

PARASHA VA'ERA

The Escape

by Joe Samuels

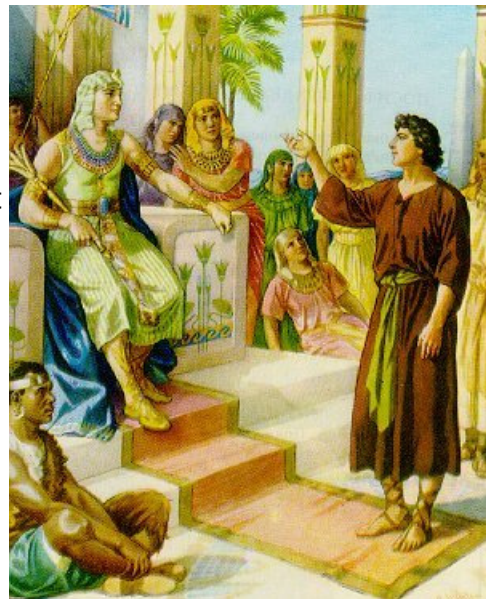
On the occasion of his 80th birthday, Joe Samuels will be delivering the Dvar Torah this Shabbat morning. His topic is Blessings and Gratitude. His speech will refer to this article which first appeared in KJ's Kol Mevasser of December 16, 2006.

In Basra, cold weather in December was unusual, but in 1949 the temperature was in the 40's, and it was bitterly cold at 11 at night. I had put my life in the hands of two Muslim smugglers, and I wasn't alone. There were sixteen other teenagers, including my younger brother, Nory. The underground movement to help Jews escape out of Iraq had arranged for a boat to take us to Iran. We boarded, one at a time, at varying intervals, to avoid raising suspicion in the neighborhood. We had no luggage, food, or water.

The boat, if it could be called that, was about 30 feet long by 10 feet wide. It had no seats, beds, toilets or motors. It moved by punting, a method of propelling the boat forward with long sticks. It was designed to carry light cargo such as manure or hay to the farmers in the delta. In

their hay cargo, the two smugglers had devised a false space that measured about 10 feet by 10 feet and about 2.5 feet high. We crouched in complete darkness in this dungeon. I was appointed the leader for the journey. The first thing I did was make holes in the hay so that we could breathe. Our escape depended on luck, the tide, and the bribed border police.

So that our crossing would coincide with the tide, at about midnight, the two smugglers pushed the boat out of the tributary river. Our beacon of hope, Iran, was downstream and across the river, two to three hours away. The sound of water splashing broke the stillness of the night and was sweet music in our ears. As we moved down the main river Shat el Arab, "the river of the Arab," our hearts lit with hope for freedom. However, after about an hour that sweet sound of splashing water stopped. All was quiet except for the sound of the wind. I went out



Prayer Schedule

SHABBAT

PARASHA VA'ERA

Friday, December 31st

Minhah & Arbit 4:15 pm

Candle Lighting 4:35 pm

Saturday, January 1st

Shaharit 8:30 am

Tehillim after morning prayers

Minhah & Arbit 4:00 pm

Motzei Shabbat 5:35 pm

WEEKDAYS

Sunday, January 2nd

Shaharit 7:30 am

Monday to Friday

Shaharit 6:30 am

Talmud Torah Classes Resume

Tuesday, January 4, 2010

ROSH HODESH SHEVAT

Thursday, January 6th

EREV SHABBAT

PARASHA BO

Friday, January 7th

Minhah & Arbit 4:30 pm

Candle Lighting 4:41 pm

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through the hole. The two smugglers looked worried. "We can't move," one of the men said, "the tide is with us, but the wind is against us."

I went back through the hole and told everyone to close their eyes and sleep a bit, while we waited for the wind to subside. We docked inside a tributary of the river. The hours passed quickly, and I began to worry. My heart was beating faster than the wind, as dawn started to break. We would not be able to move during the day, and were going to miss our rendezvous. What about food, drinks or toilets? What if some villagers were to spot us and tell the Muchabarat, the secret police? After all, we were leaving Iraq illegally and being accused of Zionism was a capital crime.

I couldn't share my fears with the boys and girls. One boy was only thirteen. Instead, I put on a stoic face and assured them that everything was going to be alright. We had to wait until darkness to move again. Some started to cry. I felt the same way, but I held back my tears.

One of the boatmen went to get some food. I warned him not to buy food in bulk, since that might create suspicion. It

was toilet time, in the early morning. One by one we got out of our hole. One boy, a good friend of mine whose brother had been arrested on Zionism charges just few weeks ago, shook so much he couldn't stand.

The boatman returned after an hour with some bread, cheese and dates.

Like rats, two or three of us came out of the hole, ate something and went back in, until all the pack was fed.

I was in Arab garb, and wore a long white long gown just like the boatmen's. I wandered away from the boat and sat under a tree in the shade. I closed my eyes and yearned to sleep. I couldn't. My life passed before me as if on a movie screen.

I remembered the Farhood of June 2, 1941 in Baghdad. I was 11. When I was 14, two Muslims boys ran after me with a knife, and I survived. In May of 1948, after the failed war against Israel, many Jewish youths were arrested, were tortured, or simply disappeared. Once more, I survived.

Just few days ago, the secret police had stopped me at the railway station when I had arrived from Baghdad. I was with my brother and two other boys traveling to Basra. One of the policemen asked me my purpose in

coming to Basra. I told him that I was visiting my cousin. When I mentioned his name, Agababa, the policeman's eyes lit up and his tone of voice changed. He became sweet and gentle, and said he knew my cousin well. He got his Arrow shirts from my cousin. I knew that what he meant was that he got his shirts for free from my cousin, like all the secret police did. I survived again. The other two boys were returned to Baghdad. We never heard from them, or saw them again.

Back on the boat, the hours passed slowly. This was the longest day of my life. A river patrol passed by unaware of the human cargo hidden in the stack of hay. I was frightened and frustrated. I began to pray, "God, please let it be night so that we can make our final escape." I went back into the hole. I assured everyone that by the next morning we would be in Iran, and in a few days we would be in Israel.

Finally, night came. My angels worked overtime. We had the tide and a favorable wind. At the precise time we moved, and before dawn we crossed the river. Three worried men were going crazy looking for us on the other side. They had been there from the night before. "We are safe, we are in Iran," I shouted

happily. One by one, my fellow travelers came out of the hole, drained and haggard; some with tears, others with a smile as wide as the river we had just crossed.

Afterword

After a public viewing of the movie *The Last Jews of Baghdad*, while I was discussing my escape, a member of our synagogue whom I had known for years came forward and said, "I was with you on that boat, when we got stuck for a day." His name is Haskel Abrahami. He had been the thirteen-year-old boy on that day long ago.

When we reached Iran, after the euphoria of arrival, the press of necessity took over. My brother and Haskel made a brief stop, then continued on to Israel. But for me, the needs of so many other people outweighed the needs of family and others who were already free, young as they may have been. Instead of accompanying my brother to Israel, I remained in Iran for two grueling months to assist others fleeing Iraq. Unfortunately, not all succeeded as readily as we had in our escape. After that difficult boat trip, each one of us, sixteen children really, went our separate ways—driven by history and its forces. But in the midst of

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In Memoriam

It is customary to light a memorial candle in the evening and to donate tzedakah. Family members are encouraged to attend prayer services in honor of loved ones.

Sunday / 26 Tevet

Ronnie ben Naji Assia

Monday / 27 Tevet

Sassoon Elias
Stanley ben Jesse Feinberg

Tuesday / 28 Tevet

Aziza bat Amam

Thursday / 1 Shevat

Mozly bat Haviva*

Friday / 2 Shevat

Aziza bat Salha
Yosef ben Ezra
Shlomo ben Binyamin
Abdullah ben Sion Zekaria

*To update, please call the office
at 310.474.0559.*

Refuah Shlemah

*Please include these
individuals in your prayers:*
Yonatan ben Alizah • Mazal Tov
bat Sulha Mitana • Matilda
Louisa • Yaheskel ben Regina •
Ayala bat Naomi • Khayah Noa
bat Sara • Haim ben Mordechai •
Pnina bat Esther • Yosi ben
Esther • Victor ben Latif • Ramah
Regina bat Farha • Aziza bat Sara
Judith bat Malka • Ofek ben Yochai
• Efrayim Zev ben Fayga • Sulha
Matana bat Mozelle • Gershon ben
David • Farangis Miriam bat
Touran • David ben Leah •
Avraham Haim ben Miryam
Maurice Moshe ben Lulu

Torah Readings

Parasha pp. 232 to 244
Haftara pp. 244 to 247

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Contact Sarah in our office
one or two weeks in advance
at 310.474.0559.

Community News

SHABBAT KIDDUSH

is sponsored
in honor of
Joe Samuels' 80th Birthday

by
Ruby Samuels and their children
Sharon, Lisa, and Jeff
and grandchildren
Elana, Eden, Rebecca, Claire,
and Zachary

CONGRATULATIONS

to
Joe Samuels
on your 80th Birthday

The Kahal Joseph community
sends wishes of peace, health,
long life, prosperity and
happiness to you
and all your family

SEUDAH SHLISHEET

is sponsored
in memory of

Ronnie Assia
z"l

by
Claire Assia & Family

Community Tehillim

A number of individuals in our community are undergoing surgery or combating illness. They need our immediate prayers to support them in their recovery. Take a few minutes today to pray and read from the Psalms, also known as Tehillim. In particular, Psalm 20 and Psalm 121 are meaningful during difficult times. Give a little of your day and have a big impact on the lives of friends and their families. Or, join us after Shabbat morning prayers to read together.

SHABBAT MITZVOT at KJ

We now offer for donation the following Mitzvot on Shabbat: **1. Petichat Hechal** The opening of the ark where the Torahs are kept; **2. Carrying of the Sefer Torah and Sefer Haftara;** **3. Hakamat Sefer** The lifting and showing of the Torah; **4. Mashlim*** The seventh aliya to the Torah who recites Kaddish; **5. Mafir*** The last aliya to the Torah which includes the Haftara (read by the clergy unless member reading is preapproved). Since we count on your donations to the synagogue to keep our membership fees as low as they are, we suggest a minimum donation for all those who are called to the Torah of \$126 or multiples of \$18 or \$26. We appreciate your support. *Paid members may call the office to book the Mashlim or Mafir in advance, in memory of a departed relative. You will receive confirmation before Shabbat if you will receive the aliya or if there is a conflict. Members may also reserve other aliyot in advance by calling the office. Non-members interested in reserving aliyot should contact the office for availability at 310.474.0559.

Learn to Chant The Haftarah

Wouldn't you like to chant the final portion from the Torah on Shabbat—the portion known as the Haftarah? Reserve a Haftarah reading by calling Sarah in our office at 310.474.0559. The Haftarah portion can be dedicated in honor of a family event such as a memorial, a bar/bat mitzvah, or a baby-naming. Then, schedule time with Hazzan Saeed Jalali & learn the authentic Baghdadi ta'amim, Iraqi melodies for singing portions from the Torah & Tanakh.

Parasha Summary: Va'era

1st Aliya: In the previous Torah portion, Moshe unsuccessfully confronted Pharaoh. The situation worsened for the Jewish people, and Hashem (G-d) reassured Moshe that in fact the redemption from slavery was about to begin. The parasha begins with G-d speaking to Moshe and telling him of the promises He had made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Also, G-d tells Moshe that He has heard and is responding to the cries of the People of Israel. Moshe relates this prophecy to the People, who are too exhausted to listen. G-d then tells Moshe to go to Pharaoh and demand the Jewish people's release. Moshe questions how Pharaoh can be expected to listen, if Moshe's own people didn't listen to him. In trying to understand his failure to reach the people, Moshe finds fault in himself, not in the People. This is how a leader should behave. This is one of the signs of humility. G-d reiterates to Moshe and Aharon, that they are to tell the People as well as Pharaoh that the People will be leaving Egypt.

2nd Aliya: Moshe's lineage is established. The Torah begins to enumerate the names of the tribes and family groups. The focus is on Moshe and Aharon as the Torah identifies the "main characters". The Torah is also giving us the ability to continue to draw the timeline of Jewish history, by giving us the ages at death of Levi (we already know the ages of the three previous generation, those of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov), his son Kehat, his son Amram. That brings us to Moshe and Aharon. The Torah then proclaims that it is Moshe and Aharon who will be speaking to Pharaoh on behalf of the People of Israel.

3rd Aliya: Torah now repeats that G-d is sending Moshe to Pharaoh and that Moshe continues to object. G-d tells him that Aharon will do the talking, that Pharaoh will refuse the repeated requests to free the Jewish people, and that He (G-d) will take His people out, and that it will be clear to Egypt (and everyone else) that it is indeed G-d Who is doing everything. Moshe and Aharon do as G-d instructs them.

4th Aliya: Moshe performs the miracle of the "staff turning to a serpent". Nonetheless, Pharaoh refuses to listen to Moshe and Aharon, as G-d had said. G-d then instructs Moshe to go to the river (Nile) in the morning. Moshe is to say to Pharaoh that G-d has sent him to tell Pharaoh to release the Jewish people. Moshe, through Aharon, strikes the river with his staff, turning the water to blood and killing the fish. The Egyptians cannot drink the water. But Pharaoh's wizards duplicate what was done, causing Pharaoh to remain stubborn.

5th Aliya: G-d next instructs Moshe to go to Pharaoh in his home and warn him that if he does not let the Jewish people go, Egypt will be smitten by a plague of frogs. Aharon raises the staff, and the land is blanketed with frogs. The wizards are again able to simulate this plague. Pharaoh calls to Moshe and Aharon to pray to G-d that the frogs be removed, promising that he will let the People go into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to G-d. So it happens, and after the frogs are gone, Pharaoh reneges on his promise, as G-d had said he would. G-d tells Moshe to tell Aharon to strike the dust of the earth. The resultant plague of lice was not able to be matched by the wizards, who acknowledge G-d's might. Pharaoh remains stubborn. Then G-d sends Moshe to warn Pharaoh about the next plague (swarms of insects or wild animals, depending upon opinion).

6th Aliya: The fourth, fifth, and sixth plagues occur, and Moshe forewarns Pharaoh regarding the seventh. The "arov" descend upon the land. Pharaoh calls for Moshe and gives permission for the Jewish people to sacrifice to G-d in Egypt. Moshe says that the offering must be in the wilderness. Pharaoh agrees on the condition that Moshe pray for the removal of the arov plague. Afterwards, Pharaoh again reneges. G-d next sends Moshe back to Pharaoh to repeat the demand for the People's release and to warn him of the consequence of his refusal, the plague of "dever." Pharaoh doesn't budge, so the livestock of the Egyptians die. The sixth plague (boils) is brought upon Egypt without warning. Although his people are suffering, Pharaoh continues to resist.

7th Aliya: The seventh plague takes place and Pharaoh "hardens his heart" and refuses to let the Jews go. The hailstorm is destructive, but some plants do survive, as do the animals of those Egyptians who heeded Moshe's warning to bring them indoors. Pharaoh admits that he has sinned and grants Moshe's demands, if only the hail will stop. When it does stop, Pharaoh yet again reneges, as G-d has said he would.

Spiritual Slavery and Freedom *By Rabbi Marc D. Angel*

"The Mitzvot are the dictates of God, and we are bound to obey them as a servant obeys his master." This is the topic of a paper assigned to a cousin of mine, who is taking a class in Jewish studies. The class is studying various religious movements within Judaism, and the above statement was meant to characterize the Orthodox view. Obviously, the way the statement is phrased paints a narrow picture of Orthodoxy-- implying that we are compelled to do mitzvot unthinkingly, and we function essentially as mindless, mechanical slaves.

While the Torah and rabbinic literature certainly contain sources that refer to the people of Israel as "avadim" (slaves) to the Almighty, the actual meaning of the term is far more nuanced than the English word "slave" connotes. For example, Moses is called God's "eved", but this is a term of high praise. It means that Moses had risen to the highest spiritual level possible for a human being. When the Israelites are told that they were no longer slaves to any human beings, but were only God's "avadim", this was a great moment of redemption and inner freedom for Israel. Yes, the mitzvot are dictates of God; and yes we are bound to obey them; but the relationship of Israel to God--as mediated through mitzvot--is not meant to be one of blind subservience. We are not to see ourselves as victimized slaves who are compelled to slavishly fulfill the whims of our master.

What is the status of a slave? Haham Solomon Gaon, whose death anniversary we observed this past week, commented on the hard work and lack of spirit which overtook the Israelite slaves in Egypt. "Hard work, when undertaken for the sake of achieving a certain aim can prove inspiring, but when such an aim is lacking in our endeavors, they then become a source of demoralization. The children of Israel in Egypt could not understand the meaning of the forthcoming redemption as announced by Moses because they had lost the spirit which had animated the undertakings of their forefathers. They were without courage, without faith, and this situation was aggravated by the fact that they had to do work under cruel conditions and under aimless pressure which did not give them any sense of achievement." Slavery is equated with powerlessness, futility, total subservience to cruel, unfeeling masters who have no regard for the slaves' value as independent human beings.

This is radically different from the "slavery" imposed on the Israelites by God. By being servants of God, the Israelites became free from domination by human beings; they found a clear focus and meaning in their lives. God did not impose mitzvot on us in order to crush our freedom and autonomy, but rather to give us Divine guidance on how best to live our lives. The mitzvot are basic sources of freedom and spiritual blessings--not heavy, mindless burdens. As Maimonides explained, each of the mitzvot was given by the all-wise God in order to perfect us. The mitzvot were given with love and wisdom by our Creator who loves us and who wants us to find the highest fulfillment in our lives. The mitzvot provide us with aim and focus in life; they enable us to escape the ennui and futility that characterize so much of humanity. I told my cousin that I would rephrase the title of the paper he was assigned: The mitzvot are commandments of God, and we have the privilege of fulfilling them as a means of coming closer to God.

The Pirkei Avot teaches that no one is as free as one who occupies him/herself with Torah. Those who truly experience Torah and mitzvot are blessed with an incredible inner freedom, autonomy, and meaning in life. It is a supreme honor and privilege to be called "eved Hashem", a servant of God. The great 17th century figure, Dr. Isaac Cardoso, said it well: To those who despise Torah, six commandments seem like 613. To those who love Torah, 613 seem like only six. Whether Torah and mitzvot are a blessing or a burden--this is very much in the eye of the beholder. We are on the side of blessing. ***Shabbat Shalom***

A Daily Inspirational Message

from Joe Samuels

זה היום עשה ה' נגילה ונשמחה בו

"This is the day the Lord has created to rejoice and be happy in it."

As we meditate upon this line from our prayers, we should try to keep positive thoughts in the forefront of our minds. Think to yourself . . .

- ◆ Day by day and in every way I feel better and better and better.
- ◆ I feel fine, I feel wonderful and I feel terrific.
- ◆ Oh what a beautiful morning, oh what a wonderful day, I have this wonderful feeling; something is going my way, my way, my way, and it's the start of a beautiful day.

(Continued from page 2)

the sadness and loss of leaving home and family grew the seeds of our future and of the Jewish people.

Joe Samuels was born in Baghdad in 1930. In 1948, after the failed war against Israel, the Iraqi government began persecuting Jewish citizens. At the age of 19, Mr. Samuels was smuggled out of Iraq through Iran; his destination was Israel. There, he served in the Israeli Navy from 1950 to 1953 before eventually emigrating to Canada.

After 1956, in Canada, Mr. Samuels resided in Montreal, and he married Ruby in 1957. Since 1978, he has made his home in Los Angeles with his family. He has been blessed with three children: Sharon, a psychologist; Lisa, a dermatologist; and Jeff, a professor at Western Kentucky University. He has also been blessed with five grandchildren. For 32 years, Joe has been a member of Kahal Joseph; and he has served one term on the Board of Directors.

Tu B'Shvat

*Wednesday, January 19th
at 6:30 pm • Live Music
30 Fruits, Wine, Dessert*

*Organized by the
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kabbalistic ritual
& blessings for a
meaningful life, love
and relationships**



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