

# PHARAOH'S THREE OFFERS, MOSES' REJECTION, AND THE ISSUES THEY FORESHADOWED

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Pharaoh, in his stubborn refusal to let the Israelites go,<sup>1</sup> goes down to the wire bringing upon himself and his people the tenth and most severe plague, the smiting of the firstborn.<sup>2</sup> In this dramatic manner, the mightiest civilization of its time together with its pantheon of nature gods are humbled before the moral Creator God of the Hebrews ' . . . so that all may know that there is none like Me in all the earth' (Ex. 9:14).

However, what is often overlooked and which I wish to show is of considerable interest, is that in the course of the negotiations Pharaoh makes three attempts to come to terms with Moses by offering what appear to be quite reasonable counter-proposals. Each offer is politely turned down by Moses, after pointing out that it does not meet his people's needs. I wish to suggest that these ostensibly futile exchanges play an important role in pointing out the radically new nature of the pending God-Israel relationship and prefigure theological tensions which are implicit in that relationship.

It is only after the fourth plague of beasts [*arov*], an economically crippling blow, that Pharaoh begins to examine seriously Moses' demand. Up to this point, Pharaoh was so enraged by the *hutzpah* of these aged spokesmen for his Israelite slaves that he never got beyond the first few words: '*shalah et ami . . .* [Send forth my people].' But there had always been a subordinate clause attached to that demand: '*Send forth my people . . . so that they may hold a feast unto Me in the wilderness* (5:1) . . . *three days journey in the wilderness to sacrifice unto the Lord* (5:3) . . . *that they may serve Me in the wilderness* (7:16). Pharaoh had a perfect right to suspect that this was merely a ploy on the part of the Israelites to flee Egypt. For, Pharaoh reasoned, if they truly mean to sacrifice to their god, why the wilderness? Why not do it right here in Egypt? Actually, the original instructions to Moses had sought to forestall this objection by having him speak in the name of the *God of the*

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*Hebrews* [ivrim] (3:18). The term "*ivrim*" was known in the region as designating various groups of different ethnic origins who, like the Patriarchs, did not occupy a fixed territory but moved from place to place. If the call to the Israelites to sacrifice came from the God of the Hebrews, then the "wilderness [*midbar*]" would be the appropriate place. For that was the natural habitat of the *ivrim*. Unfortunately, Moses erred and in his first presentation to Pharaoh spoke in the name of the *God of Israel* (5:1) which he quickly corrected (5:3). But it was too late. *Israel* at that time had no geographic referent, only that of a collection of biologically related clans, all of whom were then in Egypt. So, offered Pharaoh, '*Go sacrifice [zivhu] to your God in the land*' (8:21).

Moses' reply was eminently practical and true as far as it went. The animals to be used are revered by the Egyptians, so for the Israelites to sacrifice *in the land* would be a provocation and highly dangerous. Pharaoh concurs and says they may go, only to rescind his permission once the plague is removed. Implicit in this exchange, however, is a broader theological issue which will become of abiding significance to Judaism in the future. Why should it matter to God where you serve Him? Why Zion? Why Jerusalem? Why can't we serve Him wherever we are?

Pharaoh's second offer comes under threat of the plague of locusts, whose destructive effects were well known to Egyptians, and amidst great pressure from his demoralized officials. Recalling Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh asks them quite bluntly: '*If I were to permit you to go and serve your god who are they that shall go?*' (10:8). Moses had not been too clear in describing the religious service demanded by God. Each time he used a different expression; "*la-hagog* [to celebrate, or hold a feast]," "*lizbo'ah* [to sacrifice]," "*la-avod* [to serve],"— all general terms that could include any or all of the religious devotional activities common at the time: animal sacrifices, oblations, feasting, chanting, dancing, processions, et cetera. Moses' reply, which further enrages Pharaoh, is as follows: '*We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go for we must hold a feast [hag] unto the Lord*' (10:9). Pharaoh replies: '*Not so, let the men go and serve the Lord for that is what you desire*' (10:11). The gods will surely be placated by the participation of the adult men. Moses' insistence that even infants [*taf*] must participate in their religious pilgrimage

convinces Pharaoh of the utter duplicity<sup>3</sup> of Israel's demand. Pharaoh banishes Moses and Aaron in justified anger.

Here again, behind this seemingly disingenuous dueling the modern reader can sense a genuine issue. Is religion a full-time or part-time activity? Does it require the participation of the entire family? In what way does the religious commitment of an individual involve his offspring, which is the new element in the covenant of Abraham?

After the plague of darkness, a now desperate Pharaoh calls for Moses and plays his last remaining card: *'Go and serve the Lord, let your little ones also go with you, only let your flocks and herds stay'* (10:24).

Pharaoh in effect is saying: All right, if your meeting with your God is more in the nature of a feast, then take the entire family including the little ones. But then sacrifices cannot be that important, so leave the bulk of your flocks and herds here as a pledge of your return. A confident Moses quickly replies. *'Our cattle also shall go with us for from them we must take to serve the Lord our God'* (10:26). Finally, Moses with evident seriousness and complete honesty adds a sentence which suddenly sheds a penetrating light upon all three exchanges with Pharaoh and points up the radically new character of God's plan for Israel: *'For we know not with what we must serve the Lord until we come there'* (19:26). Of course, to Pharaoh this was the most brazen lie of all. What high priest of a religion does not know how his god is to be served? That is precisely the priests' area of expertise. Actually, however, Moses is here declaring the simple truth. God had told him only that *'when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt you shall serve God upon this mountain'* (3:12), nothing more. At that point, not even Moses realized all the implications of *'I will take you to Me for a people and I will be to you a God'* (6:7). Nothing that men knew heretofore about the relationship between themselves and the Divine could prepare them for what Israel was now being called upon to do. Sacrifices, perhaps, feasting, perhaps, but more important, an entirely new concept of *avodat Hashem* [Divine service] is being revealed. For the first time in human history, the universal creator God was to enter into an everlasting covenant with a particular people who are to live a full national life in a particular land and who as a people are to live their history dedicated to embodying and disseminating God's teaching.

So was this a serious exchange between Moses and Pharaoh or a contrived duel designed to humiliate Pharaoh? Given the fact that Moses never simply demands that Israel be set free, and had never clearly defined the nature of the "service" they were to perform, Pharaoh's offers were perfectly reasonable. After all, Pharaoh had just cause to suspect that once out, the Israelites would keep going. On the other hand, Moses, who did not really know what awaited them at the mountain, was quite straightforward in his replies. Pharaoh's offers simply would not suffice to enable the Israelites to do what God might ask of them. The God of Israel is a leading God who not only protects the people as they go on their way but gives them their destination. The God of Israel will institute new forms of worship but will not disdain some of the traditional ones. The God of Israel wishes to relate to every person in his individuality.

At the end and for a fleeting moment, Pharaoh realizes that something very significant, something far more momentous than the welfare of Egypt, was taking place, and so he said to Moses: *'Rise up . . . serve the Lord, take . . . as you have said and be gone and bless me also'* (12:32).

#### NOTES

1. Prolonged but not determined by God's hardening of his heart (Ex. 4:21).
2. As foretold to Moses (Ex. 3:19,20; Ex. 4:21,22; Ex. 7:3,4): *And you shall say to Pharaoh: 'Thus says the Lord: Israel is my son, My first born. I have said to you: Let my son go that he may serve Me and you have refused to let him go. Behold I will slay your son, your first born.'* (Ex. 4:22,23).
3. So Pharaoh understood from Exodus 10:10.