

Don't Let Falsehood Fool You – Parashat Shemot

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Pharaoh is making the Jews work for free, but when we ask him to let the Jews serve God, he says they are being swayed by “false words”...

This week we begin the Book of Exodus, the second of the Five Books of the Torah. This book deals with the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt. A new king arose in Egypt that did not know Joseph or his contributions to Egypt (another opinion says that he only acted as if he hadn't known Joseph). This king did not look kindly upon the rapid increase of the Jewish population in his country. The Egyptians were full of anxiety and fearful with delusions that Jews would take over Egypt and throw them out of their land. Have you ever heard the paranoia about “Jewish domination”? It is nothing new; it even existed

in ancient Egypt.

The problem was that due to their fear, they decided that they needed to restrict the rapid growth of the Jews by placing physical and spiritual limitations on them. But the more they were afflicted, the more the Jewish population increased.

Finally the Jews cried out to God, and He sent Moses to save them. Moses, however, tried to decline his mission when God appeared to him at the burning bush. The final argument that convinced him to go was that Aaron was coming to meet him. Still, Moses' task was not easy. When he went to Pharaoh and asked him to let Jews leave Egypt to serve God, Pharaoh refused. Not only did Pharaoh not let the Jews leave, but he increased their labor. Datan and Aviram, the same two who had informed on Moses to Pharaoh when Moses had killed the Egyptian taskmaster, also confronted him and blamed him for making the situation worse.

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Reb Noson teaches that just as falsehood has many modes and shades, so does truth. We cannot understand all the ways in which falsehood pretends to be truth, but we do have an example in this week's *parashah*. Pharaoh is the epitome of falsehood in the way he deceived the Jewish nation and put them to work for him without any remuneration. At first Pharaoh himself came to work alongside them, but soon he backed away and set his taskmasters upon them, increasing their work quota more and more until they were truly slaves. When Moses came to him on a mission from God asking him to let the Jews leave Egypt, he replied, "Moses and Aaron, why are you disturbing the people from their work? Go back to your own concerns!" (Exodus 5:4). Then he told his taskmasters, "Make the work heavier on the men and make sure they do it. Then they will not pay attention to false words" (ibid. 5:9).

Reb Noson writes: Look at this chutzpah! The evil Pharaoh is making the Jews work for free, without any remuneration at all, but when we ask him to let the Jews serve God, he says they are being swayed by “false words” – as if *his* actions were completely truthful, as if it were legitimate to enslave and torture an entire nation! He claims they should not listen to falsehood. Is there any falsehood greater than this?!

There is another level of falsehood. Datan and Aviram complained against Moses, “May God look upon you and judge, for you have made our very scent abhorrent in Pharaoh’s eyes” (ibid. 5:21). They tried to present themselves as if they were the ones who had been outraged when they informed on Moses – as if they were truly worried about the Jewish nation, and Moses and Aaron were the ones causing damage to the Jewish nation!

But the truth, too, has many levels. There are simple truths and then there are deeper truths. Sometimes there is truth which looks like truth – however, it is still not the complete truth. And this is what happened in our *parashah* when God asked Moshe, who was a man of truth, to go redeem the Jewish nation. Moses demurred and argued with God, saying, “Please, my Lord, send who You will send” (ibid. 4:13).



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The *Zohar* teaches that Moshe's argument lay in the fact that he knew that the redemption would not be complete, that in the future the Jewish nation would sin and have to go into exile. If so, what was the point and how was it merciful to redeem them now, if in the end they would be exiled again? Moses took this personally and said, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh that I should take out the Children of Israel?" But God taught him that "there is truth, and then there is Truth." Though Moses' words were true, they still were not the Truth on God's level.

God therefore reassured Moses, "Even though you have your own perception of truth, that Israel will not listen to you and will anger Me and you many more times; and also that Pharaoh will refuse to let the Jews leave and will make their burdens even worse and the work harder; and also that Datan and Aviram will continue to make trouble – even so, you must negate your own understanding of these events to My understanding and accept My mission. For in the end, I will take the Jewish people out of Egypt with a strong hand, and I will give the Torah to them. And you do not need to consider what will

happen afterwards, because anything that is for the good of Israel will never be lost."

(Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhos Ribit 5:30-32)