

Exodus 14:10-15

Pharaoh drew near. The Children of Israel lifted their eyes and saw Egypt coming after them, and they were very frightened, so they cried out (vayitz'aku) to G-d.

They said to Mosheh: "Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the desert? What have you done to us by taking us out of Egypt?! Isn't this what we told you in Egypt: "Leave us alone so we can serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert!"

Mosheh told the people: "Don't be afraid! Stand and see G-d's salvation, which will be done for you today! For the Egypt you have seen today, you will never see again. G-d will war for you, and you will be silent.

G-d said to Mosheh: "Why cry out (titz'ak) to Me? Order the Children of Israel to move out!"

Two obvious problems:

1st) The Jews initial reaction to the Egyptian pursuit is to cry out to G-d, which is generally taken to mean that they prayed, which implies that they were still believers. What, then, generates the bitter outburst against Mosheh!

2nd) Why does G-d imply that crying out to Him is inappropriate?  
(And whose crying out is being objected to?)

Ramban, in the course of his comments, suggests three different approaches to A).

- 1) (based on "Yonatan") Different groups of Jews reacted differently.
- 2) The Jews first prayed for G-d to stop the Egyptians pursuit. When the Egyptians kept coming, they turned on Mosheh.
- 3) The Jews believed in G-d absolutely, but they still doubted whether Mosheh was His messenger. The first two approaches require the positing of political or temporal dividing lines that are not explicitly mentioned in the text.

Ramban's comments with regard to B) are also diffuse, but their general tenor is that the Jews had a right to cry out, while Mosheh should have trusted in previous promises. A host of alternatives include:

- 1) Onkelos suggests that G-d is not criticizing Mosheh, but rather informing him that his prayer has already been accepted and can now cease. (cf. Joshua 7:10)
- 2) "Yonatan" suggests that G-d is telling Mosheh that the communal prayer has been accepted, and thus his personal prayer is unnecessary
- 3) Ibn Ezra ("Longer" commentary) suggests that the singular here refers to the community, and that G-d is telling Mosheh that they should cease praying and move. Mosheh himself relied on G-d's promises and did not pray.
- 4) Ramban in passing suggests that Mosheh was not praying for salvation, but rather for instructions.
- 5) Bekhor Shor suggests that all prayer was unnecessary as clearly G-d's honor was at stake.
- 6) Ibn Kaspi, and perhaps Ibn Ezra in the "Shorter" commentary, suggest that Mosheh was in fact praying out of fear lest his sins prevent salvation. Cf. Yaakov's prayer before confronting Esav.
- 7) Seforno suggests that Mosheh was crying out to G-d because of the Jews' outburst against him – to the people he spoke with complete confidence of G-d's salvation, but alone with G-d he wondered whether they would obey his orders when necessary.

- 1) seems to miss the peremptory tone of "mah titz'al eilai".
- 2) Leaves us wondering why a community that had just roundly abused Mosheh should have its prayers accepted before his
- 3) Seems superfluous, and worse – the crying out to G-d seems the better part of Jewish behavior here.
- 4) Again seems not to account for the tone.
- 5) Has too broad implications, as in several subsequent episodes Mosheh is (k'b'yakhol) forced to remind G-d that His honor is at stake
- 6) Also fails to account for G-d's tone
- 7) Has the advantage of tying our two problems together, but gives Mosheh too good a point for G-d to respond to sharply.

A perhaps more fundamental problem with every approach other than 3) is that they fail to respond to the ironic juxtaposition of Mosheh telling the Jews "and you will be silent" with G-d's silencing of Mosheh.

Here I think it is worth asking two other questions – I leave you to decide whether and how they are relevant.

- 1) While the Plague of the Firstborn is predicted at the outset of Exodus, the drowning at the Sea is not. When and why did G-d decide to perform it?
- 2) In 14:4 G-d tells Mosheh that Egypt will pursue – does Mosheh pass this information on to the Jews?

Shabbat Shalom!