

January 12, 2013

Vaera (I Appeared)

We live in trying times. There are terrorists around the globe, our constitution and freedom are under siege, there is starvation around the world, and, according to the experts, our economic system is about to collapse. Without Yeshua, it is easy to despair of a better tomorrow amid the hopelessness of the entrenched evil, suffering, and hate that is all around us. But this is nothing new.

Let's turn back a few thousand years. Having survived centuries of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites were shocked, and at the same time, elated at the good news that Moses brought them. HaShem had heard their cry. At last, liberation was at hand. The Torah tells us that they believed in Moses, and yet, their liberation did not come. After a while, they gave up on the idea of freedom, and this week's parasha tells us that, "They would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage."

Among the commentators who have wrestled with this phrase, Rashi noted that the Hebrew expression for "crushed spirits" can also be translated as "shortness of breath." He concluded that the weight of slavery was so burdensome and the pain of losing hope so searing, that the Israelite's very breath was constricted.

Abraham Ibn Ezra noticed that the expression could also mean "impatience," and would translate this passage as, "Israel did not harken nor pay attention to Moses, as their spirit was impatient because of the length of their exile and the hard labor."

In the 17th century, Rabbi Hayim ben Attar understood that new hope can make suffering even harder to tolerate. The closer liberation comes, the more difficult it is to tolerate one's oppression. There are times when only by hitting rock bottom and being forced to abandon our own self-centeredness that we can become open to help from beyond. Abandoning the pretense of self-sufficiency and giving up our delusions of power and control can permit us to "go with the flow" and turn our destiny back to the One who actually writes the script of our lives - HaShem.

By feeling the fullness of despair, the Israelites became open to the possibility of liberation. Perhaps we too should invest less energy in distracting ourselves from our sorrows and open our hearts to the liberation given to us by our faith in Yeshua.

Theme: Despair vs Hope

Hebrew reading - Exodus 6:9-11

English reading - Exodus 6:6-12

Haftarah reading - Isaiah 66:22-24

B'rit Chadasha - 1 Peter 2:9-12