

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat B'shalach

Rashi, perhaps the greatest of all the classical commentators, is customarily terse. But his comment on Exodus 14:6 is laconic to the extreme. The narrative states that Pharaoh “made ready his chariot” to which Rashi adds two words: “he himself.” What Rashi tells us is that, rather than Pharaoh typically assigning such menial tasks as saddling his horse or preparing his chariot to some subordinate, in this instance he took on the task personally. But Rashi does not explain why. Surely Pharaoh must have some reason to do himself what otherwise would be the job of an inferior. But Rashi does not reveal what that reason might be.

In all likelihood, Rashi was counting on his readers’ familiarity with the world of Rabbinic legend. In one of the earliest Midrashic commentaries on the Book of Exodus (*Mekhilta D’Rabbi Yishmael*), readers would have already been exposed to the notion of Pharaoh’s departure from the norm. And readers of the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 105b) would be aware of the reason for the departure. Says the Talmud: “*sin’ah m’vatelet shurah*,” meaning, “hatred disrupts protocol.”

Here Rashi is suggesting that ordinarily, Pharaoh would have assigned the task of preparing his chariot to one of his servants. But upon hearing how the Israelites had left Egypt under the pall of the death of all firstborn Egyptians, and after absorbing the consequence of the challenge to his previously uncontested power, a hatred for the Israelites was awakened in Pharaoh that was so powerful that he dispensed with court etiquette. He was compelled to act personally, not to waste even a moment in his single-minded pursuit of his enemy.

Our tradition recognized the powerful psychological forces that motivate human behaviour and Rashi brings that understanding to our attention with a striking economy of words. But the message is undeniable. Some people are so absorbed with the hatred of Israel that they will never let etiquette, protocol, or diplomacy stand in their way. Witness the gamut of anti-Israel diatribes, now being voiced by European intellectuals, that were heretofore considered bad taste. Add to that the growing number of articles that, on the basis of a disagreement with Israeli government policy, question Israel’s very right to exist – a question never raised against any other country in the world. That is the unfortunate outcome of hatred.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Allen has served Beth Tikoah Synagogue in Toronto for almost 22 years.

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