

D'rash on Va'era

Jan. 17, 2026

I often find that it's hardest to give a d'rash on the parshas with the most material because there's too much to work with, or too many questions that seem obvious or well-worn. Va'era is a parsha that is certainly over-stuffed with plot, clear theological questions, and phrases that prompt inquiry. Making it even more difficult to get a fresh perspective, much of the parsha is almost too familiar; we hear the story it tells and even many of its lines in the seder every year. But reading it for this Shabbat, there were aspects that struck me for the first time, or anew.

I have to say that on reading it this year, the first things that it made me think of were classic comedy routines. Moses coming to the Israelites and announcing, out of the blue, that he's spoken to G_d, and G_d will free them from Egypt is a scene that is absurd and funny (intentionally or not). Maybe that's why we only get a brief synopsis of it rather than "witnessing" it. It made me think of Bill Cosby's Noah's reaction to G_d: "Right. What's an ark?" Or the scene in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" where King Arthur comes upon a peasant in the field and tells him imperiously, "I am Arthur, King of the Britons." The peasant's response: "What's a Briton?" Or Carl Reiner asking Mel Brooks in "The 2,000 Year Old Man," "Were you around before people knew of the existence of the Almighty?" Brooks answers, "Yeah, a few years before." And then they riff on the discovery of how G_d was more powerful than their prior deity, "This guy, Phil."

But all this comic shtick captures something the Torah text is really trying to convey – the revolutionary newness of the moment. We've perhaps lost that sense from the constant retelling of the story. But we're being told about an unlikely, fundamental change in how humans see history.

Indeed "newness" is the overarching point of the opening verses of the parsha – both in the story it tells and in how it tells it.

The parsha wants us to feel that History starts at this moment. Yes, there are antecedents – we get a genealogy and a reference to the patriarchs – but *this* is the moment when history really begins. The first verse of the parsha tells us that with G_d saying – claiming? – that G_d will be called by a new name. And then we are told of revolutionary events that will transpire. This is not a vague, general prophecy – like saying we will be as numerous as the stars in the sky – this is an outline of historical events that will become the central Israelite story.

The way the story is told is also new. In Genesis, the narrative describes what happens, but rarely if ever why. The motivations of humans and G_d are largely opaque – leaving lots of room for midrash – and no story arc is laid out for us.

But that's not the case here. We are told exactly what G_d wants, in a way that pretty much summarizes the entire Torah: "I will take you to be My people, and I will be your G_d." We are told why the Israelites don't believe Moses: their spirits (or breath) were crushed or

stunted or short – depending on the translation – by slavery. And the parsha notably asks a question historians focus on that the Torah hasn’t raised previously: “Why now?” (Admittely, the answer is unsatisfactorily partial; we aren’t told why G_d hears the Israelite moaning then and not before.) Earlier in the Torah, we not only don’t know why things happen at a given time, key moments – like the Akedah – seem to be set outside of historical time entirely (“after all these things”).

So, it’s in this parsha that the Torah narrative for the first time sounds more like history, is told more like history. It is also told like a fable – we’re given the moral we’re supposed to derive – but telling history as a fable is common enough in creating a national identity. We do it, or at least traditionally did it, in American history, with the world starting anew with the Declaration of Independence, and poems talking about “the shot heard round the world” and the British band playing “The World Turned Upside Down” after Washington’s victory at Yorktown. That version of the American story is history, but it’s history with a moral, and it’s history told as if what came before is a past that no longer matters.

If we take seriously, viscerally this new energy that’s pulsing through the opening verses of the parsha – they should make us feel as we’re meant to when hearing Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” – then the contrast with the brief verse telling us of the Israelites’ response is stark. The momentum comes to a sudden halt. The spirit is indeed crushed.

What are we to make of that? It hit me more this time that the Israelites are stuck in history. They aren’t experiencing history with a capital “H.” They don’t know where the story is going – even though Moses tries to tell them – they are living in day-to-day reality. They don’t even have a concept of history as movement rather than cycle – one of the great intellectual innovations of the Torah. They can’t see that things could change, never mind that they could change them.

This made me think of a line I read in a book recently – that the study of history is, or should be about *from, not to*. What the historian (Chris Wickham) meant is that history shouldn’t be seen as a march toward some predetermined endpoint (a view known as “teleological”) but rather as an exploration of how we got from one point to another when there were so many possible directions and outcomes. (This is even trickier for the Middle Ages, the subject of the book, as the term was invented to describe a period in between Roman antiquity and the Renaissance, not as a time of value in and of itself.)

The Torah’s view is teleological and it was written after-the-fact, after having reached the “Promised Land.” But real people – the Israelites – had to live in the historical moment, with only the “from” being clear. They had no sense of where they might be going *to*.

This is also of course *our* current condition. That’s always the case, but it feels especially acute now, when the future path of American history seems to be up for grabs, when we may find ourselves to be “short of spirit.” The story seems to have lost its bounce, to have come to a screeching halt, or to some unforeseeable turn. This is a time when we may be especially able to identify with those Israelites hearing Moses talk out-of-the-blue about his encounter with G_d

and how history would unfold. They don't seem benighted in refusing to listen; they're just real people living in real time. At moments, we may see the whole situation with sardonic humor.

So, what do we take away from this? From the new storytelling with its mixed methods of history and fable? From the newness of the story? From the inability of the Israelites to accept it?

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