

## Va-Era 2018

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 1/13/18

The content of this week's Torah portion is widely known because it makes up a good part of the seder story we retell around our tables each year. We read, of course, of the plagues, and the first ones are the most familiar - Dam, Tzifardaya, Kinnim... Those three are covered in this portion.

It is interesting that the word tzifardaya, means "frog," not "frogS." This prompted the Midrash, as quoted by Rashi to say that, initially, it was just one large frog that came out from the Nile. As the Egyptians tried to kill it, it broke into more and more frogs. Every time they angrily swatted at it, the frogs multiplied. This, say the Rabbis, teaches us a profound lesson about anger. The Midrash implies that even after the Egyptian frog exterminators saw that their beatings simply exacerbated the situation, they continued their frantic frog flogging. Of course, they themselves intensified the plague as their beatings produced more and more frogs. And you know that common situations of anger generally unfold in a similar type of fashion. The more a person reacts to adversity with anger, the worse the situation becomes. Specifically, when we are overcome by anger "beating" the matter simply adds strain to the already scarred relationship, while leaving the issue alone likely allows for the wounds to heal. Anger often clouds sound reasoning and leads people to "beat the frog" despite the further deterioration of the situation that results. The lesson, of course, is to learn from the Egyptians' mistake and try to resist the onset of anger, allowing instead for the tensions to gradually ease.

Unfortunately, the Jewish People at the time were just as plagued, not with frogs, but with anger. Initially, when Moshe comes before the People to tell them of their freedom they unite behind him. But just two chapters later, after their work has gotten harder and Moshe's initial attempts at winning their freedom are not successful, the people stop listening. In fact, they get angry at Moshe and will no longer listen to reason. Every time he tries to convince them, they seem to shout him down. This led the Talmud to teach this profound and simple truth: "Ka'as mesaleik et ha-da'at" that "Anger eliminates reason." The Midrash here appears to explain that rationally, the people should have heeded Moshe's call for optimism. Despite the setback they suffered with Pharaoh's decrees they should have nonetheless acknowledged Moshe Gd's messenger, the one who would bring them forward to freedom. What prevented this reaction was their anger. You simply cannot listen to reason when you are angry.

I spoke about this at our Thursday morning minyan breakfast, and it naturally prompted people to ask, "So what can we do about it?" So this morning let me briefly attempt to provide some answers. Albert Einstein observed that "**The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.**" In other words, our anger, which is often a quick and impulsive response, cannot be addressed in a quick and impulsive way. These kinds of challenges cannot be solved in the superficial way that we created them. We need to bring a deeper level of thinking to solve these deep concerns. We need to understand that the problems are not simply "he said/she said," and the answers are not relational. They start with us, on the inside, and we are the ones who can mitigate the consequences. When issues of anger, frustration, and jealousy arise, we tempt to whack at them like the frogs, and then we wonder why they keep getting worse. That's because we fail to step back, look deeper, and look within.

What the statement "*Ka'as mesaleik et ha-da'at*", "Anger eliminates reason" reminds us is that we cannot be both filled with anger and reasonable at the same time. You cannot punch someone and shake his hand at the same time. To overcome the anger we need to step back and recognize it, address and understand it in a way that is less emotionally riven. The solutions come from the inside out; from self-awareness, from emotional and intellectual integrity.

So the first step is to call out the emotions for what they are and to recognize them as counterproductive, not just in terms of relationships, but in terms of our own overall well-being. That's the cognitive side to this, but there is a behavioral one as well. We need to follow through in actions that reflect our reasoned approach to getting more out of life. So, for instance, if you want to have a happy marriage, be the kind of person who generates positive energy and sidesteps those negative emotions when they come your way. Don't empower them. If you want to have a more cooperative, pleasant teenager, be a more empathic, understanding and loving parent. If you want more freedom in your job, be a more responsible, helpful employee. If you want stronger relationships, be more consistent in your emotional responses. It doesn't always work the first time, but, **"The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."**

Our ancient ancestors could not break the frame, they could not get to a deeper level of thought and reflection and that cost them the Promised Land. But we can do more, we can think more, and we can, through our own efforts find a deeper level of peace in our own hearts, a peace that will radiate out and mitigate more of the anger and frustration that comes our way.