A Crack in the Night: Bless Me, Too

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This week, we find ourselves on the brink of redemption.

The final three plagues: locusts, darkness and the death of the first born.
The middle of the night departure.
The bread that did not have time to rise.

And right in the middle of the parasha is a verse with an extraordinary request, almost a throwaway line, that refuses to be ignored:

Pharaoh says to Moses: "Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you! Go, worship the Eternal as you said… וּבָרַכְתֶּם גַּם אֹתִי **and may you bless me, too.**" (Exodus 12:31–32)

This is a confusing moment. There is grief and chaos throughout the nation.
Pharaoh's empire has finally begun to unravel.
And here are these words… וּבָרַכְתֶּם גַּם אֹתִי **and may you bless me, too.**

What is happening here? Is Pharaoh really asking Moses, or Adonai the God of the Israelites, for a BLESSING?

Is Pharaoh cradling the body of his first-born son?
Is he enraged or weakened?

Why does the Torah include this line?
Why does our long-awaited moment of liberation arrive entangled with confusion?

The most evil man in the Torah has finally received his comeuppance…and he asks for a blessing.
After years of cruelty, humiliation, and violence -
Now, as he releases our ancestors and sends Moses away, perhaps never to meet again, he says: bless me, too. (And we thought Jews had cornered the market on chutzpah!)

Now, look, I'll be honest, this doesn't fly with many Jewish commentators.
Rashi, an 11th century commentator, notices this add-on and says: This is entirely about self-preservation. Pharaoh is also a firstborn; he fears for his life. He is only thinking about himself and trying to get some form of protection.

Nachmanides, also known as Ramban, a 13th century commentator who often agrees with Rashi but is also known for deepening his predecessor's analysis, says: Yes, it was self-interest…but it was more expansive than just his own well-being. Pharaoh was also worried for Egypt.

"It seems correct to me," writes Nachmanides, "that Pharaoh asked for a blessing for himself and for his people, for he saw that it was in God's power both to harm and to do good."

This is a plea for Egypt. For national survival. For the story not to be over.

Two readings, among many, that keep Pharaoh exactly where we expect him to be. Still self-interested. Still calculating. Still the villain.

And now, I want to complicate the story.
I want to introduce a midrash from M'chilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai from the 2nd or 3rd century.

Using the same 3 Hebrew words: **"U'veirach'tem gam oti…and may you bless me, too,"** the M'chilta gives a wildly different interpretation. Something far more unsettling…and strangely hopeful.

Why does Pharaoh say "bless me, too?"

According to Rabbi Shimon, because Pharaoh knows he is lacking in prayer. And Pharaoh understands that repair with God requires repair *with another human being*. That forgiveness cannot be bypassed.

So Pharaoh asks Moses for a blessing, not as protection, but as the first step toward atonement. Because as we know from Yom Kippur, sins against God are not healed until sins against people are addressed.

And here is the shock: Rabbi Shimon places that same moral demand on Pharaoh.

At this point some of you are thinking: *Rabbi, are you kidding me?*

Pharaoh does not apologize. He does not atone. He does not repair. And give him a few more verses…he changes his mind again.

Most of us, if asked to vote, would be on Team Rashi or Ramban.

And still, the M'chilta is there.

Our tradition insists on something harder to swallow than our first taste of matza: Pharaoh recognizes his spiritual bankruptcy. And he reaches - briefly - toward another human being. His heart, previously hardened by God, possibly against his will, has softened. It may even have broken open.

If it helps, don't call it forgiveness. Don't call it reconciliation.

Call it what Rabbi Shimon seems to see: It's a crack. A momentary disruption in a story we thought was sealed shut.

The character we thought was all evil, now has a shade of grey.

And Rabbi Shimon goes further. He suggests that cracks matter, even when they close up again. Pharoah is not forgiven. The consequences of his cruelty are not undone.

And yet, a seed is planted. One whose fruit will ripen generations later.

How do we know? Where should we look for proof?

It's right there in the verses proclaimed by Isaiah, the 8th century BCE prophet, who dares to imagine a future in which "Egypt will one day cry out against its own oppressors. God will send a liberator (*to the Egyptians!!*) and former enemies will stand together as partners in blessing." (paraphrase of Isaiah 19:20-21)

Isaiah can see a future in which the Israelites and the Egyptians will be united through blessing. What made such a miraculous moment possible?

Bless me, too, said Pharaoh.

And that moment of atonement, that small crack of a hardened heart, THAT Rabbi Shimon suggests, was enough to set a cosmic shift in motion that would demolish the boundaries we thought the Universe had already set…and reveal a future in which more would be possible than we could have ever imagined today.

Okay…one more midrash.

In Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, a midrashic compilation from the 8th or 9th century CE, Pharaoh appears again…this time at the Red Sea. More specifically, IN THE SEA. He is drowning alongside his army.

The waters are closing in; death is imminent.

And Pharaoh speaks: *"Mi chamocha ba'elim Adonai — Who is like You among the mighty, O God?"*

What?

First of all, that's plagiarism even if our ancestors haven't yet sung their song.

Second, c'mon. Really? In his dying moment, Pharaoh suddenly accepts Adonai as his God? And expects what…forgiveness? We've seen this change of heart before. Let him die, right?

Nope, the midrash dares to say: **Teshuvah has entered Pharaoh's heart**.

And then, the impossible. Pharaoh does not die like the others in his army.

He becomes the future king of Nineveh.

That's correct: The man who enslaved Israel becomes ruler of the city that will later repent at the words of an Israelite prophet named Jonah.

A spark of light, extinguished in the Sea, creates a cosmic shift.

Someday, another reluctant prophet will confront a foreign king…and this time, without hesitation, the king will relent and bow down.

Now some of you are thinking: Rabbi, I'm not buying what you're selling.

Nothing about Pharaoh convinces me that he had an authentic come-to-Moses moment and showed genuine remorse.

I hear you. I'm with you. So let me ask a different question.

Why did our tradition keep these stories?

Not to redeem Pharaoh. Not to soften oppression. But perhaps to remind us: History never ends neatly. There are no permanent villains.

And justice may unfold across generations. In other words, moral accounting may take years to reconcile the balance sheet and close the books.

Judaism does not ask victims to trust their oppressors. We do not suspend self-protection.

And while there is a trope in Talmud called *Yissurin Shel Ahava*, the belief that some kinds of suffering are an expression of God's love for God's people, ultimately, we are never asked to suffer silently. Or to acquiesce to oppression.

We name our enemies. We resist cruelty. We fight unjust policies fiercely. AND, we refuse to foreclose **the possibility of moral transformation.**

We fight injustice with every tool we have. We refuse to bless violence and degradation. And still, we pray that even those who wield power brutally may one day change.

If not now then in our lifetime. And if not in our lifetime, then in the generations to come.

This week, the Torah asks us to hold two things at once: **moral clarity** and **moral imagination.**

To pursue justice as if everything depends on this moment, and, to imagine future generations inheriting the sparks that we release in our time.

To show up and to speak out against words and deeds that erase human dignity, and to remember that some words and deeds are still to come - that our story is not yet finished.

Perhaps, then, redemption does not begin when Pharaoh changes.

Perhaps it begins when we refuse to believe that tonight's darkness is the final chapter.

Shabbat Shalom.

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