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Why Did Moshe Mislead Pharaoh?
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THREE INSTANCES OF DECEPTION

The specter of apologetics has haunted biblical exegesis since its inception. The temptation to make the Torah conform to the values of one's surrounding society has on many occasions led exegetes to distort the meaning of the text. The opening parshiot of Sefer Shemot (from Shemot until Beshalach) present classic instances of this phenomenon, for they contain three instances of Israel deceiving the Egyptians. Moreover, each case of deception is mandated by God!

The first instance is to be found in Moshe and Aharon's repeated request of Pharaoh:

Let us go on a journey of three days in the desert that we may offer sacrifice to the Lord our God. (5:3)

This deceptive request follows God's command to Moshe at the burning bush:

And you and the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him: The Lord God of the Hebrews appeared to us; now let us go on a journey of three days in the desert that we may offer sacrifices to the Lord our God. (3:18)

The second deception is the Jews' "borrowing" of the Egyptians' vessels as they leave Egypt (12:35-36). Moshe had previously been commanded in this regard (11:2); at the burning bush, too, God had told Moshe that this would happen (3:21-22).

The third deception occurs after the nation departs from Egypt. God commands Moshe:

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and let them return and encamp before Pi Ha-chirot... And Pharaoh will say of Bnei Yisrael, "They are lost in the land; the desert has closed upon them." And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh, that he will pursue them. (14:2-4)

In other words, they are intentionally tricking Pharaoh into chasing them. Immediately thereafter (end of verse 4) we read, "And they did thus."

Although the borrowing of the vessels has especially occupied apologetic commentary, I would like to focus here on the first deception.

WAS ANY REAL DECEPTION INVOLVED HERE?

Both R. Yitzchak Arama (Akedat Yitzchak, sha'ar 35) and the Abarbanel (ch. 3, question 16) pose the question of why God commanded Moshe to speak deceitfully to Pharaoh. Instead of asking Pharaoh to permit the Jews to celebrate a brief festival in the desert, why did Moshe not simply demand their freedom from an unjust state of slavery?

Nechama Leibowitz z"l (New Insights into Sefer Shemot, Hebrew, pp. 73-75) examines and rejects a number of answers to this question before settling on the answer offered by both the Akedat Yitzchak and the Abarbanel. They claim that this was no deception but rather a genuine request, meant to serve as a test for Pharaoh. If he would refuse even this minor request, his hard-heartedness and stubbornness would be revealed to all. If, however, he would have acceded to this request, the Jews

would indeed have returned to Egypt after several days, and Moshe would then continue to negotiate slowly for their freedom.

Nechama Leibowitz also quotes the author of Ha-ketav Veha-kabbala, who follows the approach of the commentators quoted above, and adds an interesting point. Since Pharaoh had failed the test, there was no further point in presenting him again with the request for a short journey.

God commanded that at first Moshe should request something small, such as to go on a three-day journey, in order to discern Pharaoh's stubbornness. Once he refused even this small request, Moshe asked several times for complete and eternal freedom.

Where does Moshe request "complete and eternal freedom?" Ha-ketav Veha-kabbala (4:23) ingeniously attempts to prove that the words, "Send My people and they will serve Me" can be interpreted as, "Free them permanently so that they may be servants unto Me." He distinguishes between the "kal" and the "pi'el" forms of the verb sh-l-ch, indicating that the latter means to send out permanently.

Unfortunately, however, this explanation does not stand up to a careful examination of the text. The distinction between the "kal" and "pi'el" forms of this verb has nothing to do with whether the sending is done with the intention of return or if it refers to complete and permanent freedom. The distinction between them lies in the strength of the action of the one who is sent: in the "pi'el" form it refers to a strong movement of sending (either as a result of banishing him or as a result of removing a barrier which had previously prevented him from breaking loose). Following such a "freeing," nothing prevents the one who was freed from returning to the one who freed him. (See, for example, [Bereishit 28:6](#), [Shemot 22:4](#), [Shemuel I 2:20](#).) In fact, the opposite is true: a person can "send" in the "kal" form without the one who is sent returning to him (e.g. [Bereishit 45:5](#), [Shemot 9:14](#)).

A DECEPTION FROM BEGINNING TO END

The above explanations demonstrate the danger of getting carried away with apologetics. The story is presented to us over a course of four parshiot (Shemot – Beshalach), and nowhere throughout this narrative do we read even once of any request for "outright freedom." From Moshe's first appearance before Pharaoh (chapter 5) until after the slaying of the firstborn (chapter 12), the request under discussion remains only a journey to the desert to serve God, and thereafter a return. (See e.g. 5:1, 5:3, 7:16, 7:26, 8:4, 10:8-11, 10:24-26, 12:31-32.)

Let us examine, for example, the dialogue between Moshe and Pharaoh preceding the plague of kinnim (gnats). Moshe is commanded to tell Pharaoh (8:16): "Send out My nation that they may serve Me." And Pharaoh, temporarily capitulating, agrees (8:21): "Go and OFFER SACRIFICES TO YOUR GOD in the land." By the word "ba-aretz" (in the land), he means "in the land of Egypt" and not "in the desert," as they had first requested (even though they do not mention the desert here). But Moshe insists specifically on going to the desert, saying (8:23): "A JOURNEY OF THREE DAYS we shall go in the desert, and we shall offer sacrifices to the Lord our God as He told us." Pharaoh concedes to this too (8:24): "I shall send you and you will sacrifice to the Lord your God in the desert, ONLY DO NOT GO TOO FAR," and Moshe agrees to this (!), adding (8:25): "Only let Pharaoh no more deal falsely in not sending out the nation to sacrifice to God."

Could there be any clearer proof of the continued deception of Pharaoh than this debate?

When Pharaoh finally capitulates, following the final plague, he agrees to let them take their children and flocks "as you have spoken" (12:32). At no point did it enter the thoughts of Bnei Yisrael to return to Egyptian slavery at the end of the agreed time, and Moshe never imagined that his negotiations with Pharaoh would continue. What in fact happened was:

And it was told to the king of Egypt that THE NATION HAD ESCAPED, and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants turned towards the nation, and they said: What is this that we have done? For we have sent Israel out of our service! (14:5)

To Pharaoh it finally became clear, with complete certainty, that the entire negotiation process had been based on deception. The continuation of the "negotiations" between him and Moshe and Bnei Yisrael took place, as we know, at the Red Sea.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE THREE INCIDENTS OF DECEIT

Now that we have freed ourselves of the apologetic explanations that deny the facts of the story, let us return to the question of the deceit (whose scope has become clear to us), and let us try to understand not its justification but rather its simple motive.

What function did it serve in the negotiations?

The Ibn Ezra answers this question (Perush Katzar 11:4; see also Perush Arokh 10:10):

Know that this was a great thing, and Bnei Yisrael were completely righteous in that they did not reveal the secret (that they would not return). Pharaoh believed Moshe's words, "a journey of three days," to mean that they would go and then return to Egypt. Heaven forbid that [we say that] the prophet should lie, for he never explicitly said, "We shall return." God's wisdom is beyond our understanding. It would appear to me, though, that this [deception] was performed for two reasons: firstly, in order that they would give them vessels of gold and silver - for had they known that they would not return, they would not have given them. And secondly, in order that

Pharaoh and his army would drown. For had they left with his permission, and had he not believed that they would return, he would not have pursued after them. And the proof [of this explanation] is (14:5), "And it was told to the king of Egypt that the nation had escaped."

The Ibn Ezra's explanation is impressively developed by the Ran (Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven) in his Derashot (end of #11).

The Abarbanel, though, rejects his words:

His explanation is insufficient, for it would not have been difficult for God to harden Pharaoh's heart in order that he pursue them, without any need for deception.

However, an examination of what the Ran says shows that he answers this claim:

The way God acts is to bring "counsel from afar" to make His enemies fall into our hands and to avenge Himself of them ... He wished to punish all the Egyptians by the means they had used to commit evil against Israel (i.e. since they drowned the Israelite boys in the water, they too were drowned in the water) ... and He wished to bring about a situation where they themselves, OF THEIR OWN CHOICE, would enter the water and die there. Had Moshe informed Pharaoh from the beginning that their time had come to be redeemed, he would certainly have agreed [to their demand] because of the plagues, and would not have pursued them thereafter, for why would he pursue them after having willingly let them go when they were still under his rule? Therefore God did not want Moshe to tell Pharaoh exactly what was happening, but rather to say that they were going to offer

sacrifices on a three-day journey, such that when they would tell Pharaoh thereafter "that the nation had escaped," he would think ... that everything Moshe had done had not come from God but rather had been done deceitfully and fraudulently. For had it not been thus, why would Moshe have fooled him by saying that they were going only to offer sacrifices? For this very reason He commanded, "Let each man ask his neighbor [for vessels of silver and gold];" even though the money rightfully belonged to the Jews and they could have taken it openly, God nevertheless told them to dissemble ... so that when it was told to the king of Egypt and his nation that Bnei Yisrael were escaping, there is no doubt that they regarded them as bandits and swindlers... and this, without doubt, brought them to pursue them... The intention behind all of this was hidden from Israel, and perhaps even from Moshe(!).

According to the Ibn Ezra and the Ran, there is a direct link connecting the three acts of deception, and all were directed toward attaining revenge on Pharaoh and all his army. The negotiations conducted between Moshe and Pharaoh were not of the type that follow regular diplomatic rules. Rather, the negotiations were merely one aspect of the war between them, and in a war deception is permissible, since its purpose is to bring about the enemy's downfall. I found a wonderfully simple expression of this view in a commentary whose author I do not know; it is quoted in the Chumash Rav Peninim (Levin-Epstein, Jerusalem 5726) on 3:18:

"And now let us go on a journey of three days..." Abarbanel found a difficulty... and the author of D.R. (?) wrote that he read in a certain book that this presents no difficulty at all: for IN A WAR IT IS PERMISSIBLE TO

ENGAGE IN EVERY TYPE OF DECEIT AND WILINESS AGAINST THE ENEMY, even to lie to him explicitly with words. We found this in the case of Yehoshua in his war against Ai, where God commanded him (Yehoshua 8:3), "Make you an ambush for the city behind it" – in order to mislead the enemy. There is not the slightest prohibition involved, for this falls under the category of "If someone comes to kill you, get up and kill him first." Anything is justified in order to kill him. Here, likewise, there was great benefit to be gained from misleading Pharaoh such that he would believe that they only wanted to go on a journey of three days, in order that consequently he would pursue them to the sea and be drowned in it, just as they drowned Bnei Yisrael in the water. Therefore it was completely permissible to deceive him... This also answers the question of what He said at the burning bush, "Each woman will ask of her neighbor [vessels of silver and gold]" – why is this written here, for this happened at the end of the plagues? The purpose was to explain to Israel that for this reason they should speak falsely, that they should ask only to go for three days, for thereby they would be able to ask the Egyptians for vessels of silver and gold, because they told them that they were going only for three days. The lending of the vessels was also the cause of their drowning in the sea, for they desired the silver and gold that Israel had taken from them, and therefore they pursued them into the sea and drowned. ALL OF THIS WAS PERMISSIBLE FOR ISRAEL TO DO TO THESE WICKED PEOPLE WHO HAD EMBITTERED THEIR LIVES WITH FORCED HARD LABOR FOR NO REASON,

AND HAD DROWNED THEIR CHILDREN IN
THE RIVER.

To bring this home to the contemporary reader, substitute the word "Nazis" for "Egyptians" and you will see why any means were legitimate in order to wreak God's vengeance upon the cruel oppressor.

FALSE PRETENSES AS A BASIS FOR THE NEGOTIATIONS

Let us return to examine the deceit in the negotiations in isolation from the other two incidents of deceit. Can it be explained in terms of the requirements of the negotiations themselves? Was there any need for it or benefit to be gained from it in the negotiations? I propose the following positive answer: Pharaoh's honor and his own self-interest required this deceit.

Despite the fact that Pharaoh was Israel's enemy, and "all is fair in war" (as we may conclude from the commentary quoted above), we may also say the opposite: the stage which preceded the war (the battle itself having taken place only at the Red Sea) was the stage of diplomatic relations, and in diplomacy one must act diplomatically. This is how Rashi interprets the verse (6:13), "And He gave them a charge for Bnei Yisrael and for Pharaoh in Egypt." According to the Midrash (Tanchuma, [Shemot 2](#)): "Gave them a charge for Pharaoh" means that they were charged to give him honor through words." For this very reason Moshe was commanded not to tell him the truth.

God does not demand of His creatures things that are clear in advance as being beyond their abilities. The abyss separating the true purpose of Moshe's mission from what could have been told to Pharaoh is clearly illustrated in what God says at the burning bush, where these two are juxtaposed (3:16-18):

Go and collect the elders of Israel and tell them... I have remembered you... I shall lift you up from the suffering of Egypt to the land

of the Canaanite... And you shall come... to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him... Let us go on a journey of three days in the desert that we may offer sacrifices to the Lord our God.

Could Pharaoh have been made party to the true purpose of the Jews' journey from Egypt? He could not have agreed to freeing them under any circumstances, for two reasons:

1. The demand to free Israel from their slavery in Egypt implied a questioning of the legality of this slavery. Perhaps this question would not have been perceived by Pharaoh and his nation as a legitimate and justified one, in light of the accepted norms of their society (compare Melakhim I 9:20-22).

2. Historians who have studied this period conclude that the land of Canaan was at that time under Egyptian rule. (A clear hint at the Egyptian control of Canaan is to be found in the Torah itself, in the story of Yosef where three successive verses [[Bereishit 47:13-15](#)] mention Egypt and Canaan together as a single political-economic unit.) A demand to free Israel from Egypt could obviously not hide their destination – Canaan. Pharaoh could not agree to freeing a nationalistic element whose proclaimed aim was to dilute Egyptian rule in its long-held colony. The Egyptian nation would also have refused to accept this.

In order to facilitate the very existence of the negotiations with Pharaoh, and in order to provide Pharaoh with an honorable way in which to allow the requests made of him, such that his ministers and his nation would not resent him, it was essential that the smallest possible demand be presented: to go on a three-day journey to offer sacrifices in the desert.

But this does not mean that Pharaoh did not suspect Bnei Yisrael's true intention: starting at least at the time of the plague of gnats his suspicion is aroused, and he demonstrates readiness to accede to their request only in such a way as would

ensure Israel's return (by leaving their children or livestock in Egypt or by sacrificing in Egypt itself). Prior to the plague of locusts, he gives clear expression to his suspicion: "See that evil will confront you" (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban, 10:10). Nevertheless he wordlessly "asks" them to continue in their deception. It was only on the basis of this continued bilateral pretense that the negotiations could proceed and ultimately achieve a willing capitulation (albeit as a result of circumstances which forced it) by Pharaoh and the Egyptian nation.

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