

Parashat Vaera

Are You a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?: Pharaoh, the Plagues, and His Mutinous Magicians

by Marisa James on Friday January 23, 2009

27 Tevet 5769

Exodus 6:2 - 9:35

In one of the most troubling moments in the Torah, this week God says to Moses, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 7:3). Throughout this week’s parasha, Pharaoh has changes of heart again and again, and we are left hanging at the end with Pharaoh’s heart still unsoftened even after 7 plagues.

And yet we never hear from the Egyptian people; only Pharaoh speaks, so we have no idea what his subjects think about their enslaved Hebrew neighbors. Do the Egyptians know the Hebrews, or do they only see them working at the construction sites where the latest Pyramid is being built? Do the neighbors have friendly relations, or are their only interactions like the one that Moses witnessed, of an Egyptian beating one of the slaves?

In this week’s parasha, the voices of the Egyptian people are shut out entirely by the ineptitude of their leader. But the Torah has preserved their voices in other places, allowing us a glimpse of what might have become widespread dissent.

Three interesting groups of Egyptians show up at the palace. These are the hachamim, the m’chashfim, and the chartumei Mitzrayim; the wise men, the sorcerers, and the magicians of Egypt (7:11). Moses and Aaron have appeared for the first time before Pharaoh, and Aaron has demonstrated the power of God by throwing down his staff, which becomes a snake. Pharaoh calls his wise men, his sorcerers, and his magicians. They follow Aaron’s example, and the snake which had been Aaron’s staff devours the others.

Up until this point, the magicians’ behavior makes sense. Aaron challenges Pharaoh with a demonstration of God’s power, Pharaoh calls his magicians to respond with a demonstration of his own power, but Aaron’s snake (and Aaron’s God) is clearly more powerful. At this point, we might expect that the Egyptian magicians would be angry, specifically at Aaron for humiliating them in Pharaoh’s presence.

But their response is unexpected. God sends the first plague, and all of the water in Egypt becomes blood. “And so too did the magicians of Egypt with their spells” (7:22). Then God

sends the second plague, and frogs cover the land. “And so too did the magicians with their spells” (8:3). But when God sends the third plague, and dust turns to lice, “so too did the magicians with their spells to bring the lice, but they could not [...] and they said to Pharaoh, ‘this is the finger of God’” (8:14-15). Why do the Egyptian magicians try to intensify the first 3 plagues on their own people? Wouldn’t we imagine that Pharaoh’s wise men would be recruited to retract the plagues and relieve the people of Egypt? Pharaoh’s behavior makes it clear that he does not care for the welfare of his people; he cares only for his own power, which he will do anything to demonstrate. And he treats his magicians as tools to use when necessary to demonstrate his own alleged powers. Pharaoh summons these three groups of empowered Egyptians, but does not give them orders. These guys obviously know the deal: their job is to make Pharaoh look strong. Not to make him look good, just strong.

What powers they have, the Egyptian magicians use on the Egyptian people – not on Moses and Aaron, and not on the Hebrew slaves – and it begins to look like a cunning strategy. By using their powers in Pharaoh’s name to increase the suffering of the Egyptians, rather than using their powers to further oppress the Hebrew slaves, they are effectively protesting Pharaoh’s policy of keeping the Hebrews enslaved.

In the end, their powers cannot compare with what Aaron and Moses channel from God. “And the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God,’ and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened” (8:15). This is the only time the Egyptian court magicians speak, to tell Pharaoh that he is not as powerful as the God of Moses and Aaron. But their actions have spoken louder; thanks to the magicians, the Egyptian people know that Pharaoh will never relieve them of the plagues, and that it is in their own best interests that the Hebrew slaves are freed, and quickly.

By the time the third plague is upon the people, it’s likely that Pharaoh is the only one left in Egypt who wants to keep the Hebrews enslaved. His magicians, those who are meant to demonstrate his power, have abandoned him. This is a stark example of leadership gone terribly wrong, and a community with no voice which suffers terribly as a result.

We have learned from hard experience the problem of having leaders speak on behalf of large populations, but in the extraordinarily diverse Jewish and queer communities this problem is amplified. Thankfully, we are rarely these days as downtrodden as either the Egyptians or the Hebrews under Pharaoh, but it can still be difficult to hear dissent which doesn’t scream to get noticed. Is it possible to tune out the three- or four-word chants at a rally to listen to an individual’s dreams of future hope and freedom? How often do we ask the silent marchers at a protest what’s on their minds?

Pharaoh never notices the bizarre, rebellious behavior of his magicians, and as a result loses his first-born Egyptian subjects, his slaves, his army, and presumably his wise men, sorcerers, and magicians, who wisely disappear early in the story. When we allow individuals to speak for large



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groups, and we do not take care to recognize and incorporate differing voices, we are also at risk of losing our people and our effectiveness.

The Egyptian magicians are not role models, but thankfully we do learn from their behavior that Pharaoh's opinion is likely not the prevailing one in Egypt. And much later in the book of Exodus, Moses provides many examples of how to listen to a group of impatient, argumentative outsiders and honor their voices. As we continue our journey towards the Exodus, we remember that our new-found freedom to challenge our leaders comes with the responsibility of listening carefully to our fellow protesters.



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