

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

D'var Torah – Bo 5772 (2012)

This week we read about the final three plagues that God brought on Egypt. As these plagues come along, it seems that Pharaoh's resolve begins to weaken. Moses had been asking Pharaoh to allow the Jewish people to go into the wilderness to worship God (presumably a pretext for more permanent escape). Prior to the eighth plague (locusts), Pharaoh offers to allow Moses. During the ninth plague, Pharaoh offers for all of the Israelites to go to worship, with only the livestock staying behind. But Moses refuses:

וְגַם מִקִּינֵנוּ יִלָּךְ עִמָּנוּ לֹא תִשָּׂא רַרְסָה כִּי מִמָּנוּ נִקַּח לְעִבְדֹת אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאִנְחֵנוּ לֹא
 נִדְעֵם מִהַ נִעֲבֹד אֶת ה' עַד בֹּאֵנוּ שָׁמָּה:

Our livestock will also come with us, not even a hoof will remain, because we will take from it (the livestock) to worship the LORD our God, and we will not know with what we shall worship the LORD until we get there.¹

Admittedly, Moses' response may be a bit less than sincere. After all, we suspect that the plan is for Israel to leave Egypt for this religious holiday and never to come back. Leaving anything behind when you go on a permanent vacation is unwise. But perhaps by taking Moses' word at face value we can learn a lesson or two.

Lesson 1: Genuine religious worship cannot be entirely pre-planned. Certainly Moses could have asked God for a packing list and everyone could have known exactly what was going to be used for the sacrifices. Instead, Moses tells us that the exact nature of worship cannot – or at least should not – be pre-determined. Rabbi Eliezer teaches in the Mishnah²: *one who makes his prayers set, his prayers are not supplication*. Unfortunately, our ability to adhere to Rabbi Eliezer's teaching has been greatly challenged by the printing press and the printed prayer book. Too often, we know all too well "with what we shall worship the LORD" – with the words on the page! But as Moses suggests in the verse, we should not know in advance what our service of God will be. Our prayers should be a reflection of our feelings at the moment of those prayers. In order to keep a sense of freshness and sincerity in our prayers, we must go beyond the words on the page and into the recesses of our hearts. Since our lives are always changing, our experience in prayer should constantly be changing. We should remember that the words of the prayer book are merely a jumping-off point. It is how we relate to those prayers – how they help us reflect on our beliefs and our hopes, how they capture the essence of that very moment of our lives, that makes our prayers most meaningful.

Lesson 2: Worship of God requires different resources at different times. Until we get to a particular moment in time, we will not know how to serve God at that moment. This is

¹ Exodus 10:26.

² Berakhot 4:4, appearing in the Babylonian Talmud at 28b.

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true not only about prayer and sacrifice of course, but about each moment in our lives – since each moment carries with it an opportunity to serve God – whether through prayer, study of Torah, or through acts of justice, honesty, and kindness. Some moments call upon us to serve God with our financial resources, by donating funds to a worthy cause. Some times service of God requires us to give of our time, for instance by volunteering for a worthy organization or by taking the time to visit the sick or the bereaved. Sometimes we serve God by executing our professional career with a sense of honesty and by finding ways that our work benefits not only ourselves but our clients, co-workers, and the rest of society.

It is not always obvious, but every moment in life is an opportunity to serve God. The only thing is, until we reach that moment, we may not know “*with what we shall worship the LORD*” until that moment. Our job is to continue to strive to recognize each moment for the opportunity that it is. Through study of Torah, through sincere prayer, and through observance of Mitzvot (commandments) may we each learn how to find the opportunity for divine service that is in each moment of life, and may we find that we have the resources, knowledge, and inspiration to carry out God’s will.

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