

Irreligious Fearers of God

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Parshat VaEira

An act that is categorized as motivated by the “fear of God”.

During the course of the seventh plague, hail, the Tora makes reference to the “fearers of God” among the servants of Pharaoh (Exodus 9:20). Apparently taking Moshe’s warning to heart that anything left outdoors was susceptible to destruction due to the impending plague (9:13-19), these people take the precaution of seeking shelter for their slaves and animals, thereby saving their property from being destroyed by the supernatural hailstorm that is unleashed against Egypt. It is particularly notable that rather than the term “Elokim” which is typically invoked when referring to non-Jews’ belief in the Jewish God,¹ the Tetragrammaton, “Yud-Keh-Vav-Keh”, is used in this instance. When Moshe first comes to Pharaoh in 5:1, it is specifically with respect to the Tetragrammaton that the Egyptian ruler pleads ignorance (5:2), causing Moshe to subsequently refer to God as Elokai Halvrim (the god of the Hebrews) in an attempt to clarify which Deity he is talking about (5:3). Only in 12:31, when Egypt is in shambles and Pharaoh is finally granting permission for the Jews to leave, does the Egyptian monarch invoke the Tetragrammaton as the term for the Jewish God that has defeated him.

Perhaps “fear of God” in this context is more pragmatic and driven by self-interest than reflecting the moral behavior associated with monotheism.²

Amos Chacham, in Da’at Mikra,³ does not think that the group of people being referred to as “God-fearing” is being singled out for any particularly remarkable theological position. “The implication of the phrase “HaYareh Et Devar HaShem” simply refers to those who had suspicions and worries that the Divine Predictions concerning the hail would come true, but there is no inherent assumption that there was acknowledgement on the parts of these people of the Divinity of the Jewish God.”⁴

¹See e.g., Beraishit 20:3, 11; 21:17, 19, 22; 23:6; 31:24, 50; 41:16, 25, 28, 32, 38, 39; 42:18*; 44:16*; Shemot 1:17**; 8:15; BaMidbar 22:9, 10, 12, 20.

(*Although Yosef is involved in these two verses, this is before he has identified himself as Yaakov’s lost son, and is playing the role of an Egyptian.

**There is a controversy concerning whether the midwives were Jewish or Egyptian. If the latter is the case, then the use of Elokim would be consistent with other instances of non-Jews’ interactions with the Jewish God.)

² See sources cited in footnote 1.

³ Sefer Shemot, Parshiot Shemot-Yitro, Vol. 1, Mosad HaRav Kook, Yerushalayim, 1991, p. 142.

⁴ The individuals being described could be said to be comparable to ChaZal’s depiction of Haran, Avraham’s brother. In an effort to account for the special circumstances surrounding Haran’s premature death, as implied in Beraishit 11:28—see RaShI—the Rabbi’s assert that the ruler Nimrod tested Avraham’s monotheism by throwing him into a furnace in an effort to see if his God would save him from being consumed by the flames. The Midrashic tradition asserts that before knowing whether Avraham had survived or not, Haran was similarly interrogated regarding his beliefs. The Rabbis attribute to Haran the following calculus: if Avraham emerges unscathed from his ordeal, I will side with him. Otherwise, I will claim to share Nimrod’s beliefs. As a result of Haran’s archly pragmatic rather than faithful approach to determining his beliefs, the Midrash maintains that upon Avraham’s unscathed emergence from the furnace, Haran said, “I too believe in God”, and was burned to death when he was subjected to the trial by fire that Avraham had withstood. Similarly, “HaYareh Et Devar HaShem” in Chacham’s view, were motivated by their empirical observations of the plagues leading up to the hail, rather than by some spiritual commitment. The same could be said about the Mixed Multitude of non-Jews that joined the exodus in Egypt mentioned in Shemot 12:38 and BaMidbar 11:4. They might very likely have been attracted by the military and

Linking the act to protect possessions from hail with later representations to Pharaoh.

Meshech Chachma posits that Pharaoh's representatives and servants, as an act of bravado and defiance against God's Warning conveyed by Moshe about the impending hail, were insisting that everyone ignore Moshe's threat and refuse to bring their slaves and animals in out of the fields. 9:20 then refers to the group of individuals who decided to heed God's Warning rather than the instructions that they were receiving from Pharaoh's minions. It is possible that members of the same group who ended up taking seriously Moshe's predictions and saving their property, are the people who later say to Pharaoh (10:7) "For how long will this (the policy refusing to permit the Jews to leave)⁵ be for us a trap? Send forth the men and allow them to serve 'Yud-Keh-Vav-Keh' their god. Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?" While the explicit mention of permitting the Jews to engage in spiritual worship might suggest a sympathy for such religious activity, it is also still possible to maintain Da'at Mikra's point, i.e., that these decisions and subsequent recommendations were pragmatic rather than theological in nature.

Perhaps the phrase in question refers to a singular individual as opposed to an entire group.

A far more compelling and evocative interpretation with regard to who is being referred to by the phrase in question, "HaYareh Et Devar HaShem", this time with clear theological implications, is found in Talmud Yerushalmi Masechet Sota 5:6.

"R. Yishmael taught: Iyov (Job) was one of the servants of Pharaoh and an influential member of his court. The Tora says in this instance, 'HaYareh Et Devar HaShem' and with respect to Iyov is written, (1:8) 'Ish Tam VeYashar Yareh Elokim VeSar MeiRa (a man who was whole and good, FEARER OF GOD and removed from evil).'"

Consequently, the Aggada understands the text as referring to a single individual, rather than to an entire group of people. "HaYareh" lends itself to be understood as not only possibly connoting a generic trait shared by many individuals, i.e., "those who fear" but also the singular, representing a single example, i.e., "the one who fears".⁶

physical success enjoyed by the Jews, rather than the theological outlook associated with them. Such an assumption is the basis for the ruling that converts are not to be accepted during periods when the Jewish people are in ascendancy, e.g., during the reign of Shlomo—see RaMBaM, Hilchot Isurei Bi'ah 13:15.

⁵Rabbeinu Bachaye suggests two other possible interpretations for the pronoun "Zeh" (this):

a) Moshe, i.e., give in to his demands so that the plagues stop;

b) HaShem, in the sense of "Zeh Keili VeAnveihu" (This is My God and I will glorify Him) (Shemot 15:2).

While Moshe delivers God's Message, nevertheless, the origin of all of the Egyptian troubles are God's Orders, and letting the Jews journey into the desert is really fulfilling not so much Moshe's demand as that of HaShem.

⁶ Other instances where the Rabbis prefer to understand the text as describing a single individual or very few individuals, as opposed to a larger group, include:

a) RaShI on Beraishit 14:14, where it is maintained that rather than taking with him a large retinue of soldiers to fight against the kings that had captured Lot, Avraham took only Eliezer with him;

b) Beraishit 37:19; 42:21, 28 where even though the pronouns could refer to any one of Yaakov's sons, the Rabbis claim that the chief plotters are Shimon and Levi in light of what they did to Shechem in 34:25;

c) Shemot 2:13; 14:11; 16:20,27 which all could refer to just about anyone in the Jewish encampment, are understood by ChaZaL as referring to Datan and Aviram, a pair of individuals who cause Moshe problems during the rebellion of Korach in BaMidbar 16:1, 24, 25.

d) In a similar type of approach, the Rabbis point out that the explicit reference to the name of the mother of the Blasphemer (RaShI on VaYikra 24:11) is intended to demonstrate that this was the only woman who intermarried with an Egyptian. (VaYikra Rabba 32:5 lists among the four reasons for why the Jews were redeemed

Another Rabbinic source that associates Iyov with the Egyptian enslavement and redemption of the Jews.

In fact, several Rabbinic sources place the mysterious Iyov⁷ in the period of the Egyptian exile. A particularly well-known Midrash suggesting a connection between Iyov and Pharaoh appears in Shemot Rabba 1:9.

“Said R. Chiya in the name of R. Simon: ‘Three participated in that consultation (see Shemot 1:10), Bila’am, Iyov, and Yitro. Bila’am who contributed advice, was eventually killed;⁸ Iyov who remained silent, was judged to undergo afflictions as a punishment for his lack of protest;⁹ Yitro who fled,¹⁰ his children received reward and they sat in the Office of Hewn Stone (I Divrei HaYamim 2:55; Shoftim 1:16).”

A Midrash that supports one set of interpretations over another.

Yet, I would argue that more sharply drawn lessons for contemporary life can be derived if we accept Amos Chacham’s and Meshech Chachma’s contention that we are dealing with an entire cadre of individuals, rather than a single person, in light of the following Rabbinic source. This Midrash ironically states that the same “God-fearing servants” played a significant part in the pursuit of the Jews that culminates with the destruction of Pharaoh and his horsemen at Yam Suf.

from Egypt was that they did not engage in sexual immorality, implying not only violations of laws regarding incest and adultery, but also intermarriage.

On the one hand, there is a certain satisfaction of being able to connect a name to an ambiguous pronoun and be able to put a specific action into a broader context once the identity of the perpetrator(s) is established. On the other hand, by removing the anonymity from negative events, the Rabbis are suggesting that the actual “rotten apples” were fewer than might otherwise have been surmised, with the same limited number of troublemakers acting out time and again. In the case of something good, as with Eliezer being the only one to accompany Avraham when he successfully save Lot from his captors, this interpretation heightens the miraculous nature of the event.

⁷Bava Batra 15a-b places Iyov during the times of Moshe, the spies, the judges, Achashveirosh, the Queen of Sheba, Yaakov, etc. In the book of Iyov, no clear indication is given during which he period he might have lived, and the Talmud even entertains the possibility that he in fact never existed, but was an imaginary figure in an epic parable.

⁸BaMidbar 31:8. Bila’am dying in the war with Midian, suggested to the Rabbis that it was his idea to try to corrupt the Jews by having the daughters of Moav seducing them sexually in exchange for their engaging in idol worship (BaMidbar 25, particularly verses 1 and 6). The Midrashic train of thought probably assumes that if Bila’am was active in advising how to destroy the Jews at this later juncture, he could have been equally involved in the Egyptian plotting against the Jews at the beginning of Shemot.

⁹In addition to simply understanding the afflictions as a punishment for Iyov’s not standing up for justice and morality—his silence could have been attributable to his not wishing to oppose Pharaoh and thereby endanger his privileged status within the court (recent revelations of and rationalizations about comments Henry Kissinger made concerning Jews while serving as the American Secretary of State under Richard Nixon come to mind)—there might be a literary parallelism—or at least its converse—with respect to his relative loquaciousness in the book of Iyov, compared to the silence that is attributed to him when life-and-death decisions were being made in Pharaoh’s cabinet.

¹⁰Yitro’s potential for serving as a valued advisor is exemplified in Shemot 18. The fact that his descendents serve in the Sanhedrin whose seat while the Beit HaMikdash was functioning was in the Lishkat HaGazit, further is an indication of the value attributed to the advice that he gave Moshe concerning a restructuring of judicial procedures. It is also of interest to note that he does not remain as an advisor for the Jewish people despite Moshe’s pleading, according to one set of interpretations of Shemot 18:27 and BaMidbar 10:30.

Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat BeShalach #8: (on Shemot 14:7):

“And he (Pharaoh) took 600 choice chariots”—Whose were the horses (that pulled these chariots)? If you say that they belonged to the Egyptians, it already stated, (9:6) “And all of the herds of Egypt died.” If you say that these were Pharaoh’s animals, it already stated, (9:3) “The Hand of God will be raised against your herds.” And if you say these were the animals belonging to the Jews, it already stated, (10:26) “And also our herds will accompany us.” But rather these are the animals belonging to the “fearers of the Word of God” from amongst the servants of Pharaoh. We learn therefore that the “fearers of the Word of God” proved to be a stumbling block to Israel. From here it was said, “The best of the Egyptians destroy; the best of the snakes, crush him.”

Can being referred to as a “fearer of God” be reconciled with the same individual engaging in “bad acts”?

While one could maintain in the defense of the people who provided the horses that their animals were nationalized and appropriated against their will for use by the Egyptian army, the final comment in the Midrash suggests that they were willing participants in Pharaoh’s pursuit of the runaway slaves and intended to aid and abet the destruction of these people. Such an approach would render the term “fearers of the Word of God” as little more than cynical and self-serving. If what motivates religious observance is the avoidance of negative consequences, then as soon as fear of such consequences is mitigated, irreligious and even anti-religious courses of action become options.

Furthermore, as soon as one additionally considers that the fearers of God among Pharaoh’s servants were not low-level functionaries, but rather advisors to his inner court, individuals who probably had reputations for being morally exemplary in terms of their personal lives, questions arise not only regarding their role in offering animals to Pharaoh’s cavalry, but also their general outlook on life. Understanding how these same individuals denoted as God-fearing could quietly stand by while the Jewish people were systematically maltreated in a steadily escalating fashion, becomes quite difficult. Should we attribute this phenomenon to compartmentalization, i.e., their professional lives were starkly separated from their religious and ethical sensibilities, so that they would be able to rise through the ranks and attain power and prestige? Did they feel that they had to judiciously decide where and when to fight their battles with regard to trying to insert higher standards of ethical conduct within government procedures, and a calculation was made that this was not achievable within the context of official policy as to how the Jews were to be treated in Egypt? Did these people suffer from a type of xenophobia which allowed them to adopt a double standard concerning how their Egyptian native countrymen, as opposed to Jewish recent immigrants, deserved to be treated? Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the banality of evil regarding the Nazi bureaucrats who participated in the Final Solution comes starkly to mind when reflecting on such “Yarei Et Devar HaShem”.