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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vaera

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"And the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel, and unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt."

It is understandable why God commanded Moses and Aaron to order Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Pharaoh was the ruler who had the power to release the Hebrew slaves. But what did God command them in regard to the Israelites? Some commentators explain that Moses and Aaron were commanded to be kind and patient with the Israelites.

The verse, however, might be understood as follows: Moses and Aaron were to command Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves leave Egypt. They were to command the Israelites to get "the land of Egypt" out of themselves. The time had arrived not merely for a physical redemption from slavery, but for an emotional and psychological awareness of freedom. The Hebrew slaves needed to erase the scars of servitude in Egypt, and to become self-respecting, independent people.

The experience of having been enslaved in Egypt was to have a profound impact on the future character of the people of Israel. The Torah reminds us to be compassionate to the stranger--for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. It commands us to treat others with kindness and humanity--because we had been treated with cruelty and inhumanity when we were slaves in Egypt. The Talmud defines Jews as being characterized by modesty, compassion, and lovingkindness. One lacking these qualities is suspected of not really being Jewish!

Professor Gershon Galil of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Haifa recently deciphered an inscription dating from the 10th century BCE--the earliest known fragment of Hebrew writing. How wonderful that this oldest Hebrew inscription captures the essential spirit of the Jewish people going back to antiquity:

"You shall not do it, but worship the Lord. Judge the slave and the widow; judge the orphan and the stranger. Plead for the infant, plead for the poor and the

widow. Rehabilitate the poor at the hands of the king. Protect the poor and the slave, support the stranger."

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but we have learned from that experience to become ever more sensitive to the rights and feelings of others, ever more vigilant on behalf of the poor and the downtrodden, ever more righteous in our dealings with widows, orphans and strangers--and indeed with all fellow human beings.Outgrowing slavery means living as free, responsible and moral people.

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