

Va'eira

14th of 54 sedras; 2nd of 11 in Sh'mot

Written on 221.8 lines in a Torah; (16th)

16 parshiot; 8 open, 8 closed

121 p'sukim - ranks 20th (4th in Shmot)

1748 words - ranks 15th (3rd in Shmot)

6701 letters - ranks 17th (3rd in Shmot)

P'sukim are above average in length

MITZVOT

No mitzvot are counted from Va'eira. One of 17 sedras without mitzvot. Over the last 18 weeks, including this Shabbat, we have read 17 weekly sedras, which contained a total of 5 mitzvot. Things will change starting next week. (We didn't count the Torah readings of Yom Kippur and Chol HaMoed Sukkot - they both would have added to the mitzva-count.)



[P> X:Y (Z)] and [S> X:Y (Z)] indicate start of a parsha p'tucha or s'tuma. X:Y is Perek:Pasuk of the beginning of parsha; (Z) is the number of p'sukim in the parsha.

Kohen - First Aliya

12 p'sukim - 6:2-13

A long **SDT** (no worse a term than front back-axle) The two most common names of G-d in the Torah are E-LO-HIM and A-DO-NOI (as an act of respect for G-d's sacred names, these two are generally pronounced ELOKIM and HASHEM respectively, when referred to other than in prayer or Torah reading). ELOKIM is usually considered to be G-d's name of strict judgment, whereas HASHEM carries the connotation of Divine Mercy. Notice that in the accounts of Egyptian oppression, the predominant name of G-d is Elokim (especially in 2:23-25).

Exile is certainly associated with the stricter side of G-d's treatment of His People. If the quality of mercy were dominant, perhaps we would acclimate too well to conditions and lose our yearning for redemption. (See what has happened in modern times when exile is accompanied by G-d's Midat HaRa-chamim and Jews are quite comfortable, and therefore, complacent - a regrettable state of affairs. Comfortable is not bad; complacent is - it means "contented to a fault").

In the opening pasuk of this week's sedra, we find the unusual combination of both names. It is ELOKIM Who speaks to Moshe, G-d Who has judged and treated the People strictly and harshly. And G-d Who is also speaking harshly to Moshe for his outburst at the end of Parshat Sh'mot. However, His message to Moshe is "I am HASHEM"

(which comes with VAYOMER, the softer "tell", rather than VAIDABEIR, the harsher "speak" that began the pasuk). And His words of hope and promise to the People begin with the same declaration, "I Am HASHEM". In this context, we are told that G-d will take the People out of Egypt, save them, redeem them, take them unto Him, be our G-d and ultimately bring us into the Promised Land. These stages of redemption are summed up with the reiteration of the statement, "I Am HaShem." It is as if G-d is saying to the down-hearted People: "until now you've experienced Me as ELOKIM, but rest assured that you will now see HASHEM - the G-d of Mercy - in full measure. The Egyptians on the other hand are being punished by the hand of G-d as ELOKIM (see 5:15).

[S> 6:2 (8)] The sedra begins with G-d speaking to Moshe Rabeinu and telling him of the promises He had made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Also, G-d tells Moshe that He has heard and is responding to the cries of the People of Israel.

[In other words, G-d will be taking us out of Egypt not only because of promises He had made to the Avot, but because of His feelings for us.]

Therefore, G-d will take the People out from under Egyptian oppression, will save them from bondage, and will redeem them with His might. He will then take the People to Him as a Nation and be our G-d. He will then bring us into Eretz Yisrael.

Moshe relates this to the People, who are too exhausted to listen.

[P> 6:10 (3)] G-d then tells Moshe to go to Par'o and demand the People's release. Moshe questions how Par'o can be expected to listen, if the People (Moshe's own people) themselves didn't listen to him.

SDT G-d tells Moshe to go speak to Par'o (about letting the People go). Moshe "demurs", using the logical argument known as KAL VACHOMER - if the People of Israel (my own People) didn't listen to me, how is Par'o going to listen to me. Seems logical, except that the Torah has told us why the people didn't listen to Moshe - they were utterly exhausted from their unusually difficult labors. If so, it does not follow logically that Par'o would not listen to Moshe. Maybe he would listen, not being exhausted. On the other hand, Moshe's KAL VACHOMER is based on his own statement - "I have a speech impediment". In trying to understand his failure to reach the people, Moshe finds fault in himself, not in the People. This is how a leader should behave. When a rabbi or teacher fails to communicate an idea to his harges, he should not conclude that the fault lies with them - they are dumb; they are not committed enough; they are not paying attention; and so on. He should rather be critical of himself - I probably didn't explain things well; I wasn't patient enough; and so on. This is one of the signs of humility that is a desirable character- istic in a leader. This was one of the many qualities that

made Moshe Rabeinu The Leader and Teacher par excellence.

[P> 6:13 (1)] (Above Moshe's objections, so to speak,) G-d reiterates to Moshe and Aharon, that they are to tell the People as well as Par'o that the People will be leaving Egypt.

Note that this last pasuk of the first Aliya is one whole parsha. Single-pasuk parshiyot seem to say, LOOK AT ME a little harder and understand some special point. Perhaps, G-d is saying to Moshe - all your hesitations and protestations aside, it is time for TACHLIS. You and Aharon are going to tell/command the people and Par'o about leaving Egypt. Period (full-stop).

Levi - Second Aliya 15 p'sukim - 6:14-28

[S> 6:14 (15)] The Torah begins to enumerate the names of the tribes and family groups. It is obvious that the intention here is not to review the whole of the nation, but rather to focus on Moshe & Aharon. The Torah starts the list with Reuven and Shimon, and when it gets to Levi, there is much more detail. In this brief section, we meet many of the "main personalities" of the rest of the Torah. The Torah is also giving us the ability to continue to draw the timeline of Jewish history, by giving us the ages at death of Levi (we already know the ages of the previous generation - Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov), his son Kehat, his son Amram. That brings us to Moshe and

Aharon. We are also introduced to Korach and his sons and Aharon and his family.

SDT Although the purpose of this partial genealogy is to identify Aharon and Moshe, the Torah began with Reuven and Shimon before it gets to Levi. A reason offered for this in one of the sources is that since Yaakov Avinu spoke critically of these three sons, the Torah here lists only them, to teach us that they were important tribes despite their progenitors' 'mistakes'.

SDT When the Torah tells us that Aharon married Elisheva, she is identified as bat Aminadav AND as the sister of Nachshon. Rashi tells us that from here we learn that when a man marries a woman, he should check out her brothers (because children often take after their maternal uncles). The same idea was previously presented in reference to Lavan, brother of Rivka.

SDT On the Torah's HU AHARON U MOSHE, Rashi points out that sometimes (34 times) Moshe is mentioned first, and sometimes Aharon is mentioned first (4 times in Tanach), to teach us that they were equals. (On some levels, but on others, Moshe Rabeinu was obviously on a higher standing.)

Shlishi - Third Aliya 9 p'sukim - 6:29-7:7

[S> 6:29 (2)] After the "digression" of the previous passage, the Torah now repeats that G-d is sending Moshe to

Par'o and that Moshe continues to "object" because of his speech impediment. (But this time, the fact that the people didn't listen is not mentioned.)

Rashi says that G-d did not repeat the command, nor did Moshe repeat his objection. The Torah is putting us back where we left off before the genealogical data were presented.

BTW, ARAL S'FATAYIM has different meanings in commentaries. Literally, it means: I have uncircumcised lips; it is variously interpreted as, "I have a speech defect", "I can hardly speak", and "I have no self-confidence when I speak".

[P> 7:1 (7)] G-d tells Moshe that Aharon will do the talking, that Par'o will refuse the repeated requests to free the People, and that He (G-d) will take His people out, and that it will be clear to Egypt (and everyone else) that it is indeed G-d Who is doing everything. Moshe and Aharon do as G-d instructs them; they are 80 and 83 years old respectively.

Observation When the Torah is specific about ages, it usually is meant to give us an accurate way of constructing a timeline. Perhaps too, in this case, the Torah is pointing out something that we saw very often in the book of B'reishit - namely, the prominence of the younger brother over the older one.

SDT How is it that Moshe Rabeinu is

able to speak to the People of Israel throughout his "career" as leader, in light of the fact that he complained of being "speech impaired"?

When Moshe spoke to the People of Israel, it was the Sh'china that spoke from his mouth. He had no trouble with his speech defect. He was, however, concerned when it came to speaking to Par'o. See 6:30.

R'vi'i - Fourth Aliya 28 p'sukim - 7:8-8:6

[P> 7:8 (6)] G-d tells Moshe and Aharon, that when Par'o asks for a sign, Moshe shall tell Aharon to throw down the Staff before Par'o and it will turn into a TANIN. Moshe and Aharon appear before Par'o and do as G-d has told them.

Rashi says that TANIN is NACHASH, i.e. snake or serpent. Not everyone see it that way. When G-d first had Moshe throw his staff down, it changed into a NACHASH, a snake. Now with Par'o, it changed into a TANIN. Strong possibility is that we are talking about a crocodile (a fellow reptile to the snake), venerated and worshiped by Egypt. Many Pharaohs identified with the crocodile as the ruling animal of the Nile. Adds the Baal HaTurim, that the Tanin's reverting to wood was a message to Par'o that just as the mighty crocodile turns to dry wood, so too will the mighty Par'o turn to dust and food for worms.

SDT Baal HaTurim points out that the

pasuk says: G-d says to Moshe that when Par'o will ask for a sign, you (Moshe) shall tell Aharon to take your staff and throw it (on the ground) in front of Par'o, it shall become a TANIN. It didn't say: AND it will become a Tanin. He explains that the staff was thrown down and then he was to command it to become a TANIN. And that's what happened, to show Par'o the power of speech that G-d has given to Moshe. In other words, the staff did not change upon being thrown down. It changed by a spoken command. That carries a pointed message to Par'o that his wizards aren't even in the same league with Moshe and Aharon.

Par'o calls his wizards who are able to duplicate (sort of) what Aharon does; however, Aharon's staff (note: not his TANIN, his staff) swallows those of the wizards. Nonetheless, Par'o refuses to listen to Moshe and Aharon, as G-d had said.

[S> 7:14 (5)] G-d then instructs Moshe to go to the river (Nile) in the morning, where Par'o will be, and to bring the Staff with him. Moshe is to say to Par'o that G-d has sent me (Moshe) to tell you (Par'o) to release the People and you have refused until now. "With this will you know Who G-d is..." Moshe (actually Aharon) will be striking the water of the river, turning it to blood and killing all the fish in it.

[S> 7:19 (7)] Following the official warning to Par'o, G-d tells Moshe to tell Aharon to take the Staff and strike the waters of Egypt. Moshe and

Aharon do as instructed and the waters turn to blood, the fish die, and the Egyptians cannot drink the water. Par'o's wizards again duplicate what was done, causing Par'o to remain stubborn. Egyptians are forced to dig for water (and/or buy water from the Jews). This first plague lasts 7 days.

[P> 7:26 (15)] G-d next instructs Moshe to go to Par'o (at his palace) and warn him that if he does not let the People go, Egypt will be smitten by a plague of frogs. Aharon is to raise the Staff above the river, which he does, and the land is blanketed with frog(s). The wizards are again able to replicate this plague with their magical powers. Par'o calls to Moshe and Aharon to pray to G-d that the frogs be removed, promising that he will let the People go into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to G-d. Moshe asks Par'o when he wants the frogs to leave. (A strange question, to which Par'o gives a stranger answer). Par'o says "tomorrow", to which Moshe responds "so be it. And that will serve as proof of G-d's powers".

SDT Why would Par'o ask for the plague to be withdrawn on the following day? He and his people were certainly suffering and would want to rid themselves of the frogs as soon as possible. Par'o (still refusing to see the plagues as Divine, and assuming that there was some natural explanation for them) figured that Moshe came before him when he (Moshe) knew that the frogs would leave. Moshe would give

the impression that he (in the name of the G-d of Israel) had power over the frogs. So Par'o tried to trick Moshe by asking the unexpected - do it tomorrow. Moshe's answer was that doing so would demonstrate that it was truly G-d's power that was being observed.

Egypt saw itself as great because of the Nile and because of the fertile land created by the waters of the Nile. The first plague smote the water. The second was a plague that came from the river and attacked the land. The third smote the land itself.

Chamishi 5th Aliya 12 p'sukim - 8:7-18

So it happens, and after the frogs are gone, Par'o reneges on his promise, as G-d had said he would (an oft-repeated phrase indicating G-d's active role in the events of the Exodus).

[S> 8:12 (4)] G-d tells Moshe to tell Aharon to strike the dust of the earth (no warning to Par'o this time). The resultant plague of lice was not able to be matched by the wizards, who acknowledge G-d's might. Par'o, however, remains stubborn.

[S> 8:16 (13)] G-d sends Moshe to warn Par'o about the next plague (swarms of insects or wild animals, depending upon which opinion you follow). New element with this fourth plague - the obvious contrast between Egypt and the Jews.

There was always a contrast between the Egyptians and the Jews - Egyptians

had no water during the first plague; the Jews had water. The Midrash even says that if a Jew and an Egyptian drank from the same cup, the Jew would be drinking water and the Egyptian would have blood.

Similarly, the Jews did not suffer the plagues and the Egyptians did. Yet it seems that G-d had different messages for each of the plagues. (Or each set of three plagues.) AROV was the first plague that the distinction between Goshen and the Jews on one hand, and the land of Egypt and the Egyptians on the other, was so sharp and obvious. (And that Par'o was well aware of the differences.)

Shishi - Sixth Aliya 26 p'sukim - 8:19-9:16

And so the AROV descend upon the land. Par'o calls for Moshe and gives permission for the people to sacrifice to G-d in Egypt. Moshe says that it must be in the Midbar.

Par'o agrees on the condition that Moshe pray for the removal of the plague. Afterwards, Par'o reneges.

[P> 9:1 (7)] G-d next sends Moshe back to Par'o to repeat the demand for the People's release and to warn him of the consequence of his refusal this time - DEVER. And so it happens that the Egyptian livestock all die, with not a single loss to the Jews. Par'o checks this, yet he still remains stubborn.

[P> 9:8 (5)] The sixth plague (boils) is brought upon Egypt without warning. Although his people are being seriously beaten, Par'o continues to resist (from this point on, with G-d's "help").

[S> 9:13 (9)] Moshe is next sent to warn about the seventh (and very powerful) plague.

SDT In warning about HAIL, G-d says (through Moshe) that this time, I will send ALL my plagues... The Vilna Ga'on explains that G-d uses 3 main weapons, so to speak, to punish those who violate His commands - Fire, Water, and Wind. For example, to destroy Dor Ha-Mabul, G-d used Water. To disperse Dor HaP'laga, He used Wind, and to destroy S'dom, His main weapon was Fire. The plague of Blood used Water. Plague 6 was the burning Fire of Boils on the skin. The locust came on the Wind. But Hail consisted of the whole arsenal - the Hail itself was Water, it had Fire in it, and the Hail was accompanied by strong Wind - hence the phrase: All My plagues.

Sh'VII Seventh Aliya 19 p'sukim - 9:17-35

The threat/warning about hail continues. Never has hail like this been seen. There is also a challenge to the Egyptians in that G-d is allowing servants and animals to be saved by taking them indoors.

[P> 9:22 (14)] Moshe raises his hand heavenward and the hail falls. It is

extremely destructive, but some plants survive (because they were young and pliable), as do the animals of those Egyptians who heeded Moshe's warning to bring them indoors. Par'o admits that he has sinned and grants Moshe's demands, if only the hail will stop. When Par'o sees that the hail and thunder have stopped, he yet again reneges, as G-d has said he would.

Haftara 23 p'sukim Yechezkeil 28:25-29:21

The Haftara begins with the prophecy of redemption (as does the sedra). The main connection to the sedra is that the Haftara speaks of the downfall of Egypt, albeit at a different time in history. We also find in both the sedra and the Haftara, the extreme arrogance of the Par'o. But a pattern can definitely be seen. Egypt mighty, only to fall hard; Israel to be restored to its glory.

PROBING the PROPHETS

The navi Yechezkel, whose words we read this week as our haftara, lived in Babylonia during the years preceding and following churban bayit, the destruction of the First Temple, and had the unenviable task of breaking the horrific news of the churban to the Jewish community in the Diaspora. Like his older contemporary, the prophet Yirmiyahu, Yechezkel often speaks harshly to Israel and warns them of the impending doom that

awaited them if they did not change their wicked ways. And, like Yirmiyahu as well, he also soothed and reassured the grieving community sharing prophecies of comfort and of consolation to them.

After delivering harsh condemnations of Israel's sins and after warning the community of the coming Babylonian invasion, the navi turns his attention to the misdeeds and corruption of Israel's neighbors. Yechezkel spends seven prakim (25-32) condemning the surrounding nations who so cruelly tormented Israel over the years. The navi berates Ammon and Moav, Edom and Pleshet (land of the Plishtim), Tzidon and Tzor (Phoenicia). But perhaps the harshest of all his prophecies is saved for the last neighbor, Mitzrayim/Egypt, prophecies which detail the grave punishments that would be meted out to them. And it is the first part of this condemnation that makes up our haftara, a selection taken from the 28th and 29th chapters of Sefer Yechezkel, and a most fitting selection for our parsha in which seven of the plagues that Hashem brought upon Egypt are detailed.

Yechezkel's nevu'a criticizes the haughty Pharaoh and his people who failed to help Israel at the time of her need. He predicts the invasion of the Babylonian king, Nevuchadretzar, and his army that would lay waste to the entire land of Egypt. Not only would this be a military conquest but it would also lead to economic ruin for Egypt as the land itself would be depleted and remain desolate for a full forty years.

Curiously, this prophecy of destruction - and our haftara - is introduced by words of comfort directed to Israel, foreseeing a time when Israel would be gathered from the Diaspora, returned to her land and live there securely. One may rightfully wonder why Yechezkel interrupts the series of prophecies condemning Israel's neighbors, with a nevu'a of comfort and encouragement for Israel. We can suggest that this was no "interruption" at all. Although Sefer Mishlei reminds us not to rejoice at the defeat of our enemies [24:17], it was an essential part of the consolation process for Israel to understand that Hashem does not single her out from all other nations for punishment. G-d, the righteous judge, castigates all evil doers and sees that they receive their just rewards as well. Hashem may have loftier standards for his chosen people but He enforces His justice upon all.

It is a lesson taught to us by the prophets.

And a lesson whose truth we have learned throughout our long history.

Probing the Prophets, weekly insights into the Haftara, is written by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler, author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)