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D'rash on Va'era

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This parsha includes some of the best-known passages and stories in the Torah, thanks to the seder. It's also part of a series of parshas that roll out like an old radio serial – with a cliffhanger ending and a “wait til next week to find out what happens” feel. The story of Joseph reuniting with his brothers is the only other series that I can think of that is arranged that way.

But today I want to focus on the first nine verses of the parsha. In their own way, they are quite extraordinary – and too easy to overlook. One almost has to approach the verses as if hearing them for the first time to appreciate their full power.

These verses come at a breathtaking moment – right on the brink of Moses' challenge to Pharaoh, and at a historical inflection point, as G_d is about to intervene in human history.

In these verses, G-d outlines the entire history of the Israelites – past, present and future – and explicitly provides the rationale for that history. In this opening section of the parsha, how time will unspool is laid out for Moses, for the people (through Moses) and for us. Moses seems to immediately accept the picture G-d paints, and the people immediately reject it. But how does it affect us?

I had two different reactions.

The first was to wonder how we would react today – and how we would have reacted then – to a leader laying out a vision like this. In form, the verses are similar to what leaders might offer now. First comes a laying out of bona fides, either from a personal past (accomplishments, family) or an effort to tap connections to the national past; a promise to restore the nation to its original promise. Then there is the description of steps that will be taken in the present, and the prediction of the future results that will surely follow.

Hearing the future laid out can be unnerving, inducing nothing but skepticism. I think of the opening of “Macbeth” where the witches foretell his future glory – frightening and perplexing the title character. But providing a clear sense of what the future would be like if only we acted is also perhaps the only way to get fundamental change, and it is an inherent part of fomenting a revolution.

So how would we react if we heard Moses' message? I think we sometimes look down on our Israelite ancestors, wondering how they could fail to see what they were being offered. But what is it like to receive this kind of prophesy and promise, which might simultaneously be craved and distrusted?

My second reaction was to question how God summarizes Jewish history in these nine verses. At first blush, the lines seem to encapsulate history well – to be a model of powerful

summation. But as one thinks about it, it becomes clear that this precis omits many key occurrences – Sinai and the forty years in the desert, to name two.

Is this just G_d being strategic? Presumably mentioning the Ten Commandments at this point or the decades of wandering to come would not have been helpful in motivating the people to rise up. Or maybe the omissions reflect the contingent nature of history. Maybe even G-d didn't know at this point in the story that Sinai or the wandering were in the cards – perhaps those were spontaneous decisions by G_d. (The Torah itself indicates that may be the case with consigning the Israelites to 40 years in the desert.) Or maybe the omissions serve to underscore the attitudes of the Bible's writers. They no doubt saw the relationship between the Israelites and G_d as the central fact of Jewish history – even the handing down of an ethical code was taken as just a secondary effect that flowed from that.

So, for discussion:

- How would we, and how do we react to visionary pleas like the one that opens this parsha?; and
- What do we think of the way that G_d chooses to outline and summarize our history? To what extent would our own telling differ?