

Parshat Bo
Beyond the Present
Rabbanit Dr. Ágnes Veto
Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2020

There's a lot in this parasha, plenty to attract our attention—from voracious locusts to darkness so thick “it might be felt. (Exodus 10.21)” Yet hidden amid all this drama and flash is a small gem of what can only be called theology. Theology is sometimes discounted as being a “Christian” pursuit, but as our recent Maharat Theology conference demonstrated, thinking about how God and religion “work” was never alien to—and often, in fact, an intrinsic part of- the Jewish experience.

The setting is this: Moses is told to “come” (not “go,” as usual) to Pharaoh (Exodus 10.1), indicating, perhaps, that his approach is to encounter Pharaoh “in the place that he is” just as God had done with Ishmael (Genesis 21.17). And Moses tries: he speaks the language of religion—Pharaoh is, after all, considered a god, and as such, must be aware of the customs and ceremonies, the rites, rituals and retreats into religious seclusion demanded by religious observances. Moses requests that the people be allowed to go out into the desert to worship their God. Pharaoh demands a complete list of attendees. Moses replies that the Israelites wish to worship in the desert as a complete people: “young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe the LORD’s festival.” (Exodus 10.9). Pharaoh seems to understand. But his understanding is on his own, more limited terms: “This is a religious, ceremony,” he thinks, “‘Old and young’ seems reasonable. ‘Flocks and herds’ may be a problem, since the sacrifice of sheep and goats is taboo to us,—but sensitive of Moses to take them all out in the desert so that we will not have to see the sacrifice. ‘Our sons’—of course. But ‘our daughters’?” There is a moment of *almost* understanding. A moment when it seems that Moses may indeed have “come” to Pharaoh in the place he is. Pharaoh even says, “The LORD be with you!” (Exodus 10.10) But that moment swiftly passes: “But,” he continues, “‘can you think I mean to let your children go with you! Clearly, you are bent on mischief. No! You menfolk go and worship the LORD, since that is what you want.’ And they were expelled from Pharaoh’s presence.” (Exodus 10.11)

One of the most difficult parts of relating to other humans is the fact that we often make assumptions, we misread the priorities, preoccupations and intentions of others. We thus misstep because we mistake our understanding of particular situations, conventions or terms as identical to those of our interlocutors, or in this case, our adversaries. Pharaoh heard “religious ceremony,” and immediately understood “our daughters” to be superfluous to such an event. For him, “religion” was for the “menfolk” exclusively. And he made the mistake of assuming that it must necessarily be so for Moses as well, (“since that is what you want”) and that Moses’ request must therefore be a ruse.

Not so. Moses, with the clear eye of Jewish prophecy, (which does not necessarily see the future, but, rather, the present, objectively as it is, and forecasts possible futures depending on the course of history and human free will), prophetically observed that the one thing *he knew* about this religion-in-development is that *he did not know* where it would take him or the Israelites. When Pharaoh further demurs over the livestock, Moses replies, “not a hoof shall remain behind, for we ... shall not know with what we are to worship the LORD until we arrive there.” (Exodus 10:26) “Until we arrive there”: Moses leaves open the

possibility that religion as conceived and experienced in the now, will eventually give way to new, as yet unknown forms. Pharaoh does not have the strength to see past the now. He denies this openness, this literal light at the end of the tunnel, and is punished measure-for-measure with deepest darkness in the now.

And Pharaoh's punishment for not recognizing that women could be an intrinsic part of religious observance? Locusts cover the land and devour every fruitful thing—each plant and tree is stripped down only to its trunk and its roots.

Where are we going? We know not. But we know that we are going there young and old, with sons and daughters alike, and all the resources at our disposal. And wherever we are going, when we get there, our worship of God will be inclusive—therefore open, and open, therefore ready to receive the light. And enlightened, therefore fruitful.



Rabbanit Dr. Ágnes (Ági) Veto, who is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Religion at Vassar College, grew up in Budapest, Hungary where she studied Biblical and Jewish Studies at Eotvos Lorand University. She then spent two years in Paris at the Sorbonne, the Institut Catholique and the École Pratique Des Hautes Études, and later a year at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. Rabbanit Dr. Veto earned an MA in African and Oriental Studies at S.O.A.S. University of London, another MA in Jewish Studies at the Rothberg Graduate School of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and a PhD in Talmud and Rabbinic Literature at New York University.