

International Rabbinic Fellowship

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Bo

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Mordechai Rackover

No Choice

One of the Hollywood mythologies that runs through the Exodus story is the amazing idea that Moshe was an Egyptian prince who grew up beside his eventual nemesis, Ramses, the Pharaoh. This is the tale told in the classic Cecil B. DeMille film *"The Ten Commandments,"* and elaborated on in the animated film *"The Prince of Egypt."* There is scant evidence in the Torah for such an idea. While the daughter of Pharaoh rescues Moshe and raises him in her household, this is not proof of his having been a sort of twin adopted brother to the eventual Pharaoh. MOSES and RAMSES do have similar names, and traditional commentators, not only Sigmund Freud, took note of this and wrestled with the Hebrew version of his name, Moshe, sensing that it should somehow be closer to the Egyptian. But this doesn't support the myth of their fraternal relationship.

The more compelling story is, after all, the cosmic battle between the God of Israel and the Egyptian leadership's belief in gods that are powerless. The proxies in this battle are Moshe and Ramses, Aaron and the Sorcerers, and the weapons of war are nature and its various elements. The Egyptian belief in gods that are natural phenomena or celestial bodies – the Sun, the Nile – is attacked and defeated by God via Moses and Aaron. Ramses is proven powerless.

This week's parsha features one of the most powerful

moments in the Exodus cycle. At the end of the ninth plague, Moshe and Ramses have another encounter; it will be their last. Pharaoh allows the Hebrews to go out and worship God in the desert; they shall go he says but must leave behind all their livestock and herds. Moshe rejects this and pushes back, we read:

Shemot 10:25-27

"But Moses said, 'You yourself must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offering to offer up to the lord our God; our own livestock, too, shall go along with us – not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of the lord our God; and we shall not know with what we are to worship the lord until we arrive there.' But the lord stiffened Pharaoh's heart and he would not agree to let them go."

And once God has stiffened Ramses' heart and he declines to let them go he says to Moses: Shemot 10:28 ..."Be gone from me! Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die."

This is the first time that Ramses has threatened Moshe's life. It has been a long and arduous conflict; the Egyptians have suffered greatly, yet Moshe and Ramses have some sort of accord, chemistry even. I believe that until this point, Ramses was too proud to suggest eliminating Moshe; for Moshe's death would also destroy Pharaoh's existential need for victory. Pharaoh, had he eliminated his enemy by natural means would

have shown himself to be weaker. Moshe's reply to the threat on his life is found in verse 29 ... "You have spoken rightly. I shall not see your face again!" Finally, Moshe has a moment of pro-active prophecy. Until now it seems as though he and Pharaoh have both been moved as chess pieces, but here, finally, Moshe is able to see beyond the futility of each of these encounters and recognize that their relationship has truly come to an end. In a Shakespearian moment the whole drama unfolds in front of him and he sees that there is an end. Moshe knows that as certain as he is in God and the truth of his quest there is an equal amount of futility in Pharaoh's. They have reached the natural end to this contest.

In an attempt to make such a state compatible with our belief in free will Pharaoh's 'hardened heart' has been subjected to myriad analyses by Jewish Philosophers. Ignored, however, is that Moshe also had no free will. He, like Pharaoh, is locked in this Heavenly plan, and despite his protestations, Moshe is made to play his role. He begs God repeatedly not to force him into a leadership role and tragically when, in the book of Bamidbar, Moshe acts on his own feelings, he is swiftly and powerfully punished. Thus, while he hates what Pharaoh stands for, Moshe has a hint of sympathy! He understands through experience that they have been in a pitched but un-chosen battle, and that Pharaoh, though the ringleader is also ultimately a victim. When Moshe adds the seemingly unnecessary "I shall not see your face again!" to his previous, "You have spoken rightly," I detect a hint of Moshe's personality peeking through, pushing for closure to a very long and very

powerful relationship. Were Moses and Ramses brothers? No. They were enemies. Men fighting a battle that was far far bigger than either of them, and as it drew to a close, Moses reflected and had a wash of memory and clarity and closed the door. Hollywood, in this case, did latch on to something; the feeling that Pharaoh and Moshe were deeply linked and parallel characters that comes to a head in this week's reading. Shabbat Shalom

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