

DEBAR TORAH *by* RABBI ROHDE

To Be a Nation Means to Face Sustained, Protracted Confrontation

At the end of last week's Parasha, the first Parasha of Exodus, we find Pharaoh not only refusing to let Israel go, but that he has made Egyptian oppression worse than ever for Israel, requiring the same quotas of bricks but telling Israel that they would have to cut straw, a key component in such brickmaking, for themselves. Now in advance of Moses' speaking to Pharaoh, God had already told Moses that Pharaoh's heart would be hardened and he would not willingly heed the call to let Israel go. Rather, God had foretold that several repeated calls for their release, accompanied by God overwhelming Egypt through a series of punishing, forceful Divine interventions, would be necessary to coerce Pharaoh to let Israel go. But then Moses goes to Pharaoh for the first time and then crumbles in talking to God afterwards, so crushed is Moses that his petition is rejected so vehemently, making things so much worse for Israel rather than better! Hadn't God just warned Moses that this would be a protracted, drawn-out conflict, that his petition would be rebuffed repeatedly? And yet Moses returns to questioning God's mission for him, repeating his query as to why he is being sent to no apparent avail! Then in the very last verse of last week's Parasha and the beginning of this week's (the chapter divisions actually group that last verse with the beginning of this week's reading for good reason), God responds to Moses by reiterating that Pharaoh's heart would be hardened and that only repeated forceful Divine interventions would coerce Pharaoh to release Israel. How does repeating this answer clarify anything?

Hadn't Moses realized that the "hardening of Pharaoh's heart" until God forced him meant that Pharaoh would likely express his displeasure and rejection at Moses' petition with retribution and punishment? Didn't Moses realize that "hardening Pharaoh's heart" meant that Pharaonic Egypt, God, and Israel were headed for a major sustained confrontation, and that in such conflicts, things have to get worse before they can get better? Did Moses somehow think that it would get worse only for Egypt, and not for Israel? Hadn't God also warned Moses that Israel also would have opposition to their own liberation, opposition which would have to be overcome? Didn't Moses realize that such a confrontation would likely exact a price in pain and suffering for Israel, as well as for Egypt? Or was it just the degree of hardship Israel was facing which precipitated Moses' plaint? How does God's repeating His answer about hardening Pharaoh's heart alleviate Israel's suffering or Moses' anguish over their suffering? Is this just reassuring Moses that in the end Pharaoh and Egypt would indeed be vanquished and forcibly compelled to release Israel, despite the collateral suffering Israel would have to endure? Indeed, Moses continues to cry out in subsequent episodes that things keep taking turns for the worse for Israel, rather than for the better, with no salvation in sight. And over and over again, God perplexingly just seems to parrot back the exact same answer.

And yet God's answer to Moses at the beginning of VaEra is different in detail and is of greater length than some of the others. God refers back to His Covenant that He would take Israel to be His People and He pledged to be their God, and to the allocation of the Promised Land as their patrimony. What I think is being intimated is the necessity of facing such a protracted, forceful confrontation if Israel is truly to become a nation. National existence makes for sustained, long-term adversaries. Sustaining war and conflict with those adversaries over long periods is a necessary part of being a nation, despite all the collateral pain and damage that incurs, aside from suffering the adversaries' direct attacks. Such costs are unavoidable and must be faced if an entity which is truly national is to be founded and is to continue. The Patriarchs did not yet constitute a national entity with a national territory and boundaries, although they were promised they would generate such an entity. Hence sustaining such national war and confrontation was less necessary for the Patriarchs, although they showed themselves capable in their confrontations. Warfare had some deterrent effect even for the Patriarchs and certain tribes, but there was no necessity as of yet for Israel as a whole to face the prospect of unavoidable, painful, drawn-out conflict. But a nation is more than individuals and clans. Jacob can still scatter his clan to resist Esau's attack and need not defend territory. But if Israel wants to avoid the killing of its firstborn sons and the oppression of abject slavery, Israel will have to band together as a nation and assume responsibility for much, much more: The protection of young and old, sons, daughters, cattle, and flocks (see 10:9) will require establishing a security blanket which is both external, establishing boundaries against enemies, as well as internal boundaries, in the form of a reliable justice system. Pharaoh and the Egyptians assailed an Israel which was emerging as a distinct nation, and the new national entity would have to defend even the most vulnerable babes in arms, establishing a safety and security net for all. Israel would learn that with their faith in their People and in Israel's God, they would be able to take on protracted, painful confrontations with their neighbors and win. They must be loyal to their Nation and God, and patiently trust that His Power can take on, tackle, and overwhelm any adversary. Though they murmur, Israel is taught willy-nilly the lesson that their national destiny requires them to shoulder the burden of facing protracted conflict with adversaries, and they learn to willingly face and sustain such confrontation head-on, without avoidance.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Vaera

January 24-25, 2025 | 25 Tebet, 5785

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 232 | Haftarah: p. 244 / Kaplan: p. 280 | Haftarah: p. 1096

Candle Lighting | 4:46 pm

Evening Services | 4:45 pm | Main Sanctuary

Friday Night Lights | Rabbi Soloveichik | following services | *5785 Season sponsored by the Julis Romo Rabinowitz family*

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Women's Service | 9:00 am | In honor of Hudson Lentnek's Bat Mitzvah | Little Synagogue

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Youth Groups & Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | **Fidanque Youth Room**

Kiddush | following services | Levy Auditorium | *Sponsored by Raquel & Ian Lentnek, in honor of Hudson becoming a Bat Mitzvah*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 3:55 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik

Teen Shiur | 3:55 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

Evening Services | 4:40 pm

Habdala | 5:34 pm

Rosh Hodesh Shebat begins on Wednesday night.

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday (Minha & Arbit): 4:45 pm

Monday-Thursday (Arbit only): 6:30 pm

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

Community Shabbat Shira Dinner: Magevet Returns!

Yale's premier Jewish a capella group

Friday Night, Shabbat Shira, February 7

Following Friday Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

Following our Friday evening services – always musically exquisite – registered guests will enjoy a festive Shabbat dinner enhanced by a musical performance by Magevet, Yale University's Jewish a capella group. A co-ed ensemble, comprised of talented undergraduate students at Yale University, Magevet is known for its sweet blend of voices, unique arrangements, and lighthearted sense of humor, and is one of the nation's premiere Jewish a capella singing groups.

Young Professionals Shabbat Dinner

Friday Night, January 31 | Following Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

For ages 21-35

Featuring Baruch-Lev Kelman on the topic of "Dancing in Jewish Law"

YP Twofer Pricing: Register for BOTH this dinner and the February 7 Community Shabbat Dinner with Magevet, and get a special discount!

Tu B'Shebat Seder

"Letters in Bloom: Isaac Luria and the First Tu B'Shebat Seder"

Wednesday, February 12 | 7:00 pm | with Baruch-Lev Kelman

After last year's successful Seder, gourmand Baruch-Lev will again lead this tasty banquet of fruity delights native to the land of Israel. Join for a night of flavors, mysteries, and histories!

Parent-Child Learning

Next session: Motzei Shabbat, February 8 | 7:00 pm

Led by Dr. Pesha Kletenik, Head of School, MDS

Final Session:

March 8 | 7:30 pm | Ellin Cooper, Yoetzet Halakha

Stitch & Fix

Presented by the Sisterhood

Alternating Wednesdays in the Fidanque Room

Upcoming Sessions: THIS Wednesday, January 29, February 12 & 26

RSVP to Rose Edinger at rgedinger@gmail.com.

THIS WEEK

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

(Virtual) Sunday Matinee with Sisterhood

All proceeds will be donated to help families of Israeli soldiers

FINAL FILM DISCUSSION:

THIS Sunday, January 26 | 4:00 pm | Walk on Water (2004)

Film Screening

AFTER: Poetry Destroys Silence

*Featuring a Q&A with producer & Shearith Israel Member,
Janet R. Kirchheimer*

Tuesday, January 28 | 7:00 pm | At the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan
Discounted tickets available through the Shearith Israel Sisterhood & League

AFTER: Poetry Destroys Silence was named as "one of the best films of 2024" by RogerEbert.com. Contemporary actors and poets confront the Shoah and discuss the responsibility of art to respond to genocide. The film stars the Academy Award-winning actress Melissa Leo and actor and poet Géza Röhrig, star of the Academy Award-winning film, *Son of Saul*, along with renowned poets Edward Hirsch and Alicia Ostriker, as well as two survivors, among others.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Rabbi Meir & Loyaliza Soloveichik are pleased to announce the engagement of their son, **Aharon**, to Fayga Tziporah Pinzower.

We welcome new member **Jonathan Arking** to our growing Shearith Israel family.

Mazal tob to **Hudson Lentnek**, upon becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Congratulations as well to her parents, **Raquel & Ian Lentnek**, and her sister, **Dakota**.

Mazal tob to **Ruth Shapiro** & the late Irwin Shapiro, z"l, upon the birth of a great-grandson, Jacob Irwin (Yisrael Yeruchum), born to their grandchildren, Sara & Josh Jay.

Condolences to **Avery (& Susan) Neumark**, and **Rachel Neumark (& Jonathan) Herlands**, upon the passing of their uncle, Morris L. Kramer.