

פְּרָשֵׁת
וַאֲרָא
Parashat Va'era

*Shemot / Exodus 6:2-9:35, Ezekiel 28:25-29:21
Matthew 12:1-14*

The Spirit of Blasphemy

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans saying, “*As it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’*” (*Romans 2:24, τὸ γὰρ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ δι’ ὑμᾶς βλασφημεῖται ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, καθὼς γέγραπται.*) Paul wrote “*As it is written...*” The question presented to us here is “*where was this written?*” The Greek text is written as καθὼς γέγραπται meaning “*according to the manner in which it is written.*” Looking at the Greek text Paul wrote “*as it is written*” at the end of the verse saying first the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles followed by “*as it is written.*” The English translation however reverses the order of the phrase to the beginning of the sentence. The way Paul is writing these things, he is making a divide between a proof text and an illustration. It may be Paul had this week’s Torah portion in mind, Parashat Va’era, and the plagues the Lord God had brought upon Egypt. This attitude of blaspheme goes all the way back to the Torah with Moshe going before Pharaoh saying according to *Shemot / Exodus 9:14* כִּי אֲנִי שְׁלַח אֶת-כָּל-מִגַּפְתֵּי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּבְעַבְדֶיךָ וּבְעַמֶיךָ בְּעִבּוֹר תִּדְעֶנּוּ כִּי אֵין כְּמֹנִי: בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ: *‘For this time I will send all My plagues on you and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one*

like Me in all the earth. (NASB) It is at this point that God meant to tell Pharaoh that the impact of this impending plague would completely change his attitude towards the God of Israel, even from since the first time Moshe had come to him declaring *“let my people go.”* Previously Pharaoh’s magicians were able to reproduce the plagues. It was only with the plague of gnats (כִּנֹּחַם *Shemot / Exodus 8:16-19*) the magicians declared *“this is the finger of God.”* It wasn’t until this time, the plague of hail (ice) and fire that Pharaoh would realize his mistake. What Pharaoh had previously seen was a powerful work of demons up until this point. He most likely disregarded the previous miracles because his magicians were able to duplicate them. In the plague of fire and ice, the Lord God was forcing Pharaoh to admit that none were capable of producing this kind of plague they were about to experience. In *Shemot / Exodus 9:14* the Lord says אֶל־לִבְךָ֙ saying that he is speaking to Pharaoh’s heart. Up until now Pharaoh had related all that he has seen to his eyes and his mind. The Lord God stressed the word מַגֵּפֹתַי, *“My plagues,”* to emphasize that this phenomena emanated directly from God. No demon or sorcerer could possibly wield such power. (*Or HaChaim on Exodus 9:14 Part 3*) It was at this point the blaspheme of God’s name became a very real thing in Pharaoh’s heart. The Lord God Almighty said *“For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world.” (NASB)* The Lord made a distinction between His people and the Egyptians. These things are what shape our understanding of the Covenant of God, His relationship with His people, through the power of His Word to deliver them from slavery and set them free to serve and worship God the way He calls us to.

First century Judaism was a complex religion consisting of various sects (subgroups) having their own perspective on the true expression of God’s covenant with Moshe and what this looked like for God’s people. Take for example, the Pharisees considered their Oral Tradition (Mishnah) as being equal with the Written Scriptures. The Sadducees wanted to appease Rome since they were put into positions of power by the Roman government. The Sadducees believed only in the Torah and neglected the Prophets and the Writings section of the Tanach. The Zealots believed that a violent revolution was the way

to go against the pagan Roman occupiers and that this kind of revolt would bring about the kingdom of God. The Essense believed the Temple service was corrupted and withdrew to the wilderness, living an ascetic life and producing the Dead Sea Scrolls. Based upon what we do know about these subgroups in Judaism, despite their differences, these groups all agreed upon the idea that ethnic Jewishness conferred certain privileges before God. The Apostle Paul wrote saying the same, agreeing that there were certain advantages to being Jewish (*Romans 3:1-2, 9:4-5*). Paul rejected the idea however that one's Jewishness alone or by simply obeying the mitzvot alone would convey salvation (*Romans 2:1-16*). Paul taught that one cannot be declared righteous before God by obedience to the commandments (mitzvot) alone because obedience requires perfection, and no man is capable of perfectly keeping the commands. This is how he related this saying *"As it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"* (*Romans 2:24*) Even one significant failure would doom us all (*Galatians 3:10-12, 5:3, James 2:10*). The Midrashic approach to this week's Torah portion according to Midrash Rabbah on Shemot Parashat 12 Part 4 states that *"The words 'all My plagues' refers to the hail which broke the trees whereas the fire contained within it burned the roots. The force of the cold did not extinguish the fire, nor did the heat of the fire melt the hail (ice)."* There was something to this plagues that was related to destruction at both the surface and deep down within (at the root). The Midrash goes on to relate this to two feuding dukes who are opposing forces required to work together in order to overcome the enemy. Ezekiel's vision of the angels holding up the throne of God were as fire and ice speaking of these as natural forces with opposing characteristics that were necessary for the habitat of heaven as compared to that of the earth. This may also be paralleled to the Yetzer Hara and the Yetzer Hatov being created by God within a man, these opposing forces which are a necessary part of man to cause him to succeed in this world (*i.e. to seek a wife, to build a house, to enter into business with others, etc.*). When discussing these things, we understand the idea of the *"spirit of blaspheme"* is connected to the life of a believer who blasphemes the name of the Lord by the way he lives his life, or by the words that he says (*i.e. "Oh my G--"*). When these things are mixed together, like

fire and ice, two opposing forces, the life of a believer is confounded in his spiritual life and witness before the world. The significance of what we read here in this week's Torah portion is taking God's Word seriously in our lives in the sense of by the way we live our lives, either being according to God's word or according to what we see is good in our own eyes. Our words and our actions reveals the truth about what we believe.

Shemot / Exodus 9:13-35

9:13 Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, 'Let My people go, that they may serve Me. 9:14 'For this time I will send all My plagues on you and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth. 9:15 'For if by now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth. 9:16 'But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth. 9:17 'Still you exalt yourself against My people by not letting them go. 9:18 'Behold, about this time tomorrow, I will send a very heavy hail, such as has not been seen in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. 9:19 'Now therefore send, bring your livestock and whatever you have in the field to safety. Every man and beast that is found in the field and is not brought home, when the hail comes down on them, will die.' 9:20 The one among the servants of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord made his servants and his livestock flee into the houses; 9:21 but he who paid no regard to the word of the Lord left his servants and his livestock in the field. 9:22 Now the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward the sky, that hail may fall on all the land of Egypt, on man and on beast and on every plant of the field, throughout the land of Egypt.' 9:23

Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt. 9:24 So there was hail, and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very severe, such as had not been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. 9:25 The hail struck all that was in the field through all the land of Egypt, both man and beast; the hail also struck every plant of the field and shattered every tree of the field. 9:26 Only in the land of Goshen, where the sons of Israel were, there was no hail. 9:27 Then Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron, and said to them, 'I have sinned this time; the Lord is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones. 9:28 'Make supplication to the Lord, for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail; and I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.' 9:29 Moses said to him, 'As soon as I go out of the city, I will spread out my hands to the Lord; the thunder will cease and there will be hail no longer, that you may know that the earth is the Lord's. 9:30 'But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear the Lord God.' 9:31 (Now the flax and the barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. 9:32 But the wheat and the spelt were not ruined, for they ripen late.) 9:33 So Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh, and spread out his hands to the Lord; and the thunder and the hail ceased, and rain no longer poured on the earth. 9:34 But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned again and hardened his heart, he and his servants. 9:35 Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not let the sons of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses. (NASB)

יג ויאמר יהוה אל-משה השכם בפקר והתיצב לפני
 פרעה ואמרתי אליו כה-אמר יהוה אלהי העברים שלח
 את-עמי ויעבדני: יד כי | בפעם הזאת אני שלח את-

כָּל-מִגְפְּתֵי אֵל-לִבָּהּ וּבַעֲבֹדֶיהָ וּבַעֲמֻדָּהּ בַּעֲבוּר תַּדַּע כִּי אֵין
כְּמִנֵּי בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ: טו כִּי עָתָה שְׁלַחְתִּי אֶת-יָדֵי נְאֻם אֹתָהּ
וְאֶת-עֲמֻדָּהּ בְּדָבָר וּתְפַחֵד מִן-הָאָרֶץ: טז וְאוֹלָם בַּעֲבוּר זֹאת
הַעֲמֻדָּתִיהָ בַּעֲבוּר הָרֵאִתָּהּ אֶת-כַּחֲזִי וּלְמַעַן סִפֵּר שְׁמִי בְּכָל-
הָאָרֶץ: [שְׁבִיעִי] יז עוֹדָה מְסֻלָּל בַּעֲמִי לְבַלְתִּי שְׁלֹחַם:
יח הִנְנִי מִמְטִיר כְּעַת מְחַר בְּרֹד כְּבֹד מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-הָיָה
כְּמֵהוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם לְמִן-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְעַד-עַתָּה: יט וְעַתָּה
שְׁלַח הָעֵז אֶת-מִקְנֶהָ וְאֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לָהּ בַּשָּׂדֶה כָּל-הָאָדָם
וְהַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר-יִמְצָא בַּשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא יֵאָסֹף הַבִּיטָהּ וַיֵּרֵד עֲלֵהֶם
הַבְּרֹד וּמָתוּ: כ הִירָא אֶת-דְּבַר יְהוָה מֵעֲבָדֵי פְרַעֲהַ הַנְּסִים
אֶת-עֲבָדָיו וְאֶת-מִקְנֵהוּ אֵל-הַבְּתָיִם: כא וְאֲשֶׁר לֹא-שָׂם
לְבוֹ אֵל-דְּבַר יְהוָה וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת-עֲבָדָיו וְאֶת-מִקְנֵהוּ בַּשָּׂדֶה:
כב וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵל-מֹשֶׁה נָטָה אֶת-יָדָהּ עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם
וַיְהִי בְרֹד בְּכָל-אָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַל-הָאָדָם וְעַל-הַבְּהֵמָה וְעַל
כָּל-עֹשֵׁב הַשָּׂדֶה בְּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: כג וַיֵּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מַטְהוֹ
עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי נָתַן קֶלֶת וּבְרֹד וּתְהַלֵּךְ-אִשׁ אַרְצָהּ וַיִּמְטֹר
יְהוָה בְּרֹד עַל-אָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: כד וַיְהִי בְרֹד וְאִשׁ מִתְּלַקַּ-
חַת בְּתוֹךְ הַבְּרֹד כְּבֹד מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-הָיָה כְּמֵהוּ בְּכָל-אָרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם מֵאִז הָיְתָה לְגוֹי: כה וַיֵּךְ הַבְּרֹד בְּכָל-אָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה מֵאָדָם וְעַד-בְּהֵמָה וְאֶת כָּל-עֹשֵׁב הַשָּׂדֶה
הַכָּה הַבְּרֹד וְאֶת-כָּל-עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה שִׁבַּר: כו רַק בְּאָרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן
אֲשֶׁר-שָׂם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא הָיָה בְרֹד: כז וַיִּשְׁלַח פְּרַעֲהַ
וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם חֲטָאתִי הַפְּעַם יְהוָה
הַצַּדִּיק וְאַנִּי וְעַמִּי הָרָשָׁעִים: כח הַעֲתִירוּ אֵל-יְהוָה וְרַב
מִהִיִּת קֶלֶת אֱלֹהִים וּבְרֹד וְאֲשַׁלְּחָה אֶתְכֶם וְלֹא תִסְפּוּן
לְעַמֵּד: כט וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מֹשֶׁה כִּצָּאתִי אֶת-הָעִיר אֶפְרַשׁ
אֶת-כַּפִּי אֵל-יְהוָה הַקְּלוֹת יִתְחַדְּלוּן וְהַבְּרֹד לֹא יְהִי-עוֹד
לְמַעַן תַּדַּע כִּי לִיהוָה הָאָרֶץ: ל וְאִתָּהּ וּבַעֲבֹדֶיהָ יִדְעַתִּי כִּי
טָרַם תִּירָאוּן מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים: לא וְהַפְּשַׁתָּהּ וְהַשְׁעֵ-
רָה גִפְתָּהּ כִּי הַשְׁעֵרָה אָבִיב וְהַפְּשַׁתָּהּ גִּבְעֹל: לב וְהַחֲטָה
וְהַכְּסֻמָּת לֹא גָבוּ כִּי אֶפְיֹלֶת הִנָּה: [מִפְטִיר] לג וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה
מֵעַם פְּרַעֲהַ אֶת-הָעִיר וַיִּפְרֹשׁ כַּפְּיוֹ אֵל-יְהוָה וַיִּתְחַדְּלוּ הַקְּלוֹת

וְהִבְרִד וּמָטָר לֹא-גִמְתָּ אֶרְצָה: לֹד וַיִּרְא פְּרֻעָה כִּי-חִדַּל
הַמָּטָר וְהִבְרִד וְהִקְלֵת וַיִּסַּף לַחֲטָא וַיִּכְבַּד לְבוּ הוּא וַעֲבָדָיו:
לֵה וַיִּחְזַק לֵב פְּרֻעָה וְלֹא שָׁלַח אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּאִשָּׁר
דָּבָר יְהוָה בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה:

Here in the Torah text, the Lord God Almighty began to make a distinction between the children of Israel and the Egyptians, and God said according to *Shemot / Exodus 9:14* כִּי | בַּפְּעַם הַזֹּאת אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ אֶת- כָּל-מִגַּפְתֵּי אֱלֹהֵי-לְבוֹךְ וּבַעֲבָדֶיךָ וּבַעֲמָלֶיךָ בַּעֲבוּר תּוֹעַ כִּי אֵין כָּמוֹנִי בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ: *For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world. (NASB)* The commentary *Chizkuni on Shemot / Exodus 9:16 Part 1* states saying, “ולמען ספר את שמי בכל”, *and in order to spread My fame in the whole country, (or on the whole earth).*” *G-d continues to respond “tit for tat,” seeing that Pharaoh had denied His existence, not to acknowledge His power; G-d will make sure that he will see how wrong he had been, and he would have to do so publicly.*” The reason we remain alive today is to bring glory to God according to His Mercy, even in the midst of blasphemy against the name. The Lord God Almighty does this in order to show us His power, and in order that we will proclaim His name throughout the whole Earth. The way the Lord God is revealing Himself for those who have said “*Who is God?*” is so we are able to proclaim His name all through the earth. The Lord God says this through Moshe, and we note how back in those days, they did not have the kind of world-wide communication capabilities as we do today. What The Lord God is revealing to us and what He was saying to Pharaoh, what he was about to do to Pharaoh and his people, would be the instrument through which the whole of mankind would become aware of who God is, and what God does to those who reject Him and His commands. We are learning who the God of Abraham is, and what it means to be in a covenant relationship with Him. The power of God is to do the impossible and He is demonstrating that here for us in this week’s Torah portion!

The commentary *Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot / Exodus 9:16 Part 1* states the following:

Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot / Exodus 9:16 Part 1

בעבור הראותך את כוחי *in order to demonstrate to you My power.* G'd did not also display His גבורות, as this was an aspect of His which He did not display in Egypt. However, during the redemption of the future G'd will display this aspect of His power also as testified to by Ezekiel 40,4 who mentions this in connection with his vision of the building of the Third Temple. The key word in Ezekiel's vision is the words הנה הובאתה הנה spelled with the letter ה at the end. This is a hint that at that time additional dimensions of G'd's power and greatness will become manifest. The letter ה is absent in the word הראותך used by Moses to describe what G'd had shown Pharaoh.

The rabbis say that the Lord God did not display His גבורות as this was an aspect of His that He did not reveal in Egypt. The rabbis note how this word reveals a future expectation of the redemption of God in relation to His גבורות. It is interesting how Yeshua explains to his disciples all power (גבורות) and authority has been given to him. In the Messiah Yeshua, the Lord God demonstrated his גבורות to all the world. The building of the Temple of God is connected to this dimension of power (גבורות) and the establishing of the Covenant with His people. This may be paralleled to how the Lord God establishes this temple of our bodies in the Messiah, He sends His Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. In *Romans 2*, Paul cites *Isaiah 52:5*, which speaks of the nations of Isaiah's time, they were conquering God's people, and they blasphemously questioned His power to save. We see something very similar in the book of Jeremiah and the king of Babylon questioning the ability of the God of Israel to save the people. The point was this exile was the people's fault, not the Lord's. Their sins led to the Lord God removing His protective power (his hand), allowing the Gentiles to conquer the Jewish nation. In addition to this, they did not seem to realize the exile was HaShem's punishment for their sin, and the sin of blaspheming His Name. Note also how something very similar hap-

pened in the first century with the destruction of the Temple. We read that many Gentiles admired Jewish ethics, but others saw how God's people were not practicing what they preached and asked, *"How great is HaShem if those who are called by His name live no more virtuously than anyone else?"* In the Torah portion, Pharaoh realized the error of his ways as the Torah states in *Shemot / Exodus 9:27* וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם חַטָּאתִי הַפְּעַם יְהוָה הַצַּדִּיק וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי: *Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I stand guilty this time. The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong."* (NASB) Pharaoh finally admitted that he was guilty and the Lord God was righteous.

Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot / Exodus 9:27 Part 1

ה' הצדיק ואני ועמי הרשעים, *"Hashem is the righteous One whereas I and my people are the wicked ones."* Pharaoh said to Moses in effect: *"you who are the messenger of Hashem are righteous and Hashem is righteous in His application of judgments. I and my people are wicked in that we refused to obey His commandments."* Seeing he had repeatedly denied even Hashem's existence, Pharaoh now spelled out his mistake in detail as befits people confessing a sin. Actually, he only had to confess his own personal sin. However, seeing he was afraid he might be held responsible for the sins of his people because he was their king and he could have restrained them, he confessed their guilt also saying: *"I and my people are the wicked ones."*

According to this commentary, it may have been Pharaoh thought Moshe was the one performing these miracles up until this point. Pharaoh recognized his failure to obey God's commandments and confesses this before Moshe and God. When we consider our sins, many times we rank them as minor or major. Those things considered minor are not given much thought as opposed to the major ones. *"Minor"* sins were bad enough, and the *"big ones"* were those such as theft, murder, adultery, and idolatry. These were those sins that were evident in the Jewish community according to Paul in *Romans 2:17-23*.

First-Century Jews were not first rank idolaters who bowed to statues in the Greek culture. Since idolatry was not their sin, Paul connects idolatry to robbing temples (*Romans 2:22*) in a very rabbinic way. We are not certain what all this involved, the use of sanctuary money (i.e. *precious metals from pagan sanctuaries*) or maybe not paying the Jerusalem temple tax, or maybe this was a reference to something else entirely. The point is that First-Century believers tolerated the cultural idolatry and other sins, having learned nothing from their exile (*2 Chronicles 36*). Note how this is paralleled to becoming familiar with the world around us, with our culture (i.e. LGBT) or the use of the phrase “*oh my G--*” as being something of no consequence? With few exceptions, these first century believers were not lights to the world, and consequently, the Gentiles were blaspheming God (*Romans 2:24*). How we live our lives is of utmost importance with its connection to repentance and this may give us some clues to whether Paul was thinking about this week’s Torah Portion, Parashat Va’era while writing *Romans 2* in relation to blaspheming the name of God.

The Scriptures are clear we all fall short of the Torah requirement for our lives, and others will always take advantage to blaspheme the name of God due to our failures. We must however be honest about our failures, and not so familiar with the world that we do not recognize the sin that is in our lives (i.e. the modern day usage of the phrase “*oh my G--*”). Paul writes to the believers in Rome (*Romans 2:22*) asking if they committed sacrilege? Here he connects, in a very rabbinic way, idolatry, adultery, covetousness, theft, murder, all of the major types of sins listed in the Torah. The spirit of blaspheme is found within all of these things, either intentionally or unintentionally. This is why the rabbis say this plague of fire and ice encompasses all of the other plagues previously brought upon Egypt. Paul was bold enough to call the people out on these things, and the Torah’s rabbinic method of interpretation draws in all of Torah, all of the commands, calling out the people to take notice, not just of the major sins, but of the minor one’s as well in relation to taking the Lord’s name in vain by what we say and what we do. The expectation of the Gospel Message, is to believe in our Father in heaven, to believe in the Son, and to ask the Lord God to send His Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts, to empower us to overcome the world (sin), and to have a desire to

closely examine our lives such that we may come humbly before our God seeking His forgiveness. This is the fruit of the Spirit the Lord God gives us, to seek justice, to love mercy, and to do what is right, loving others with a servant type attitude. This is what God was looking for in Pharaoh and his servants. This is what God is looking from us today, to be doers of the word and not just hearers only. In *Shemot / Exodus 9:27* Pharaoh said *“I stand guilty this time. The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.”* Are you able to admit the same, confessing your sins before God, and believing upon Yeshua the Messiah for the salvation of the soul? This week’s study leads us to understand these things when we consider the Torah is a vital part of the Gospel Message!