

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Vaera

Parshat Va'era begins with three verses which create a build up, one after the other. First, G-d says he wants to make his name Hashem known, something he never did with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (6:3). Rashi explains this means that G-d wants to fulfill the promises he made to the forefathers. In the next verse, G-d specifies that he established a covenant with them to give them land of Canaan. In the third verse, G-d says he also has heard the groans of the Jewish people from the Egyptian slavery, and he remembers the covenant.

What is the connection between the pain of the Jewish people and the covenant to give Israel to the patriarchs? Rashi says that G-d refers here specifically to the promise he made to Abraham in the covenant between the parts (Genesis 15). Abraham asked G-d for an assurance that he and his descendents would receive the land of Canaan (15:8), and G-d responded by making a special covenant with him and promising him the land. But before guaranteeing him the land, Hashem told Abraham that his descendents would suffer in slavery for many years until Hashem would judge their oppressors and release them from the slavery. Then, they would return to the promised land.

Gur Aryeh (16th century commentary on Rashi) explains that, in our parsha, the Jewish people were not crying for Israel. They were simply interested in being freed from the hard work. But when Hashem sees their suffering, he considers the covenant he made with Abraham to redeem them from slavery and return them to Israel. The Jewish people were not comforted by either of these grand plans (6:9). Oppressed from the hard work and constricted with a slave mentality, the idea of redemption from Egypt and entering the land of Israel did not speak to them.

We see from the prophetic revelation to Abraham that the redemption from Egypt would be linked to receiving the gift of the land of Israel. The Jews would not simply be released from suffering so that they could be free people, but rather so that they could return to the land that Hashem promised to their forefathers. So in the beginning of Va'era, when the Jews have been suffering and G-d wants to comfort and encourage them, he says that he is ready to fulfill the promise to release them from slavery and give them the land of their forefathers.

The Torah says several times that G-d remembered the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Before appearing to Moshe in the burning bush and calling him to lead the Jews out of Egypt, the Torah says G-d remembered the covenant with the forefathers (2:24). Then, when he tells Moshe to tell the Jews he will deliver them from the Egyptians, he says to tell them that the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will save them from oppression and bring them to the land flowing with milk and honey (3:15-17). Why does G-d emphasize that he wants to fulfill the covenant he made with the forefathers to give them Israel?

G-d's message to the Jewish people is not simply that he feels bad for them and wants to save them from suffering. He charges them with a mission, and this goal will ultimately be achieved in the fullest sense in the land of Israel. We see this clearly in the four expressions of



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

redemption, which we remember when we drink the four cups of wine on the night of Passover.

While the first three expressions (6:6), I will “take out, save, and redeem them,” refer to freeing the Jews from the Egyptians, the fourth expression (6:7) “I will take them to me as a nation” states the purpose of the redemption. G-d wants the Jewish people to relate to him, serve him, and teach the world his values by keeping the mitzvot of the Torah. The following verse (6:8) says I will bring them to the land of their fathers. G-d says quite clearly that he is not simply saving them from slavery, nor is he only giving them a land to live in. Rather, he is taking them to be his nation, and the fullness of that relationship will be realized in the land

G-d here does not specify what we ought to do once we get to Israel. He only mentions first that (6:7) he will take them to him as a nation and will be for them a G-d. But in the song that Moshe and the Jewish people sing to praise G-d after the splitting of the sea, they speak in more specific terms about what they will do in the land. In what Nachmanides sees as a prophetic vision of the future, Moshe says that the Jews will cross rivers and enter Israel (15:16), and that then G-d will bring them to Mount Moriah and the Temple.

What is the significance of mentioning the Temple in this vision of the Jews entering Israel and living there? The mishna (Keilim chapter 1) says there are ten different levels of holiness in the land of Israel, and the Temple is the highest of these levels. The highest levels of holiness are attained when man elevates his physical living by punctuating it with a spiritual undertone, and the place most conducive to connecting to the spiritual element of the world is in the Temple. When man senses the divine presence in the Temple, he can use this realization as a tool to remind himself of G-d’s presence in all aspects of his life, and in every place he goes. Living in Israel is about living holy lives, and this is practically triggered through meetings with G-d in the holiest of places.

We see from the constant repetition of the covenant to give the Jews Israel that G-d wants a relationship with his people, which can be maximized in Israel. We see further from the song of the sea that it is not enough to be in Israel geographically. We also need to relate to him by going to holy places and then taking the awareness of his presence, which we experience in those most holy places, with us to all the places we go. In this way, we will be fulfilling the mission of becoming a nation of G-d.

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Yosef Saltzman

