

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Va'eira

When G-d met Moshe last week at the burning bush, He ordered him to return to Egypt and liberate the Jews from their long oppressive enslavement. But Moshe was hesitant; he was worried about rejection. "They will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, 'G-d did not appear to you'" (Exodus 4:1). Fortunately, G-d had a plan.

He gave Moshe miraculous signs that would prove to the Jews that Moshe indeed was the agent of G-d. The first of these signs was the famous snake in the staff trick. Moshe went to Egypt and successfully used the signs to convince the people that he was the real McCoy (4:30-31).

In this week's parsha, Moshe is once again called upon to do his snake trick, but this time he has a royal audience. "G-d said to Moshe and Aaron, 'When Pharaoh speaks to you, he will tell you to prove yourself with a miraculous sign. You [Moshe] must then tell Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh.' It will become a snake.'" (7:8-9).

G-d announced his arrival on the Egyptian stage to both Jew and Egyptian alike with a wooden staff that miraculously transformed into a living snake.

It is very surprising that G-d would use such a sign. A snake is used as evidence of the divine origin of Moshe's message? After the events in the Garden of Eden, the snake should be a Biblical symbol of evil, not G-d. A snake is the last thing G-d would want to use as a sign.

But there is an even bigger problem here.

"Moshe and Aaron came to Pharaoh. They did exactly as G-d had said. Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh, and it became a snake. Pharaoh summoned his scholars and magicians. The Egyptian sorcerers were able to do the same thing with their incantations" (7:10-11). The Midrash tells us that it was not only master magicians who knew this trick. Even Egyptian children could do it. "Pharaoh said, 'This is the power of your G-d?! [Egypt] is the source of all the world's magic!' He summoned young children four and five years of age and they performed [the same trick] with their sticks" (Tanchuma Va'era 3).

It seems that this whole snake idea was a big mistake. This is the sign of the all-powerful G-d? Egyptian kids can do the exact same thing! Why on earth would G-d give Moshe such a pathetic sign? Is He trying to make Moshe look like an idiot?

Admittedly, Aaron's staff does show its superiority by miraculously swallowing the staffs of the Egyptian sorcerers (7:12). But still, why doesn't G-d just knock these guys' socks off with a supernatural phenomenon which they could never dream of duplicating? How about eclipsing the sun or having Moshe walk on water? Why undermine the message with such a disappointingly common trick?

For the answer to these questions we need to understand the point behind all the extraordinary miracles of the Exodus. It is obvious that G-d did not need to send ten plagues



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

and break every law of nature if His only purpose was to free the Jews and punish the Egyptians. These objectives could be easily achieved through conventional means. G-d's purpose here is something entirely different. G-d wants to educate mankind and debunk polytheism, idolatry and paganism. He is teaching the world about the oneness of G-d, and that is why He conducted the Exodus in such a supernatural way.

This idea is explicit in the Torah text. Prior to the plagues, G-d lays out his objectives: "Through this you will know that I am G-d" (7:17), "You will realize that I am G-d, right here on Earth" (8:18). The message is clear. The plagues are not about retribution; they're about understanding G-d.

The Egyptians believed in multiple Gods. They had a God of the weather, a God of wild beasts and a God of the Nile. They believed in good Gods and they believed in bad Gods. But now the real G-d was coming with the ten plagues to show the Egyptians, the Jews and the world, that there is only one G-d. And He controls everything.

"Thus said G-d, King of Israel and its Redeemer, G-d, Master of Legions: I am the first and I am the last, and aside from me there is no God... [I am the one] who forms light and creates darkness; who makes peace and creates evil; I am G-d, Maker of all these" (Isaiah 44:6; 45:7). We may not understand the ways of G-d, but one thing we know: There is no independent force of evil. There is only G-d.

The sign that G-d gave Moshe had a fundamental message for the Jews. G-d was in effect telling them: You can make no sense of the pain and suffering that you're going through in Egypt? You're beginning to think that it must be the snake and not the G-d of your forefathers? You're wrong. "My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). There is no reality to the snake. There is only G-d.

This was also G-d's first lesson for Pharaoh and the Egyptians: You think the snake is an evil force that operates independently of G-d? You think that your sorcerers control the forces of magic and evil? You're wrong. I, G-d, am the one master of every force in creation, including the snake. I turn him on and off at will. And I, G-d, am the master of all of your magic. I can consume the staffs of your sorcerers.

G-d did not want to simply impress the Egyptians with great miracles. What would that accomplish? The Egyptians would just add the Miracle God to their long list of Gods. The time had come for the Egyptians and the world to learn that their belief system was empty and false. There is only one G-d. And He loves the Jews.

Shabbat Shalom!

