:1): "They will not believe me." What then is the best strategy to attract their confidence and to make them ready to listen? The answer is precisely what God does in His monologue – His identification with their suffering and an expression of readiness to free them from it. This is indeed the crux of the speech at the bush. This strategy, in fact, works. When Moshe and Aharon bring God's words to the nation, their reaction is, "And the nation believed, and when they heard that God had remembered Bnei Yisrael and that He had seen their suffering, they bowed" (4:31).

But this strategic advantage turns out to be only temporary: if the purpose of the redemption is only to improve the immediate, physical condition of Bnei Yisrael, then the claim of "Why have you dealt badly with this nation?" is perfectly justified. The intensification of the oppression that comes in the wake of Moshe's first encounter with Pharaoh (the first act that was meant to bring about redemption) creates a contradiction in the people's consciousness – and in that of Moshe himself – and brings about a crisis. It is this crisis that leads to God's speech at the beginning of our parasha.

In this speech, the starting point of the redemption is to be found in God's covenant with the Patriarchs regarding the land (brit bein ha-betarim, etc.), and the purpose to which the entire process is heading is the fulfillment of that covenant by bringing the descendants of the Patriarchs to the land. The redemption from Egyptian servitude, with all its immediate importance, is only a vehicle for the realization of the covenant. It should be noted that in this speech, the goodness of the land is not mentioned at all – for the purpose of the redemption is only to fulfill God's plan as embodied in the covenant with the Patriarchs. Hence the land is here described as "the land which I lifted My hand to give to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov." The importance of the inheritance of the land finds expression in the fact that it surrounds the speech as a "first cause" (A) as well as a final purpose (A1). In this speech, God hears Bnei Yisrael's groaning because of His covenant with the Patriarchs (and therefore the covenant, not the suffering, is central); and the redemption from Egypt is meant ultimately to realize the covenant.

The connection between the enslavement in Egypt (and the redemption from it) and the realization of the promise of the land is not coincidental: it flows from the brit bein ha-betarim itself, which tied the inheritance of the land to oppression in exile and redemption from it. To Avram's question (Bereishit 15:8), "How will I know that I will inherit it?", God replies (15:13-18): "You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers in a land not theirs, and they will serve them, and they will afflict them for four hundred years... and the fourth generation will return here... On that day God made a covenant with Avram, saying: To your seed I will give this land...."

From this point of view, it is of less significance that Bnei Yisrael at that moment did not listen to Moshe. This declaration had to be made at that time and the place for the sake of future generations, and even for the sake of that generation which, once freed from their slavery, could turn its attention to the question of its origins and its future.

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Following the crisis at the end of parashat Shemot, there was a need to elevate Bnei Yisrael's perspective on contemporary events, lest their spirit fall when confronted with crises like the one they had just faced. Perhaps we may put it thus: the very purpose of the crisis was to bring about a situation in which the Divine plan would have to be revealed in its totality. The reasons for redemption put forward at the burning bush were simply insufficient. They would not stand up to the test of reality; the reality around them would force Bnei Yisrael to face a speech that contained within it a broad outline of the plan for redemption. A broad historical view of the far-off purpose would give them strength to withstand temporary difficulties.

From this point of view, the speech did not achieve its objective. "They did not listen to Moshe for affliction of spirit and for hard labor." The loftiness of the speech is completely lost on Bnei Yisrael, who are mired in the degradation of slavery and torture. Nevertheless, the value of the speech remains.

From the lowest point of the slavery, at the end of parashat Shemot (the situation paradoxically brought about as a result of the beginning of Moshe's redemptive action), the gradual process of redemption will begin, starting with the plague of blood and onwards. At the beginning of parashat Va'era we therefore find ourselves at the watershed in the story of the exodus: between the climax of the slavery's severity and the beginning of the battle which will end in exodus. Starting from the plague of blood, the four expressions of redemption will start to be realized.

Before the battle begins, before the process of redemption gets under way, this Divine monologue appears as a declaration of God's intentions with regard to that process - a document explaining in advance its ultimate purpose, lest the small details which comprise the future battle bring us to forget its true purpose.