



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Va'eira

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Va'eira

**Hip-Hop: Lessons from Frogs**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## **ABSTRACT**

2015 was a brutal year for hedge funds. And that very reality should give us pause.

Hedging our bets may or may not work for fiscal investments, but it never works for living life to the utmost. This is because hedging in life does not allow us to realize our fullest potential.

How do we know that?

From frogs.

Yes, frogs. Indeed, this is why they were the second plague God visited upon Egypt in the process of freeing the Jewish slaves from bondage, as we learn in this week's Torah portion.

## HIP-HOP: LESSONS FROM FROGS

### 1. The Markets are Jumping (Joke)

A hedge fund manager thinks he has his trading process so automated that even a frog could run it. So, on a dare, he hires a circus trainer to put a frog in front of one of the computer terminals and press buttons all day. Everything seems to be going fine – a croaking ribbit here, a croaking ribbit there – until one day the hedge fund guy returns to see the trainer shaking her head.

“Is everything all right?” the hedge fund manager asks the trainer.

“That depends on your point of view,” replies the frog whisperer. “Our froggy friend here just orchestrated a leveraged buyout of the Bronx Zoo.”

### 2. Hedge Funds

The past year, 2015, was brutal for hedge funds.<sup>1</sup> Some were down over twenty percent – that’s losing \$200 million for every \$1 billion invested. Chump change it isn’t. Most of us could use an extra \$200 million.

The most alarming thing is that losing a lot of money is the very thing that hedge funds were set up to prevent. The name “hedge fund” was coined when speculators started “hedging” – that is, offsetting a potentially bad investment with a good one. Why was it called “hedging”? Well, the term came from a “garden hedge,” a protective border to keep grazing animals out. The thinking went that, by “hedging,” one could protect one’s interest and limit one’s risk. Thus “hedging” became a practice of taking a position in one market to offset and balance the risk in a contrary or opposing market.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/business/dealbook/hedge-funds-struggle-with-steep-losses-and-high-expectations.html>.

The irony is that hedge funds have become some of the riskiest investments – they are high-risk because, when they fail, they incur high losses, but of course when they succeed, they produce high rewards. As well, they are less tightly regulated than traditional mutual or other monetary funds and therefore ripe for abuse.

Whether or not to invest in a hedge fund is a financial decision best made with the consultation of financial professionals, not rabbis.

What rabbis do know is that hedging in life is never a good decision; hedging one's bets instead of making an all-out commitment will always produce more losses than gains in the long run.

And we know this from frogs – yes, frogs – a creature that shows up in this week's Torah reading.

### 3. Parshat Va'eira

This week we begin reading about the Ten Plagues. To free the Jews from Egyptian slavery, a process of breaking the bad habits of the past was needed. There had to be steps to unlock the chains that shackled the Jewish nation to their asphyxiating prison.

The first plague turned the Nile into blood. The second plague infested Egypt with frogs.

If you think that God has no imagination or sense of creativity, you should read this:

*God said to Moses: "Go to the Pharaoh and say to him: 'This is what God has said, "Let My people go so that they may serve Me. If you refuse ... I will send a plague. All your territories will be [afflicted] with frogs. The [Nile] river will swarm with frogs, and they will emerge and come into your house and into your bedroom and your bed, and into the house of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls [i.e. baking utensils]."'*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 7:26-28.

Ah ... the wondrous detail! Into your house, into your bedroom and your bed, even into your ovens and into your food – frogs everywhere!

What does this mean? Why are... frogs – specifically frogs – necessary for... freedom? Why is the Torah compelled to tell us in such striking detail that the frogs crawled into the Egyptians' ovens and kitchen utensils? The other creature plagues – like locusts or wild beasts – aren't nearly as detailed. So why so much focus on frogs?

And, if the Torah desired to get across just how ubiquitous and complete the frog infestation was, why specifically mention ovens and baking utensils?

#### 4. The Talmud Explains

The Talmud explains that these seemingly superfluous words, *into your ovens and into your kneading bowls [i.e. baking utensils]*, taught three of Israel's greatest leaders – the heroes of the Book of Daniel – a lesson in serving God.

Come and hear ... What inspired Chanan, Mishal and Azariah to commit their lives to sanctifying God's name by entering the fiery furnace?<sup>3</sup>

They reasoned as follows: If regarding frogs, who are not *commanded to sanctify God's name, it is written, and they will emerge and come into your house...and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls [i.e. baking utensils]*, how much more so must we do the same. Were not the ovens hot? [Yet the frogs jumped right in, as must we.]<sup>4</sup>

Animals are not commanded to sanctify God's name. But human beings are. And Jews have fulfilled this mitzvah with uncommon passion.

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<sup>3</sup> See Daniel, chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> Talmud Pesachim 53b.

During the Inquisition, they chose to be burned at the stake rather than deny the one true God and desecrate His name. During the Holocaust, they walked into the gas chambers pronouncing God's unity and sanctifying His name.

One of the first times this happened is described in the third chapter of the Book of Daniel. The three great Jewish leaders, Chanan, Mishal and Azariah, who were advisers to Nebuchadnezzar, refused to bow to a certain golden idol that the Babylonian king had fashioned. As punishment for their refusal, the king commanded that they be cast into a fiery furnace.

Faced with certain death, they recalled the words of our Torah reading and reasoned that if frogs who are not commanded to sanctify God's name and yet they did so anyway by jumping into the hot ovens of Egypt, we men of flesh and blood who are commanded to sanctify God's name, must do likewise!<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, they opted not to take the easy way out and were taken to the furnace, which Nebuchadnezzar – enraged by their defiance – commanded be made extra hot, so much so that the soldiers who threw the young men in were killed just by standing in the proximity.

But what happened to Chanan, Mishal and Azariah? They escaped unscathed. Their act of sanctifying God's name so impressed Nebuchadnezzar that he became transformed and himself blessed the God of Israel.

And all this happened because Chanan, Mishal and Azariah learned a fundamental lesson from ... frogs.

But now let me ask you: Why specifically frogs? Why not the wild beasts or the locusts? Do we not learn a lesson from those creatures as well? What is so special about frogs?

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<sup>5</sup> See Rashi, Tosafot, and commentaries ad loc for a comprehensive discussion on the obligation to sanctify God's Name.

## 5. Against Nature

It is antithetical for all living creatures to enter a hot oven. Self-barbecue goes against every single survival instinct of every single living thing.

But it is even more antithetical to the frog. The frog is a creature of the water,<sup>6</sup> a cold-blooded creature. The cool, watery nature of the frog is the polar opposite of the hot nature of the fiery oven.<sup>7</sup>

So why would a frog sacrifice its own life through self-immolation?

To teach us a profound lesson about commitment.

Note that in afflicting Egypt as commanded by God, the frogs didn't do a mediocre job. They didn't just do the minimal amount necessary. They did the *maximum*! Theirs was an all-out commitment, even to the death.

The frogs went against their innate nature, they went to the extreme opposite of who they naturally are. Despite their cold natures, they jumped into blistering hot ovens.

Thus, the lessons we learn from frogs are quite profound. Let's discuss two of them:

## 6. Lesson 1: Stop Hedging Your Bets

Lesson 1: Stop hedging your bets!

It may work at times for hedge funds (not this past year though) but it never works in life. In life you must commit completely and unequivocally.

We all know how much we tend to hedge.

For some hedging has become an art. Like the guy that said: I used to think I'm indecisive. Now, I'm not so sure.

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 7:28. Shemot Rabbah 10:2. Nedarim 41a. Kohelet Rabbah 5 (to v. 5:8).

<sup>7</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. I, p. 122.

In the honest privacy of our own hearts, every one of us knows how much – or little – we commit ... how often we do the minimum required to live and achieve. But from frogs we learn the lesson of doing our utmost, going all out, letting go completely, committing totally. Frogs teach us dedication and self-sacrifice.

The frogs could have easily hedged their bet, protecting their self-interests. And Chanan, Mishal and Azariah could have done the same. But they didn't and from their example we learn that when we do commit on such a complete level, something miraculous happens:

We walk into the fiery furnace and we walk out unscathed.

Make a decision and commit one million percent, without hedging. This is especially difficult today, with the infinite possibilities and blessed opportunities that come along with hedging. It is so easy to hedge, to delay, to procrastinate, to deliberate and never commit – to pit matter against spirit, body against soul, leaving your options open.

Our grandparents did not have options. They were faced with life-and-death decisions daily. They had to dedicate their lives to something greater than themselves. They had to walk into the fiery furnace.

Thank God a million times over that we don't have to enter into any literal fiery pits, unlike our forefathers in Egypt, Babylon, or Auschwitz. And may it be the will of God that never again will a Jew have to enter a fiery furnace to sanctify God's name.

Today commitment comes without danger facing us. And ironically, in free times, when we have no threat of the furnace, people tend to hedge more than ever. Without a defined enemy from without, we can lose sight of a crystallized vision. Apathy is the by-product of comfort zones.

So let us learn this lesson from our history (as well as from frogs): To totally and utterly commit to the things we believe in. One is either committed or one is not committed. There can be no hedging.

Frogs jump to sanctify God's name; we must jump higher. This is the only way to escape Egypt, free ourselves from slavery – including the slavery of our comfort zones – and reach the Promised Land.



And this is why the frog plague was so important. It showed that without full commitment, there is no freedom. If Israel would have hedged its bets, Israel would have ceased to be a long time ago.

Our secret is our complete and unwavering commitment.

This is perhaps why so many Jews go into hedge funds – they don't hedge in life so they hedge with money.

Our challenge today is *choosing* to commit, to sanctify God's name in everything we do – to commit fully and unequivocally, without hedging, without leaving our options open. For it is only then that all our options are truly open.

## 7. Lesson 2: Go Against Your Nature

The second lesson from frogs is that, like they did, we must go against our natures in order to turn our weaknesses into strengths. Frogs are cold-blooded, mostly water, yet they went into the hot ovens and jumped into fire.

As human beings, we like to remain where we are comfortable. We hate to leave our comfort zones. But leave we must. Dare yourself to transcend your routines and conventions.

Here's an exercise:

If you like the cold, go into the heat; if you like it hot, go into the cold. If you are cerebral, do something emotional; if you are emotional, do something cerebral.

If reading comes easy for you, write once in a while; if writing comes easy for you, read once in a while. If you haven't yet committed to eating kosher, try eating kosher; if you eat kosher, try also to keep Shabbat. If you do that too, try teaching someone else about it.

If a frog, a ribbit croaker can do it, so can we.

## 8. Be Careful What You Wish For (Joke)

While sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office for his annual checkup, a devout Chassid was studying the weekly Torah portion. When his name was called he got up and, in his haste, forgot to take his holy text with him. When he returned to the waiting room following his checkup - he was, thank God, completely healthy - the book was nowhere to be found.

Upset but remembering that everything happens by Divine Providence and for a good reason, the Chassid headed home.

Three weeks later, his front door bell rang, and when he opened the door, he couldn't believe his eyes. A frog was standing there with a little frog glint in its eyes and holding his precious book in its grinning mouth.

The Chassid was overwhelmed with gratitude. He raised his eyes heavenward, and exclaimed, "*Baruch ata Hashem...sh'asah Nissim Bizman Hazeh!* Thank you God for performing such a wondrous a miracle in our time!"

"Miracle, schmiracle," said the frog. "Your name is written inside the cover."

## 9. The Supernatural Miracle of Frogs (Conclusion)

The plagues may seem to us as supernatural miracles that are beyond the realm of our understanding. Ostensibly they may not appear to have relevance to our modern day lives. But that is not true.

The plagues are meant to help us turn the natural limitations of our lives into supernatural realities of limitless horizons.

The plague of frogs was a miracle then, in that it helped free the Jewish people from Egypt. And the plague of frogs is a miracle today, in the sense that it teaches us how we may free ourselves from our own present day personal slaveries.

How? Through complete commitment!

It is time to stop hedging our bets and start living the way God intended.

(Of course, a few million in a hedge fund wouldn't hurt either!)

Shabbat Shalom!