

Parashah: Vaera
Read On: January 25, 2025 | 25 Tevet 5785
Torah: Exodus 6:2–9:35
Triennial: Exodus 8:16–9:35
Haftarah: Ezekiel 28:25–29:21

A Three-Day Journey

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

We are not entirely sure how to measure time in the Tanakh. Time rushes past us in genealogies, where whole lives—births, marriages, and deaths—are condensed into brief accounts. Yet time also lingers, trickling and flowing through stories. We spend chapters on a single day, only to leap forward decades in a few verses. And when time is explicitly measured, it often doubles as a measurement of space, demarcating distance.

This concept of time as distance is most evident in our relationship with God. The Hebrew root **רחק** (“to distance”) appears in select narratives from Genesis and Exodus. We encounter it when Hagar distances herself from Ishmael’s near-death experience, when Abraham journeys during the Akedah, when Joseph’s brothers gaze at him from afar and conspire against him, when Joseph later conspires to frame his brothers, when Miriam watches over her baby brother Moses, and when we, at Mount Sinai, distance ourselves from God.

We often find ourselves about three days away from God. When God invites us to find Him, it frequently requires a journey of three days. Abraham journeys three days during the Akedah. Hagar encounters God in the wilderness after distancing herself for a time. In the Exodus story, we tell Pharaoh that we must take a three-day journey to worship God. We read: “Send my people so they may worship Me.” Each of these moments presents an opportunity to encounter God. In each, a parent nearly loses a child in the process. And in each, the key is that God feels distant—spatially and temporally—but the distance can be traversed.

But in the Exodus story, Pharaoh does not let us go. We are not allowed to journey three days away. Instead, God comes to us. And God comes to Pharaoh.

Hagar passed God’s test. Abraham passed God’s test. Even Joseph, estranged from his brothers, passed God’s test. In each case, they endured separation from their loved ones while trusting God—and they acted to ensure their loved ones would return. Pharaoh, however, does not. Pharaoh refuses to let us go, and so God comes to him. This time, the firstborn is actually killed.

There is a reason God keeps Himself distant. There is a reason we measure that distance in time rather than space. We resist locating God—or God’s absence—in a specific place. Instead, we need to believe that by moving through time, we can draw closer to God. We can recover those we have let go. We want to approach God so that God does not have to approach us.

Denial Ain't Just a River in Egypt

Jonathan Lipnick

Exploring the Parashah



**In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.*

Short of Breath

Rabbi Joshua Kulp

Midrash and the Parashah

In last week's parashah, Moses receives God's plan to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, he goes and reports of the plan to the people and the Israelites respond with belief (Exodus 4:31):

וַיֵּאֱמַן הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמָעוּ כִּי־פָקֵד יְהוָה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה אֶת־עֲנָיִם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ׃

And the people believed and heeded, that the Lord singled out the Israelites and that He had seen their abuse. And they did obeisance and bowed down.

This week's parashah begins with another revelation of God to Moses in which God outlines that He will redeem Israel "with an outstretched arm and with great retributions" (Exodus 6:7). The verse then turns to a vision of the future relationship between God and God's redeemed people, "***And I will take you to Me as a people and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt. And I will bring you to the land that I raised My hand in pledge to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inheritance. I am the LORD!***"

This time the people do not respond positively (Exodus 6:9), "*And Moses spoke thus to the Israelites, but they did not heed Moses out of shortness of breath and hard labor.*"

A simple read of the verse implies that Israel was simply too exhausted to believe anymore in promised miracles. After all, God's promises were related to them earlier, and yet after Moses and Aaron demanded that Pharaoh let the people go, their work had become doubly hard. Their opposition to Moses and Aaron was already voiced in 5:21. It is not surprising that in 6:9, they refuse to heed God's renewed promises. Ramban on this verse explains according to its simple meaning that the people of Israel refused to believe, "Not because they did not believe in God and His prophet, but rather because they did not listen to his words due to their shortness of spirit (*kotzer ruach*), like a person whose soul is distressed by his toil and does not wish to endure even a moment of suffering, even if he knows that relief will come afterward."

But the midrash offers a more spiritual or religious answer. The following is from **Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael 5:10**:

רבי יהודה בן בתירה אומר: הרי הוא אומר: (שמות ו,ט) "וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה, מִקְצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה." וְכִי יֵשׁ לָךְ אָדָם שֶׁהוּא מִתְבַּשֵּׁר בְּשׂוֹרָה טוֹבָה וְאִינוּ שָׁמְחִים? נֹלֵד לָךְ בֶּן זָכָר, רִבֵּךְ מוֹצִיאֲךָ לְחֵרוֹת, וְאִינוּ שָׁמְחִים? אִם כֵּן לָמָּה נֶאֱמַר "וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה"? אֲלֵא שֶׁהִיא קָשָׁה בְּעֵינֵיהֶם לְפָרֵשׁ מֵעֲבֹדָה זָרָה.

R. Yehudah b. Betera says: It is written (Exodus 6:9) "And Moses spoke thus to the Israelites, but they did not heed Moses out of shortness of breath and hard labor (*avodah kashah*)." Now is there anyone who is given glad tidings and does not rejoice? A son has been born to you, Your Master is freeing you from bondage and he does not rejoice? Why then does it say, "but they did not heed Moses"? It was difficult for them to abandon their idolatry.

The midrash is almost surely picking up on the ambiguity of the word "*avodah*" which here literally means "labor" but can also mean "worship." Moses has just related to the people of Israel that the Exodus entails not just freedom from the hard labor of Egypt, but a change in their religious orientation. From the paganism of Egypt they will be brought to the land of Canaan, where יהוה will be their God. The children of Israel are not willing at this point to abandon the idolatry they had learned from the Egyptians.

As the midrash notes, we anticipate that good news will bring rejoicing. When one hears of an upcoming birth or future freedom from hard labor, how can one not rejoice? But, truth be told, change is scary, even change that seems to be for the better. We are comfortable with the past because we have already gotten used to it. The children of Israel have grown accustomed to the idol worship of Egypt, and they are understandably nervous of the demands being made of them when they join God's covenant, even if they are also being set free. As hard as their work is, the paganism in which they are ensconced, the mentality with which they were raised, has explained to them why the world is the way it is. They have a certain view of the world, and such views are not easily changed.

We too grow quickly accustomed to mentalities, even those thrust upon us by recent events, and change is often hard to accept. Even change that seems to be for the good is still change and we fear the new demands it will make upon us. Change comes with risk and while the old situation also bore risks, those were risks to which we had grown accustomed. New risks are the unknown, and they can be terrifying. But as readers of the Tanakh, we know that Israel will be better off accepting these changes. And sometimes, we must be readers of our own lives and situations, and realize that the difficult changes we face now will lead to a better promised land in the future.