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Vaera: Don't Play No Game That I Can't Win

1.

So in one of my all time favorite midrash

Pharaoh is in his palace

It is coronation day

And all the other princes and dignitaries are bringing him presents

And he is receiving all his honors and gifts and they are wrapping up after another long day of telling Pharaoh how great he is, everyone is cleaning up, getting ready to go home

And there is knock on the palace gates

Because that is the moment when Moses and Aaron, show up, completely underdressed

But Pharaoh thinks they are just late comers to the Pharaoh appreciation party and tells his servants to let the old men in

Moses and his brother Aaron, speaking for God, immediately demands that Pharaoh free Israel

Pharaoh, taken by surprise, is furious but his terms are almost laughable

"Your god does not even have the manners to send me a present on my day! Not a crown!

Just sends these words!?

I don't know your God, and I will not let the people go."

But then, according to midrash, Pharaoh adds, "But wait – I will search my records"

And there is a bizarre scene, think Pharaoh but working at the DMV, going through alphabetically, periodically asking Moses and Aaron questions:

"Your god, how many cities has this god conquered? Young or old? How long has this god been on the throne?" etc.

*As if, through some sort of formula, Pharaoh could assess the reality of God.*

Moses and Aaron try to answer on Pharaoh's terms, citing God's creations (um, the world) and giving examples like babies and categories of fruit and dew and things way more poetic and powerful than any of the categories Pharaoh is setting out but you see,

Because Moses and Aaron's answers don't begin to fit into Pharaoh's categories

*Because God does not have a file in Pharaoh's file cabinet you see*

*Because God did not send a gift*

In this midrash

Pharaoh not only rejects God fully

Pharaoh rejects Moses and Aaron, creating waves of shame,  
saying

*"You are liars! I am the Lord of the Universe, I created myself as well as the Nile.*

*...Who is this God that I should listen to God's voice?"*

All Pharaohs, you have met them, they all think they're God  
And it goes without saying that all Pharaohs reject anything and  
anyone that doesn't fit in their pre-existing files

2.

This is the situation God and Moses find themselves in  
Suffice it to say that the emotional gymnastics of being forced to  
put an idea, a reality like God in terms Pharaoh can understand  
I imagine it would be like teaching environmentalism at Mar a  
Lago

The humiliation of trying to convey life and the complexity of the  
world, the necessity for the soul in a system as rudimentary and  
narrow as Pharaoh's "god files"

By the time we find Moses in our parasha  
After a lifetime of this, more  
Moses has been rendered mute  
All the energy has been drained from his body  
He has lost the will to speak  
He has spent decades as a recluse

And as many times as God tries to get Moses to finish the task, finish what has been started, go back, tell Pharaoh to free the people

Moses does not want to return

This is the situation God and Moses find themselves in

3.

And so God, not unlike a parent on a long flight with a toddler, has to resort to every trick in the book

On demand, God had to give Moses a Divine name to drop when asked

God gave Moses special magic tricks Moses can use to show off, a magic wand that turns into a snake, really low level stuff

There are divine promises, cajoling, compliments, stuff to make Moses look fancier than he is, the whole nine yards

In fact, at this point God seems to have given into Moses' fears that this is the only way to win: play by Pharaoh's rules, fit into Pharaoh's files.

Why does God pander? There is a beautiful midrash about how although God comforts many people who are afraid in Torah, and there is plenty of fear in Torah, everyone has their moments, Although God comforts many people, it seems two are comforted by God but are still afraid

Jacob and our Moses

And so the rabbis conclude, not (as we might expect) that Moses was wrong to hang onto this fear, but rather, if this kind of

thing was allowed back in Torah, how much more so should we be allowed to be afraid today? [BR 76:1]

Why is God giving into Moses?

Because fear is not the problem, *stopping as a result of fear is the problem*

So God does everything to help Moses re-enter the fray

4.

But then, this week

The rabbis ask a rather obvious question, why didn't we think of it before?

You see, when God finally gets Moses to go back to Pharaoh, famously, Aaron, Moses' brother is assigned all the talking and explaining

So if Aaron is explaining everything to Pharaoh, to the Israelites

If Aaron is providing the words, making the deals

Why does Moses have to go back and confront Pharaoh altogether?

What is Moses doing there at all?

Maybe, we can start to see, maybe these confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh are not only to instruct or change *Pharaoh's mind*

Maybe these negotiations are equally to teach *Moses*

*Maybe God doesn't just want Moses to return to Pharaoh no matter what*

*Maybe its not even about Moses working through his fear of Pharaoh*

*Maybe God wants Moses to start to see what is divine in himself*

Maor VaShemesh<sup>1</sup> points out

That in Torah when God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh, God says

דַּבֵּר אֶל־פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ

Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I *tell* you,

But, you see, since God is describing something that will happen in the future we expect God to say, tell Pharaoh all that I WILL tell you

Why does God not speak in the future tense?

Why does God say instead, essentially, "You will say to Pharaoh all that I *am* telling you, as in right now?"

It's as if God is saying to Moses,

"What I am asking you do to with Pharaoh is not so different from how you are inspired to speak right now

"Everything that you already understand now, everything that you already hear Moses

All your arguments with yourself

This conversation

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<sup>1</sup> to 7:1-2 / Shulchan Orach of Chasidut

Everything that has been said  
Don't you see?  
That is also me talking through you,

Even in your past mistakes  
In your early life when you didn't know who you were  
In your running away into the wilderness  
In your conviction that you should be a shepherd the rest of  
your days  
Even in your terror now  
In your begging to get out of what I am asking you to do  
It has always been this way, whether you knew it or not –  
I have always talked with you and through you  
"You don't need a magic wand or my holy name on a business  
card

"B/c What I am asking you do to with Pharaoh is not any  
different from how we are speaking right now."

You see  
Moses is not being sent to Pharaoh – Pharaoh is a lost cause –  
everyone knows that  
Moses is not being sent to Pharaoh  
Pharaoh is being sent to Moses  
To test Moses, to sharpen his conviction  
To make Moses understand  
To teach Moses, and by extension, all of us  
To stop trying to play by Pharaoh's rules  
To stop seeing himself through Pharaoh's eyes

And instead listen for the voice that is already speaking from within

4.

Finally

HaEmek Davar tells a last secret, an important one

Because right before God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and

דַּבֵּר אֶל־פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אָנִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ

“Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that **I tell** you” (what we just talked about)

God says, something very strange

God says, אֲנִי יְהוָה

“I am god.... דַּבֵּר אֶל־פַּרְעֹה...”

This sticks out immediately

Why does God need to self identify, here, self introduce right here?

For once, Moses is not even asking for anything.

But HaEmek Davar teaches that the reason God says, “I am God’ before giving the instructions for going to Pharaoh is because God wants to teach Moses that there are actually two ways of talking, two ways of communicating

There is a first way,

The way we are used to

The way of explanation, of translation, of elucidation of getting the words and ideas across, more or less



That's what this part of the verse is describing

דַּבֵּר אֶל־פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ

“Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that **I tell** you”

And HaEmek Davar teaches us

This first way of communicating is already covered,

Aaron's got it (!)

But there is

Another way of speaking entirely

A way that has less to do with words

Or, at least, it is not entirely dependent on words

And so perhaps, says HaEmek Davar, the reason Moses is needed in that room is to represent this second way of speaking

– Although speaking does not really cover it –

It is more another way of being in the world

So you see, when God begins telling Moses to go to Pharaoh by saying, “I am God”

God is *reminding* Moses in that moment, “I am God, I and all my *kavod*, all my glory, all my honor”

“All that is breathtaking and holy and divine and full of splendor, all that is the power of creation, the inevitability of redemption, the certainty of your leaving Egypt

That is what you, Moses, with your presence, are carrying,  
emanating into the room"

...אני בכבודי

"So it is not just that I, God am going to tell you what to say  
It is that by your very presence, Moses, and by what you carry in  
the room with you

*Whether he admits it or not  
Pharaoh will know he is not God*

And you will not have to say anything because my honor already  
speaks all by itself

It is the opposite of what you learned from Pharaoh  
Nothing has to be summoned  
Nothing has to be explained  
Nothing has to be defended  
My word, my *kavod*, just exists

אֲנִי יְהוָה

It just is, Moses

I just am

And if you can withstand your fears long enough  
My word, if you can call it that, *kavodi* / my splendor, it will arise  
from you –

Effortless, impossible to restrain,  
Undeniable, everywhere

