

**Torah From a Mussar Perspective**  
**Parshat Bo – Exodus 10:1-13:16**  
**Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis**

In Exodus chapter 10:21-23 we read about the ninth plague brought upon Egypt, that of *choshekh*/darkness:

Then the Eternal One said to Moses, “Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched.” Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings. (Exodus 10:21-23)

In *Siftey Chayyim*, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander<sup>1</sup> offers a lesson about why Pharaoh was so obstinate in his encounters with Moses and Aaron. His teaching is entitled, “The *Gey-ut*/Arrogance of Pharaoh was his Downfall.” Rav Friedlander teaches:

The root of the wickedness of Pharaoh, and his stubbornness in respect to the Holy One, in spite of all the previous *makkot*/plagues and punishments that [he and Egypt] received, [producing] ever-intensifying suffering for him as well as his people, [displays] the extent to which the *middah* of *ga'avah*/pride (or arrogance) was [rooted] in him. This is as our Sages taught, When Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, “He said to them: ‘From the outset, you are telling a lie, as I am the lord of the world, and I created myself and the Nile,’ as it is stated: “My river is mine, and I made myself” (Ezekiel 29:3).”<sup>2</sup> And sure Pharaoh believed he was a god. So much so, that his *ga'avah* led him to deceive himself that he was a god!

Because of his *ga'avah* Pharaoh was prepared to suffer all of the *makkot*/plagues, as well as to cause great suffering to come upon his people.

[We can see an example of this in his] delaying the removal of the plague of frogs for a day. When Moses asked him, “You may have this triumph over me: for how long a time shall I plead to you?” Pharaoh responded, “Until tomorrow!”<sup>3</sup> It was hard for [Pharaoh] to recognize the right and the true, namely, that it was the Hand of God which had caused [the plague.]<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (1923-86) was *mashgiach* of the Ponivezh Yeshiva, and a disciple of Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler.

<sup>2</sup> *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 5:13

<sup>3</sup> See last week’s portion – Exodus 8:5

<sup>4</sup> *Siftey Chayyim Shemot*, page 148

*Ga'avah*/Pride (or Arrogance) is the very first *middah* presented in *Orchot Tzaddikim – The Ways of the Righteous*.<sup>5</sup> In the opening of the chapter on *Ga'avah* we are taught:

*Ga'avah*/Pride is the coin which the Holy Sovereign has rendered defective, exhorting us in Torah, "Take heed, lest you forget THE ETERNAL ONE your God." (Deuteronomy 8:11) The person filled with pride (that is, the one who is arrogant) forgets their Creator."<sup>6</sup>

Without any doubt, the stand-off between Moses and Pharaoh is a wrestling match over who is Divine: Pharaoh, or the Creator of the Universe. As we saw in last week's *parshah*, and continue to see in this week's *parshah*, Pharaoh is quite stubborn. He is simply unwilling to break out of his *ga'avah* long enough to see his own limitations.

We must remember that *Ga'avah*/Pride is not always improper. Like all other *middot*, it must be in the proper measure. We must strive for a midpoint between arrogance and narcissism on the one extreme, and a total lack of self-pride on the other. We must also remember that *ga'avah's* companion *middah* is *anavah*/humility.

Rav Friedlander continues:

[Even in spite of all that has been displayed of God's might in Egypt,] Pharaoh's *ga'avah* is left intact, even after he sends the Israelites forth [to worship God.] As our Sages taught,<sup>7</sup> "At that very time when [Pharaoh] said, 'Get up and go,' he nonetheless pursued after them, catching them and returning them, as it says in Psalm 136:15, "Who hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Sea of Reeds, [God's] steadfast love is eternal." [Only then] does Pharaoh declare, "perhaps I should not have sent them!"<sup>8</sup>

Rav Friedlander teaches,

When the Children of Israel went forth from degradation and servitude in Egypt, it was necessary that they immediately learn to have a sense of the destructiveness that can come as a result of *ga'avah*, as well its place as the root cause of Pharaoh's downfall. [They needed to learn that] they must not go from *avdut*/servitude to *ga'avah*/unbridled pride.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Orchot Tzaddikim*, originally named *Sefer Ha-Middot* was composed by an anonymous author. Written in Germany in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Orchot Tzaddikim* follows the structure of "The Improvement of the Moral Qualities" by Solomon ibn Gabirol. The work adds teachings from the Rambam and others, advocating improving one's character and exercising balance in one's life.

<sup>6</sup> *Orchot Tzaddikim*, *Sha'ar Ha-Ga'avah* 1:1

<sup>7</sup> Rav Friedlander is loosely citing *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 20

<sup>8</sup> *Siftey Chayyim Shemot*, page 148

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, page 149.

He then proceeds to bring this lesson home for us. “We must remember that there are many times in a person’s life when one might be brought to suffering on account of their *ga’avah*.”<sup>10</sup> He cites *Talmud Berachot* 43b where we are taught,

**One who walks with an upright posture and in an arrogant manner, even four cubits, it is as if they are pushing away *raglei haShechinah* - the feet of the Divine Presence.**

He teaches that when we carry ourselves with a posture which bespeaks haughtiness, we push away God’s Presence. How important a lesson this is – for Pharaoh, for *B’nei Yisrael*, as they prepare for a life away from servitude in Egypt, and for us in our time. I daresay I would extend this to our leaders – in many settings, no matter which ideology they hold – we must all carry ourselves with a balanced sense of both *Ga’avah*/Pride and *Anavah*/Humility. Sadly, we are living in a moment in which we see a lack of balance in regard to these virtues in so many individuals, no matter their position in life, or the community.

We have returned to reading and studying the plagues which were meant to convince Pharaoh and Egypt of the might and power of the One God, so that they might learn a sense of proper perspective about their own selves and powers. So should we all use this time to reflect deeply on these *middot* in the context of our souls, our lives, our relationships, and how we carry ourselves in this world.

#### **FOR FOCUS:**

- Can you think of a time when your *ga’avah*/pride was out of balance? How did you come to notice that, and which *middot* can you engage to help find a proper measure?
- Which *middot* can you turn to when you see someone else acting with an out-of-balance measure of *ga’avah*?
- Which plague from ancient times most challenges you from a *Mussar* perspective? How? Why?

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.