

Pharaoh the First-Base Coach

Sometimes I have a problem with translations here. The translators who work for our movement sometimes have a tendency to try to improve on the original Hebrew with linguistic embellishments. But the result, in my way of thinking, is sometimes to compromise or even change the intent of the text – and the deeper interpretations.

Here is an example that is first found in this week's *parasha*, and continues through several chapters of *Sefer Shemot*. It's a four word command that is familiar to everyone here: **Let my people go**. But is that what the Hebrew really means?

If you care to follow along...

On Page 329, chapter 3, verse 18, at the end of this long *pasuk*: *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* directs Moshe to ask Pharaoh for permission – *nelcha-na* – let us go. (Actually means we will go, with the additional word indicating a polite request.)

Now, **over to verse 20 on 332** – English first – So I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall LET you go. *Acharei-chein yishlach eschem*. Take a good look at the verb – *yishlach* – the root is *shin lamed chaf*. The infinitive is *lisloach*. To send. Everett Fox, the translator and scholar who will be here for the Glatzer Memorial Shabbat, translates it this way: he will send you free.

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Now – one more sample – **Page 336, Chapter 4, verse 23**: Let my son go. **shalach** *et-bni*. Fox's translation: send free my son.

(One more thing – last *pasuk* of *parasha Shemot* – 6:1 on page 341 – *uvyad chazakah ygarsham me'artzo* – he shall drive them from his land. Footnote – he will force you to go. In modern Hebrew, the root *gimel resh shin* means chase.)

So this is the pattern throughout the story of the ten plagues. Moshe demands that Pharaoh send the people. When we read in English, it's a gentler "Let." Where did this come from? I haven't been able to find out who or why.

Why does it matter? It matters a lot.

Basically, Let is passive. Send is active. Look, here's a baseball analogy. There's a position called first base coach, often filled by a retired player, and he doesn't do much. In fact, his only responsibility is to give a signal to a base runner to steal second base. Let's say Dustin Pedroia is on first and the pitcher is slow throwing to the batter. It's a good scenario for a runner to get a good head start and arrive at second ahead of a throw from the catcher – to steal second. And after a few pitches nothing happens and passionate fans will yell to the coach, "Send him, send him." That's because the stolen base is part of an overall strategy; runners

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can't improvise. The coach is the delivery system. The coach has to be a key actor on this stage.

Now, if an athlete like Mookie Betts or Rabbi Lerner is on first, speed is his greatest asset. Players like these have what fans call a green light. They can attempt to steal a base when they think the opportunity is there. The first base coach may go through his signals but he has no role; he just LETs the runner steal second.

When my kids wanted to play outside after school, my wife would say: I can't LET you play until you finish your homework. But there were times when one or both kids was so rambunctious, so full of pent up energy, literally bouncing off the walls, that she would stop whatever she was doing and just demand that they leave the house. Go outside now. Forget about the homework; I've got to have some peace in here. I am SENDING you outside.

If *Bnei Yisrael* had packed up and headed for the border, with their loaves of bread and bags of *kityanot*, and the forces of Egypt stayed in their barracks, that is how I would interpret letting the people go. But *Hashem* wanted the entire world to recognize his supreme authority, and to reduce the power of Pharaoh to a whimper. So redemption was not the only goal – so was humiliation. Pharaoh had to initiate the process, to demand that the slaves leave Egypt. And indeed, that's the way it happened – Page 387 –

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Parshat Bo –chapter 12, verse 31 – after the tenth plaque, in the middle of the night, Pharaoh tells Moshe and Aharon – *kumu tz'u ulchu* – get up. Get out and go. Steal second, third and home.

Now, what does any of this have to do with our Jewish lives today?

My parents were Conservative Jews by default. They were the children of nominally Orthodox; the conservative community they joined was best defined by what it was not. My parents “let” their Judaism happen.

What's the alternative? There's a doctrine called *Emet V'emunah* – statement of principles of conservative Judaism – first published in 1988. I still rely on this as the framework for my outlook as a Conservative Jew. (I may be the only one!)

The final section of the statement, on pages 56 and 57, is called “The ideal conservative Jew.” And it is all about action. “Three characteristics mark the ideal conservative Jew. Here they are, word for word:

1. Willingness involves not only a commitment to observe the *mitzvot* and to advance Jewish concerns, but to refract all aspects of life through the prism of one's own Jewishness.

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2. Jewish learning is a lifelong quest through which we integrate Jewish and general knowledge
3. The ideal Conservative Jew is a striving Jew. No matter the level at which one starts, no matter the heights of piety and knowledge one may attain, no one can perform all 613 *mitzvot* or acquire all Jewish knowledge. What is needed is an openness to those observances one has yet to perform and the desire to grapple with those issues and texts one has yet to confront.

Complacency is the mother of stagnation and the antithesis of Conservative Judaism.