

Va'era

וַאֲרָא

“I appeared”

Exodus 6:2 – 9:35

Torah Together



The next two *Torah* portions describe the battle that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob wages with the gods of Egypt through Moses and Aaron. God inflicts ten plagues on Egypt, each one more devastating than the one before it. When it's all over, Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt will be defeated and God's purposes will be accomplished.

Much insight can be gained by considering these events from God's perspective – what was He accomplishing by confronting Pharaoh and Egypt's gods in this way? And what can we learn about God from this story?

1. God promises deliverance - 6:2-12

a) In verses 2 - 8, God speaks very explicitly to Moses. How does He begin and end his statement? What is the essence of His speech to Moses? Is this a reprimand?

God begins and ends his statement to Moses with the phrase “I am YHWH”. (Old Testament scholars call this “inclusio” and it imparts special significance to the revelation.) God recalls his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying that He has heard the groaning of the Israelites, and will REDEEM them with an outstretched arm. God may have been reprimanding Moses for a lack of faith.

b) God also points out to Moses that his ancestors did not know Him by the name YHWH but by El Shaddai. Why do you think this is significant?

El Shaddai means ‘God Almighty’ or ‘God the all-powerful’, which is a good description of God, but not his name, which is YHWH. Thus Moses was introduced to God on a more personal level than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Scripture Link:

Genesis 17:1 records the first instance of the use of the term *El Shaddai* (or God Almighty) as a name or description of God. What was the subject of this passage and what events were transpiring?

c) Did the Israelites believe Moses? Why? What was Moses' response when God instructed him to go to Pharaoh again? Why do you think Moses responded this way?

The Israelites did not believe Moses because of their ‘discouragement and cruel bondage.’ He pointed out to God that if the Israelites didn't believe him, then Pharaoh wouldn't either. He also referred back to his speech problem. Moses was clearly discouraged and not confident.

The Name of God

From the last *Torah* portion, we know that God revealed His personal name to Moses whereas Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew Him only as El Shaddai, or “God Almighty.” Why do you think the actual name of God was used in the book of Genesis? (Hint: Who wrote Genesis?)

Why these genealogies?

It often seems that much of the Torah is taken up with long lists of names, detailing the relationships of individuals. This was a common practice among ancient cultures to provide an oral history of clans and tribes. Even today, they provide **context**, helping us understand the times and people involved in the historical events being described.

Scripture Link:

Genealogies often appear at seemingly random points in the *Torah*. However, they are all linked together in some way. As an example, you can find **Amminadab** (Aaron's father-in-law) mentioned several places, like **Numbers 1:7**.

God's Agenda

God's actions are usually efficient, accomplishing several goals at the same time. According to **Exodus 7:4-5**, what two major goals does God intend to achieve with His upcoming actions? Can you think of other actions by God that have accomplished several goals at the same time?

Scripture Link:

For the names of Pharaoh's magicians, see **2 Timothy 3:8**. Details such as this testify to the divine source of our Scriptures.

2. Family record of Moses and Aaron - 6:13-27

a) Why do you think God thought it important that this genealogy be inserted here? Why do you think it starts with Reuben? Why doesn't it include Jacob's other sons?

It's not clear why this is inserted here, but it could be an indication of the beginning of the real story of God versus Pharaoh. It's probably out of respect that it starts with Reuben, then Simeon, and Levi since this is the birth order. It stops with Levi (and goes into greater detail), because this is the point of this genealogy.

b) What are the names of the three clans that make up the tribe of Levi? What do you find interesting about the mother and father of Moses and Aaron?

Levi's sons were Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. Levi and Aaron came through Kohath. Both their parents were Levites.

c) Can you determine what tribe Aaron's wife is from? ***Numbers 1:7 shows that Amminadab was from the tribe of Judah.***

3. Aaron and Moses meet Pharaoh again - 6:28 - 7:13

a) At this second meeting with Pharaoh, how does God handle Moses' 'faltering lips'?

God instructs Aaron to give Pharaoh his message. God appears to indulge Moses' lack of confidence.

b) In 7:1-5, God gives at least two reasons for His coming actions. What are they?

One is to bring his people out of Egypt and another so that the Egyptians will know that YHWH is God.

c) How old were Moses and Aaron at this time? ***Verse 7 says Moses was 80 and Aaron was 83.***

d) Who threw down the staff in front of Pharaoh? Describe what happened. How do you think this happened? What does this imply about the struggle with Pharaoh?

Aaron threw down the staff. Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate this miracle with their own staffs, but Moses' snake swallowed theirs. This shows that the struggle was between God and Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt.

(NOTE: See 2 Tim 3:8 for the names of Pharaoh's magicians.)

4. The plague of blood - 7:14-24

a) When Moses spoke God's words in verses 16-18 to Pharaoh, did he make God's position clear? Of what was He trying to convince Pharaoh?

God's words to Pharaoh were very specific. This miracle was to convince Pharaoh that YHWH is God, the God of Moses.

b) Who struck the waters of the Nile and what happened? Were Pharaoh's magicians able to duplicate this miracle? What was Pharaoh's response?

Aaron actually struck the water of the Nile, turning it to blood. Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate this miracle. Pharaoh's "heart became hard" and he "turned and went into his palace."

5. The plague of frogs - 7:25 - 8:15

a) How much time passed between the first plague and this second plague?

Seven days passed before Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh a second time.

b) Describe this plague that God inflicted on Egypt. Did He give Pharaoh advance warning? Were Pharaoh's magicians able to duplicate this miracle?

Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh that God was going to infest the land with frogs. Pharaoh's magicians could duplicate this miracle also.

c) The Egyptians worshiped frogs as the god Hekt. How do you think this effected the people during this miracle?

It must have been disconcerting to have a revered animal become a nuisance and to be piled up, dead, into stinking heaps. This definitely showed that God was greater than the gods of Egypt.

d) How did Pharaoh respond to this plague? Why do you think he went back on his word?

Pharaoh at first agreed to let the people go worship, but then changed his mind. He had too much to lose by obeying: his work force, his authority, his position as a god, and he would "lose face."

Egypt's gods: Hapi

The Egyptians considered the Nile river "the giver of life to all men." They worshiped the god Hapi as the god of the Nile. By turning the water of the Nile into blood, God was showing His superiority over the pagan god Hapi.

Egypt's gods: Hekt

The Egyptian goddess Hekt, a fertility goddess, was represented as a woman with a frog's head. By producing an infestation of frogs, God showed that the goddess Hekt was not in control of fertility, even that of frogs. It must have been discouraging to see the symbol of their fertility goddess turned into reeking piles of dead frogs.

Egypt's gods: Geb

Geb was an Egyptian god of the earth and therefore reigned over the dust of the earth. Again, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses, YHWH, was able to make a laughingstock of an Egyptian god.

Egypt's gods: Khepri

Khepri was the Egyptian god of creation and rebirth. He was represented as a man with the head of a fly. Again, YHWH makes a nuisance out of an Egyptian god.

Egypt's gods: Hathor

Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love and protection, was often depicted as a woman with a cow's head. This plague was a particular insult to Pharaoh as he believed that he had a special relationship with Hathor as the protector of Egypt.

6. The plague of gnats - 8:16-19

a) Who brought about this third plague on Egypt and how did he do it? The Egyptians worshiped Geb, god of the earth. Given the nature of gnats, how do you think the Egyptians felt about this plague? ***Aaron performed this miracle by striking the ground with Moses' staff. Gnats can be extremely bothersome and the people must have been very irritated that the dust of the earth turned into these bothersome gnats.***

b) Were Pharaoh's magicians able to duplicate this miracle? What was their conclusion? What was Pharaoh's response? ***Pharaoh's magicians could not duplicate this miracle and concluded that it must be "the finger of God." Pharaoh just hardened his heart. (The term "the finger of God" can be found in Exodus 31:18, Deut 9:10, Psalm 8:3, and Luke 11:20. In all cases, it refers to direct intervention by God.)***

7. The plague of flies - 8:20-32

a) In what way was this fourth plague different from the previous plagues? What was God's point of this difference? (It would appear that Pharaoh's magicians had given up trying to duplicate God's miracles by this time.)

With this plague, the flies infested all the Egyptians but did not go near the land of Goshen where the Israelites lived. God was trying to show that He was YHWH, that He was there in Egypt, and that He loved His children.

b) What was Pharaoh's initial response to this plague? What was Moses' objection to offering their sacrifice "here in the land"? Why do you think Pharaoh again went back on his word? ***Pharaoh said that he would let the Israelites sacrifice in Egypt. Moses objected that sacrificing animals to YHWH would be offensive to the Egyptians and they might stone the Israelites. Pharaoh agreed to let the people go away to sacrifice. He again went back on his promise for any of several reasons. It seems that Pharaoh was anxious to fight God.***

8. The plague on livestock - 9:1-7

a) Describe this fifth plague on the Egyptians. Which livestock was spared from this plague? What effect do you think this miracle had on the people of Egypt?

In this plague, all the Egyptian livestock "in the field" was smitten with disease and died. The Israelite's livestock was spared, as God had said. In addition, it may be that any Egyptian livestock that was brought in from "the field" may have been spared. (The people were probably more ready to believe YHWH than was Pharaoh.) This plague probably was quite costly to the Egyptian people as livestock was a source of significant wealth.

b) What was Pharaoh's response to this miracle? ***Pharaoh again hardened his heart and would not let the people go.***

9. The plague of boils - 9:8-12

a) Who performed this sixth miracle and how did he do it? From Pharaoh's perspective how was this miracle different than the others? ***Moses tossed handfuls of soot from a furnace into the air in front of Pharaoh and festering boils broke out on men and animals. Boils are extremely painful and although it doesn't say explicitly, one can assume that Pharaoh himself was struck with them. This plague struck him on his person, making it "very personal."***

b) What was Pharaoh's response to this miracle?
Here it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

10. The plague of hail - 9:13-35

a) Through Moses, God tells Pharaoh exactly what He intends to do and why. According to verse 16, why is God dealing with Egypt in this way?

God says that He could have easily wiped the Egyptians from the face of the earth. Instead He has dealt with them in this way so that He might show Pharaoh His power and "that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth." God's purpose was to show himself not only to the Egyptians and the Israelites but also to all subsequent generations who would hear of His miraculous deeds.

b) Hail must have been a fairly rare occurrence in Egypt, as it still is today, and this was a record-breaking hail storm. Who sustained what kind of damage from this hailstorm and who was protected?

All people and animals who were in the fields died. People who had grown to fear the word of God (including some of Pharaoh's officials) brought their slaves and livestock in from the field (verse 20). Also, no hail fell in Goshen (verse 26).

c) How was Pharaoh's response to this plague different than to the others? Do you think Pharaoh's confession was heartfelt? Did Moses think so?

Pharaoh said, "This time I have sinned. ... I and my people are wrong." It's fairly clear that Pharaoh didn't believe this. He must have taken YHWH to be a pretty simple, naive god. Moses didn't seem to believe him either because in verse 30 he says, "I know that you and your officials still do not fear God."

d) After the hail stopped, what did Pharaoh and his officials do? What do you think their attitude toward God was at this time?
"Pharaoh and his officials hardened their hearts and would not let the Israelites go" (verses 34-35).

Egypt's gods: Im-Hotep or Isis

Im-Hotep was considered a god of healing and Isis was the goddess of medicine and peace. Certainly this plague showed both to be impotent in comparison to the God of the Israelites.

Egypt's gods: Nut

Nut, the Egyptian goddess of the sky, was also the mother of the sun god, Ra. She was supposed to protect the land from destruction which came down from the heavens and so was particularly responsible for not preventing this plague.

"I have raised you up . . . that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

Exodus 9:16

The Superiority of our God

In **Exodus 9:16**, God clearly sets Himself above both Pharaoh and all the gods of Egypt. Through Moses, God tells Pharaoh that his very existence was a function of God's will and that God intends to use him so that "my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." It appears that Pharaoh had no concept of who he was dealing with. The very fact that we are studying this story, some 3500 years after it occurred, bears witness to the fact that God was successful – Pharaoh was indeed used so that God's name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

Digging deeper

1. God had many things to demonstrate and teach through his dealings with Egypt. List some of the things God was trying to accomplish through His miracles. (Hint: One might be to demonstrate to Egypt that He was more powerful than their gods.)

God was accomplishing many things through His miracles:

- a) the deliverance of Israel**
- b) God's supremacy over the gods of Egypt**
- c) the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**
- d) the need for a redeemer for Israel (and for us)**
- e) the concept of a passover lamb**
- f) the defeat of the gods of Egypt**
- g) the punishment of Egypt for oppressing the Israelites**

2. There are many places in this parashah (as well as the previous one) where God talks of "hardening Pharaoh's heart." Sometimes it appears that God does this and other times that Pharaoh himself does it. Research "hard-heartedness" and see if you can determine what role God played and what role Pharaoh played in this. Does this contradict man's free will?

In one sense, God raised up Pharaoh just so that He could demonstrate His powers and carry out His will. In another sense, God knew Pharaoh's heart and that he would not change it - Pharaoh was the kind of man who could never submit himself to God or worship Him. If Pharaoh had not been this type of person, then God would have relented and accepted Pharaoh's true repentance. The fact that God knows the future does not preclude man's free will. (See Romans 9:16-21)

For further study, see

Haftarah : Ezekiel 28:25 – 29:21

Brit Hadashah : Romans 9:14-17; 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1