

**Parashah Fifty-One**  
**Ex 8:16-9:35 [English 8:20-9:35]; Is 34:11-35:4; Heb 12:14-17**

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*Serving the Almighty: His View vs. Man's View*

Nothing stands out more in our Torah text this week than the repeated emphasis upon God as the One Who makes distinctions. We read of the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th plagues (מַגֵּפָה, *magephah*, 9:14; נֶגַע, *nega*, 11:1; נֶגֶף, *negeph*, 12:13) waged against Egypt, and each time the text makes it clear that while the plague fell upon every level of Egyptian society (from Pharaoh on down), not one Israelite was touched by the destructive “finger” of God.

But the first example of how God makes a distinction comes at the very beginning of the *parashah*. He had given explicit instructions to Moses and through him to Pharaoh: send forth My people that they may worship Me (שְׁלַח עַמִּי וַיַּעַבְדוּנִי). The “sending forth” (which is much more forceful than the common English “let My people go”) is necessary before there can be the kind of worship or service God demands and desires.

Pharaoh had a different idea. Note 8:21[English 8:25]: “Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God within the land.” (וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְלֵאמֹר לְכוּ זָבְחוּ לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם בְּאֶרֶץ). Actually, this text can be read two ways, since בְּאֶרֶץ can just as well mean “in the Land (of Israel)” as “in the land (of Egypt).” That Pharaoh meant that Israel should worship HaShem without leaving Egypt is obvious, but the veiled reference to the Promised Land is intriguing.

Moses’ answer is very interesting and the standard English translations (NASB, NIV, NRSV) miss the point. It is not that the lamb was considered by the Egyptians an abomination, but this word is used in the Hebrew text (since it was written to Hebrews) to describe all pagan sacrifices and idolatry (cf. Deut 7:25-26). The Egyptians considered the lamb sacred and would never have used it as a sacrifice. Thus when Moses says “Behold if (translating הֲן as a questioning particle, cf. Ibn Ezra) we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians...,” he is referring to the lamb as a sacred object in the Egyptians’ eyes—one of their many gods. Moses most likely used a different term when actually speaking to Pharaoh, but when relating the story (which would be read by Hebrews) used the term “abomination” to refer to the lamb as “sacred” in an idolatrous way. The Stone Chumash thus gives the proper sense: “behold, if we were to slaughter the deity of Egypt in their sight, will they not stone us?”

Here we gain insight into God’s definition of worship. It involves, at its core, a clear distinction between the Creator and the creation. Paul recognizes that all idolators have this in common: they worship the creation rather than the Creator:

*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen. (Romans 1:25)*

All paganism begins with the creation rather than the Creator. That is, paganism considers what can be seen as all important, while God’s worship begins with what cannot be seen as absolutely necessary to understand properly what can be seen. In other words, from God’s perspective, faith is a prerequisite for genuine worship.

*And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and*

that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6 )

But there is another important insight we receive by looking closely at how Pharaoh defines worship. His suggestion that Moses and the Israelites could just as well offer sacrifices in the land of Egypt rather than going into the wilderness reveals the fact that for Pharaoh worship was a means to an end rather than the end itself. For Pharaoh (and all false religion) worship is a way of pleasing the gods, of getting them on your side, of gaining for yourself from the gods what otherwise you could never have. In many cases, worship of the pagan gods is “tricking” them into acting on behalf of the worshiper.

In contrast to this, worship as God describes it is purely an act of love for Him and not an attempt to gain something from Him or cause Him to do something He otherwise might not. Thus for Pharaoh, to follow God’s prescriptions for worship was not that necessary. If it was sacrifice He wanted, then give it to Him, but do it in the most expedient way—no need to travel three days journey—just do it here and now.

And here is the crux of the matter: Pharaoh, like all who follow falsehood, do not take seriously the word of God. The Almighty had communicated to Moses that Israel was to travel out of the land of Egypt and worship Him via sacrifice in the wilderness. Moses told Pharaoh this, but Pharaoh considered it unimportant. “Do the ceremony, but there is no need to do it exactly as God says. Modifications don’t matter—do it my way.”

So why did it matter? Could the Israelites have genuinely worshiped God in the land of Egypt? Could they have offered acceptable sacrifice to HaShem without going into the wilderness as He had instructed them to?

The answer is, of course, “no.” They could not have offered acceptable sacrifice in Egypt. And the reason is because God had told them to do something different than that. Acceptable worship to the One true God can only be accomplished in the context of obedience. The worship God desires cannot be given in the realm of disobedience.

Moses knew this. When he says “it is not proper to do so” (לֹא נְכוּן לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן) he shows us that he had taken God’s word seriously. It was not merely that to do this would have raised the hackles of the Egyptians, but more that God had prescribed a different way. Of course Israel would not always take this position. Accepting the ways of the pagan nations and incorporating these into their worship would become the on-going bane of the nation’s existence.

But why was it necessary for Israel to leave Egypt before she could offer acceptable sacrifice? Because an eternal picture was wrapped up in her leaving: redemption and deliverance must proceed acceptable worship. Only the redeemed can worship Him as He desires, because only the redeemed have come to the full realization that God, and God alone, can save. Worship in the context of redemption is worship that considers the Creator to be blessed forever, separate and above the creation. And only people who have been genuinely redeemed are in a position to worship God out of their love for Him and not to gain something for themselves.

There’s another way to say this: only the redeemed are able to worship God in the context of covenant. God had already told Moses that the sign He would give to prove Himself was that the people would worship at the mountain where He had revealed Himself in the burning bush (Ex 3:12). The covenant that would function as Israel’s *ketubah* (marriage contract) could only be given after they were redeemed from Egypt, not before. God would take Israel as His wife, and in so doing He would separate her unto Himself. Symbolically she could not remain in Egypt and

still be His wife. She would have to be sanctified, made holy, set apart, in order to be His chosen beloved. Worship would be the result of her redemption, not the cause of it.

Thus the remaining plagues, as enumerated in our *parashah*, have as one of the primary functions the separating of Israel as a distinct people from the Egyptians: “I shall make a distinction between My people and your people...” (8:19 [English 8:23]).

Note carefully as well that sacrifice is the key activity associated with worship. The command to Pharaoh is: “Send forth my people that they may worship (עִבְדוּ) Me.” And this worship is defined as offering sacrifice. Why sacrifice? Because redemption is accomplished via sacrifice. This is the key of the Pesach event: blood on the doorposts (they symbolize one’s entire life) is the redemptive symbol distinguishing the Israelites from the Egyptians.

Pharaoh saw sacrifice as a means of placating the gods. It could thus be done whenever and wherever. God reveals that sacrifice is the means of redemption and must therefore be done according to His schedule and done His way.

*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Torah, to redeem those under the Torah, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Gal 4:4-5)*

Indeed, in the progressive revelation explaining God’s way of redemption, sacrifice would be prescribed as acceptable only when done in connection with the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), and finally only at the *Heichal* (Temple). These institutions would be the revelation of how God would dwell among His people—how He would effect full and complete redemption. It is the natural tendency to believe that redemption and worship can be had apart from sacrifice. Our sinful nature arrogantly thinks that we have something God counts as worthy—of attracting His forgiveness. But faith recognizes that redemption must be won by Someone other than ourselves. The pure and spotless lamb proclaimed this time and time again, and the sacrificial system made it clear to all who had faith to accept it, that God forgives on the basis of sacrifice, that is, the sacrifice of Messiah. It is in Him that God’s people find their ultimate distinction—their true holiness.

Plague	Text	Event	Warning?	Egyptian deity
1	7:14–25	דם - blood Nile turned to blood	Yes	Khnum: guardian of the Nile; Hapi: spirit of the Nile; Osiris: Nile was bloodstream
2	8:1–15	צִפְרֻדֵּי - Frogs	Yes	Heqt: god of resurrection
3	8:16–19	בָּן - Gnats (?)	No	
4	8:20–32	עֲרֹב – Swarming insects	Yes	
5	9:1–7	מִקְנֵה - Cattle: death of livestock	Yes	Hathor: mother-goddess; Apis: bull of god Ptah; Mnevis: sacred bull of Heliopolis
6	9:8–12	שָׁחִין - Boils on man & beast	No	Imhotep (?): god of medicine
7	9:13–35	בָּרָד - Hail	Yes	Nut: sky goddess; Isis: goddess of life; Seth: protector of crops
8	10:1–20	אֲרָבָה - Locust	Yes	Isis; Seth
9	10:21–29	חֹשֶׁךְ - Darkness	No	Re, Aten, Atum, Horus: sun gods
10	11:1–12:36	בְּכוֹר - Death of the firstborn	No	Pharaoh: son of gods; Osiris: giver of life

### *Deficient Repentance*

In our *parashah* this week we have a significant example of deficient repentance. In 9:27 we read:

*Then Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “I have sinned this time; Adonai is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones.”*

We may note several interesting things from this. First, Pharaoh admits that he has sinned, but he adds “this time” (הַפְּעָם, *ha-pa’am*). Deficient repentance is marked by sorrow because of the present circumstances, but fails to reckon with the fact that previous sins have been a contributing factor. Had Pharaoh honestly bowed before the God of the Hebrews when first commanded to do so, he would not have experienced the continuing burden of the plagues. True repentance admits that all of one’s sins are equally egregious in the eyes of the Holy One of Israel.

Secondly, the language of deficient repentance matches that of full repentance. What Pharaoh confesses is right on the mark: he has sinned, and Adonai, the God of Israel is the righteous One against whom he has sinned. Moreover, Pharaoh admits that both he and the people he represents are wicked (רָשָׁע, *rasha’*). What else would one expect to hear from a repentant heart? But this highlights an important fact. Full repentance is demonstrated by one’s actions—words are only a first step. Without concomitant actions, words of repentance ring hollow. And of course, Pharaoh’s subsequent actions prove that his confession of repentance was just that—hollow, without real substance. For once the current trouble is past, he returns to his hardened rebellion against the Almighty and His people.

This is exactly what Pharaoh did. In 9:34 we read: “But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned again and hardened his heart, he and his servants.” The words of “repentance” were not matched with deeds of repentance, and thus his “repentance” was seen ultimately to be false.

The issue is how one receives the troubles in life that foster the initial willingness to admit guilt and wrong doing. When one's sin is made known through the events of life, is it received as the work of God in discipline as a loving Father, or as the unfortunate circumstances of "being found out?" Pharaoh had been proven to be wrong—his faith in the pagan gods of Egypt had been shown to be foolish. So Pharaoh humbled himself before Moses, but not because he genuinely agreed he was guilty, but only to find a way out of the trouble the plagues had caused. Once the trouble subsided, Pharaoh reverted to his prideful self.

Paul speaks of this when he defines two different kinds of sorrow: one, which is a gift from God in leading to repentance and thus drawing His child back to Himself, and one which is only concerned about one's own welfare and the momentary distress.

*For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. (2Cor 7:10)*

The sorrow produced by the loving discipline of our Father brings a repentance "without regret," meaning that one does not consider the whole process of discipline as something bad, or something one wishes he could have avoided. Rather, this kind of sorrow leads to salvation, in the sense that the person realizes God's merciful hand of discipline was the means by which a far more abundant life of shalom had come. But the sorrow of the world produces death, in the sense that once that trouble has passed, one reverts to the old ways which ultimately leads to no shalom at all.

We see, then, that Godly repentance is always combined with a true faith in God's goodness. The discipline, though sorrowful for the short-term, is received as that which is necessary for one's personal growth and holiness. Without faith, the troublesome circumstances of life are considered as random events without purpose and without ultimate good, and the sooner one can "move past them," the better.

We understand, then, that Godly repentance is, in fact, a gift from God (2Tim 2:25), because it is combined with faith, which is also God's gift (Eph 2:8). God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are above our thoughts. The gift of faith, however, allows us to receive from our Father the disciplines He brings, and to find in these disciplines the gift of faith and repentance that leads us back to Him, the source of salvation in this world, and in the world to come.

The *haftarah* chosen for this Torah *parashah* is the prophecy of Isaiah against the nations who have sought Israel's destruction. Here, in stark poetic language the prophet reveals the heart of God for His chosen people, Israel. It is obvious, then, how the words of the prophet fit well with the story of the plagues against Egypt. For the wrath of the Almighty against Egypt is an historical fact that gives notice for the future. In spite of the fact that as a nation we have often, in our history, rebelled against our Redeemer, He does not forsake us. Rather, His hand of discipline upon is proof of His unfailing love and His faithfulness to the covenant He graciously has made with us. His discipline leads to repentance and restoration.

Note well in Is 34:16 the admonition of the prophet: "Seek from the book of Adonai and read" (דַּרְשׁוּ מִעַל־סֵפֶר יְהוָה וּקְרְאוּ). Here is the way for us, even when we, like Israel of old, find ourselves under the tyrannical boot of our enemies. We must seek the word of Adonai and learn to know Him through His own self-revelation. In so doing, the Ruach HaKodesh will enliven our minds to know Him in truth and keep us from drawing our own imaginative sketch of Who He is.

As is often the case in the prophets, in our *haftarah* the prophet Isaiah puts in stark contrast the just wrath of God against His enemies and His the victory He intends to bring to His chosen ones, a victory made sure through His tender mercies towards them. The desert will bloom, the wilderness will rejoice, and His glory will be manifest when He safely plants Israel in the Land. But note as well the admonition of the prophet, that we are to strengthen each other as we await the day of His salvation:

*Strengthen the hands that are slack; Make firm the tottering knees! Say to the anxious of heart, “Be strong, fear not; Behold your God! Requital is coming, The recompense of God — He Himself is coming to give you triumph.”*  
(Is 35:3–4)

All of us have weakness. All of us need to be encouraged and strengthened for the journey. And all of us need to hold firmly to the truth that our triumph comes from the Almighty. His strength and His provision is sufficient for each of us, and we do well to remind each other of this often.

Thus, the Apostolic portion reminds us that repentance, though at first a painful enterprise, is in the end the path of lasting peace. True repentance affirms my own weakness and failings. But it does not stay there—it reaches forward to lay hold of God’s greatness and to find in Him the shalom for which our soul longs. As we open our hearts to even the smallest act of true repentance, God opens the gates wide to restore us, first to Him, then to ourselves, and finally to others. One of God’s greatest gifts is repentance, for it yields the fruit of a settle contentment that none can destroy.