

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
Vol. 8 #14, January 15, 2021; Vaeira 5781

**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning almost 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.**

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## **LEARNING TO LIVE WITH COVID-19: PANEL DISCUSSION**

Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington and several shuls in Silver Spring are presenting a panel of distinguished experts to share latest research and findings on treatment and vaccines. **Saturday, January 23, 2021, 8:15-9:15 p.m.**

**Dial-in-number: 1301-715-8592. Zoom Meeting ID: 878 2795 1873. Pass code: 699427.**

**Speakers:**

**Ronald Reisler, MD/MPH**, infectious diseases, clinical research, Davis Defense Group

**Yosefta Hefter, MD**, pediatrician, Pediatric Infectious Diseases Fellow at Children's National Hospital

**Evan Fisher, MD**, internist and Chief Nephrologist, Wright-Patterson AFB; and Assistant Professor, Wright State University Medical School.

**Topics include:**

- Main signs of COVID-19 and the various tests used to identify and treat it.
- Changes in treatments over the past 10 months and what lies ahead.
- How the virus affects children and how they spread it.
- Latest research findings about early markers of COVID-19 and its after-effects.

**Bikur Cholim and shuls invite everyone in the community to listen in by Zoom.**

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Last year we read Vaera during the week including the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp (January 27, 1945). While the anniversary this year comes in two weeks (13 Shevat on the Jewish calendar), it seems appropriate to recall the Nazi death camps during the weeks when we read about the anti-Semitism our ancestors faced in Paro's Egypt. As I mentioned last week, the Egyptians described the Jews as rodents or insects (such as rats or

cockroaches) swarming all over the ground and multiplying so fast that they gave birth to multiple babies at a time, like animals, before the midwives could even reach their homes (1:7, 12, 19).

According to Professor Wikipedia, the Nazis sent 1.3 million people to Auschwitz, and 1.1 million of them died there (960,000 Jews). The Nazis gassed 865,000 of the Jews when they arrived. The Auschwitz concentration complex was a group of more than 40 concentration and extermination camps that the Nazis operated in Poland.

In Vaera, we read about the first seven plagues. The reason that God sent so many plagues to inflict Paro and his country was that He was giving a class for Paro, the Egyptians, the Jews, and the world on the subject of "Who Is Hashem?" While God could have swept the millions of Jews from Egypt to Canaan in a flash, anyone who has ever taught a class knows that it takes time and repetition for students to absorb and learn a new subject. By presenting ten increasingly harsh plagues over approximately a year, God presented a lesson that no person alive at the time would ever forget.

While Paro and the Egyptians rather quickly learned the power of Hashem, it took the Jews longer to absorb the lessons they needed to learn to transform from millions of depressed slaves to a unified people, devoted to Hashem, qualified to receive and internalize God's mitzvot. The primary subject of the remainder of the Torah is how the Jews learned and absorbed the meaning of Hashem, their obligations, and the rewards for following His mitzvot.

Paro and Hitler share one critical character flaw as political leaders. Both focused more on subjecting (and killing) the Jews than on the goal of making the most of their countries. Paro was willing for God to destroy the Egyptian economy and wealth with a long series of plagues rather than permit the Jews to go away for three days to present sacrifices to Hashem. Hitler focused more on killing all the Jews than on winning the war, especially in 1944 and 1945, when the course of the war turned against the Nazis. We Jews can see the hand of God in turning around a war that seemed for so long destined to end up with Nazi Germany controlling all of Europe and Africa, if not the entire world. (It is even easier to see the hand of God in Israel's victories over the combined Arab forces in winning freedom for Israel and continuing to win since then – victories that military experts all say was impossible based on military science.)

In two weeks, very close to International Holocaust Day (January 27), we shall be reading Beshalach, the beginning of the Exodus from Egypt and wanderings until our ancestors finally entered the land. Very soon after the successful crossing of the Sea of Reeds, when God destroyed the Egyptian army at night (out of view of the Jews), the people cry for water. God tells Moshe to strike a rock to have water come forth. Immediately after this incident, Amalek comes and attacks the weakest of the Jews (those at the end, struggling to keep up with the others). Amalek has become the symbol of anti-Semitism throughout Jewish history. We see our enemies' hatred of Jews as part of Amalek, either by blood or in spirit. We must war against Amalek later in the Torah, during the times of the prophets, in Persia at the time of Purim, during the Crusades, in Nazi Germany, and in various Arab attacks. Throughout our history, the hatred that Amalek represents has come and will return, always trying to destroy our people. As we read about anti-Semitism in Paro's Egypt, then Amalek's treachery, and recall International Holocaust Memorial Day, look at the parallels throughout our history. A strong, united Jewish people is our best prospect for continuing to battle successfully against those who hate us merely because we are Jewish.

I am writing these words in the last few hours before Rosh Hodesh Shevat, which is the yahrtzeit of my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l. Rabbi Cahan was a chaplain for the U.S. Navy for many years – both active duty and for many years doing reserve duty each summer. Rabbi Cahan served in Japan after the Korean War (and became fluent in Japanese). He served during a period when the military made tremendous progress fighting racial and religious intolerance, and he was at the forefront of opening more opportunities for women in Conservative Judaism. Rabbi Cahan worked hard to make congregants and fellow Jews sensitive to our obligations to treat people with respect – and to help the poor, aged, medically challenged, and others in need. Listening to him was a great way to become a better person. It is fitting to remember Rabbi Cahan during a period when we reflect on countries treating all people properly and remember the horrors of Amalek and other dictators who represent the worst enemies of our people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

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Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Menachem Mendel ben Chana, Nossan ben Pessel, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers.

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Hannah & Alan

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**Drasha: Vaera: Raise the Baton!**  
by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 2002

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

In this week's portion, once again, Hashem sent Moshe and Ahron to Pharaoh in a second effort to sway his heart and have him change his mind to let the Hebrews leave Egypt. Unlike the unembellished appeal in last week's portion, this time they were equipped with more than pleas – this time they came with miracles. Standing in front of the ruler, Ahron threw his stick down and it turned into a snake. Pharaoh was not impressed. He countered with a little magic of his own. His sorcerers matched the miraculous stick-to-snake act by having his spooks throw down their sticks and by transforming them into snakes.

Ahron one-upped the Egyptian magicians as his stick swallowed all of their sticks. But that obviously was not enough. Pharaoh's heart was once again hardened and he refused to let the Jews leave Egypt. And so, Hashem decided that the benign miracles would not be effective with the stubborn king. It was time for the heavy artillery — the ten plagues.

Hashem commands Moshe: "Go to Pharaoh in the morning — behold! He goes out to the water — and you shall stand opposite him at the river's bank, and the staff that was turned into a snake you shall take in your hand" (Exodus 7:15). A simple question bothers me. Moshe had only one special stick. There are various Midrashic explanations as to its origin, but everyone agrees it was a unique one. It was a special one with special powers. Moshe may have been a leader of many hats, but he only carried one stick. Why did Hashem need to define the stick as the one that turned into a snake? He could have simply asked Moshe to come with his stick. Moshe would surely have known exactly which stick Hashem wanted him to take.

**Charles Lutwidge Dodgson is better known to us as Lewis Carroll, author of the 1865 children's fantasy story, Alice in Wonderland. What most of us do not know about him was that he was also a brilliant mathematician spending more than twenty-five years teaching at Oxford University.**

**An apocryphal story relates that Queen Victoria was so delighted after reading his fantasy-laced novel, Alice in Wonderland that she asked him to send her any other works penned by the same quill. Dodgson responded immediately, but the Queen was somewhat taken aback when she received two of his other works, Syllabus of Plane Algebraical Geometry and An Elementary Treatise on Determinants.**

We tend to look at the world and forget that routine natural events are also replete with awe-inspiring miracles and supernatural properties. We become acclimated to the mundane miracles of life so that we also shrug when Hashem turns proverbial sticks into proverbial snakes. We feel we can do that too!

Therefore, before orchestrating the largest insubordination of natural law in world history, by turning the flowing Nile into a virtual blood bath, Moshe is told to bring with him the stick that Pharaoh only considered to be capable of performing minor miracles. Moshe is told that the same stick that was not able to impress Pharaoh has the ability to shatter the Egyptian economy and with it the haughty attitude that kept the Hebrew nation enslaved.

Sometimes our marvel of G-d's wonders is dulled by the scoffing of the naysayers. They lead us to forget that the same power behind the minor miracles of life are the generators of great miracles that we can hardly fathom and surely not anticipate! Even the incomprehensible miracle of life itself is blunted by its ongoing regularity. Our emotions become bored and our intellect spoiled with the majestic events that are considered trite by their regular reoccurrence. And when we fail to see the greatness of genius in the wonderland in which we live, we expect G-d to send us a more prominent message. But we must never forget that even the most awe-inspiring message comes from the same Hand and Stick that bring us the simplest benign worms!

Good Shabbos!

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### **Va'era: Speech in Exile**

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

Moshe complains to God that since speaking to the Israelites things have only gotten worse. God tells Moshe to return to the people and tell them that God will redeem them from Egypt and take them to be God's nation. The people, however, are deaf to this message due to their hard labor. Moshe then returns to God and challenges God – If the people will not listen to me, then “אֵיךְ יִשְׁמַע בְּי פִרְעֵה וְאֲנִי עֵר ל שִׁפְתָיִם” – how will Pharaoh listen to me, seeing as I have uncircumcised lips.” (Exodus 6:12).

The Zohar raises a sharp question on this verse. When God initially sends Moshe, God tells Moshe that he need not worry about his heavy speech, “for I will be with your mouth.” If so, says the Zohar, how does Moshe, here, believe himself to be unable to approach Pharaoh due to his uncircumcised lips?

The Zohar's answer is a shocking one. It was not just Bnei Yisrael who were enslaved and in exile. Speech itself was enslaved; dibur was in exile. Moshe was unable to speak articulately because the very power of speech was no longer free.

As slaves, there is no way that the Israelites could truly speak. How can a slave express his deepest sense of who he is? Without autonomy, a sense of the past and a sense of the future, without any narrative to explain the arc of his life, how could he do anything but simply talk? Speech, an expression of self and of meaning, is beyond the grasp of a slave. When Benei Yisrael cry out to God, we are told that they cried, but not that they prayed. They couldn't articulate their hopes, frustrations, and desires for a better future. They could only moan out in pain. There was only kol, sound, but not dibur, not true speech. Speech itself was in exile.

When was it redeemed? The Zohar teaches that this was at the moment of Har Sinai. “The Lord spoke” – va'yidaber – “all these things, saying” (Shemot 20:1). God speaks to the Bnei Yisrael and declares ה' אלהיך, “I am the Lord your God.” The ultimate statement of existential meaning. And then the Ten Commandments – the directives of how to live a life of purpose. The giving of the Torah at Har Sinai was the redemption of speech.

The exile of speech is experienced not just by the people, but by Moshe himself. It occurs whenever there is a rush to grab on to the surface of the words – the kol – without attempting to plumb their depths, to listen more closely, to understand more profoundly what is being said.

Moshe tells God that the Bnei Yisrael will ask who is this God that has spoken to you, what is God's name. God responds with an answer of great philosophical and theological power, eheyeh asher eheyeh, I am who I am. And yet, when Moshe delivers the message to the people, they have no questions about God or God's name. They are immediately ready to

believe. God sent you to redeem us? Great! We are on board! On one level, this is a sign of emunah, of belief. But on another level, it is a jump to embrace the kol, the surface. They have no need to hear the dibbur, to understand what this is all about, who is this God and why is God redeeming them. They are ready to listen to the kol and move forward.

It was for this reason that the people were so easily discouraged when Pharaoh responded to their demands by increasing their workload and enslavement. Lacking a deep connection to the purpose of and a belief in the ultimate message, the people couldn't hold onto it in the face of adversity. Their overeager readiness slipped away just as easily as it came to them in the first place.

And so it is with Moshe and Pharaoh – it is all kol, no dibur. Moshe makes no attempt to explain who this God is who sent him. It was simply – the God of the Hebrews wants us to worship Him and bring sacrifices in the desert. This declaration lacked meaning for Pharaoh, and Moshe was immediately dismissed.

Why, we may ask, was speech in exile for Moshe? He was not of “shortness of breath,” and not under the burden of slavery! Why couldn't he say what needed to be said?

Sfat Emet states that the answer can be found in the verse itself. When Moshe says that the people will not listen to him “and I am of uncircumcised lips,” he did not mean to say that his difficulty in speech was why they would not listen to him. No! The reverse was the case – because they would not listen to him, that is what made him have uncircumcised lips. That is what made it impossible for him to speak.

When no one is listening, we won't bother – or even be able – to truly speak. Sure, words will come out, but it will be merely kol, surface words. Dibur will only happen when someone is ready to listen. When another person truly wants to know what we have to say and what is going on for us on a deep level, then we can access our inner selves and communicate through dibur, and not just kol.

In our lives dibur is so often in exile. We are easily able to engage the kol, but we are so often adverse to digging deeper. It is no small thing to speak with a dibur and to invite and make the space for the dibbur of another. The redemption of dibur takes work.

This goes beyond the difference between hearing and listening. We might be listening and paying attention, sure, but all the while listening to the wrong thing. Spouses will sometimes get into a big fight about nothing – why didn't you take out the garbage, why were you late picking up the kids – and there will be much heat and emotions expended. But often, when the temperature in the room goes down, and people are able to really talk and really listen – then the true dibbur can come out. “What was that really about? Why does this bother you so much? What's really going on?”

In that moment we are able to look beyond the kol and access the dibur. One side is ready to talk, and the other side is ready to listen. What puts our dibur in exile is that “וְלֹא אֶשְׁמָעוּ” – and they did not listen.” Once we are able to be shomeiah, to actively listen and create space for the other, dibur will be redeemed.

My bracha for all of us is that we should all be able to move beyond the kol, beyond the exile of dibur. That we find the redemption of our speech in our arriving at Har Sinai, in connecting to the thing that speaks to the essence of who we are. And that we are able to overcome the challenge of “and they did not hear,” to become true listeners, and to thereby redeem the speech of others.

Shabbat Shalom!

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**Vaeira: The Power of Words**  
by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine\* © 2021 Teach 613

Moshe was a man with a mission. He was assigned to bring hope to the downtrodden Jewish people and to discipline Paroh. Moshe had divine backing. Eventually Moshe would be the conduit of the famous ten plagues. Yet, Moshe approaches the task with great reluctance because he was not naturally articulate. By nature, Moshe was not blessed with the attribute of gifted speech.

The commentaries observe that on some level it was important that Moshe not be a gifted orator. His role in bonding the people with G-d was such that it needed to occur for substantive reasons and through understanding, not through the gift of gifted persuasion. Moshe would reach the people with his words because they were the words of truth and not because they were forceful or suave. Ultimately because he was not a gifted orator, Moshe did have the truest gift of speech—The gift of sharing the power of the words themselves as a communication, without any stylistic distractions.

Judaism is quite definitive on the topic of words and speech. Although some will claim, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” the Torah, through the laws of Lashon Horah (gossip), is quite definitive that words can destroy. Little by little, the accumulation of negativity can leave destruction in its wake. In my Perek Shirah series I explore the comparison of Lashon Horah to the spider. The spider spews poison from its mouth on its prey, until the victim deteriorates and can be slurped up. That is the same effect witnessed in Lashon Horah. It is no wonder that in the Kabbalistic system, mankind is titled, “Midaber- The one that speaks,” because so much of our good and bad impact in this world is tied to our speech.

This week the United States has struggled through the aftermath of the tragic event at the Capitol. The Capitol-- symbol of law and order and regulated communal living-- was overrun. But, beyond condemning, the obligation is upon us to do a bit of introspection and consider what occurred to place us at this national low from which we must collectively emerge.

One, obvious lesson, is that words have impact. Words of anger, words that are provocative, shared again and again, through a variety of live and virtual forums do impact people's behavior, sometimes with devastating consequences.

But I believe that there are other conclusions we can reach if we are truly introspective, conclusions that apply equally to both sides of the political aisle. The charged and concerning environment in this country did not start with the current President and will not magically go away with the changing of the guard on January 20. If we are to successfully maintain the dream and mandate of Democracy, we must remind ourselves that Democracy at its essence is a system of benevolence. And Democracy is a system of “Words,” a system in which the proper use of words will spell respectful resolution of our differences, or the opposite.

Words, conversations, dialogue, and debate are able to work their magic when all parties involved sincerely endeavor to create a safe place. When progressive agendas threaten to close down those who do not subscribe to their views, an extremism that is downright offensive may emerge. The mandate of progressive agendas must never be allowed to close down, or threaten to close down, other people's businesses or educational systems.

No, the country will not be magically cured by the changing of the President. The challenge of using words wisely really starts with the people, realizing the power of our words. We have some serious work ahead of us as Americans to preserve a healthy Democracy. May G-d bless us with the fortitude of benevolence for which this country is so well known.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos.

\* Rav of Southeast Hebrew Congregation, White Oak (Silver Spring), MD and Director of Teach 613.  
[RMRhine@Teach613.org](mailto:RMRhine@Teach613.org). Teach613, 10604 Woodsdale Dr., Silver Spring, MD 20901. 908-770-9072. Donations welcome to help with Torah outreach. [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org).

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## **Outgrowing Slavery: Thoughts on Parashat Va-era** By Rabbi Marc D. Angel\*

"And the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel, and unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt."

It is understandable why God commanded Moses and Aaron to order Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Pharaoh was the ruler who had the power to release the Hebrew slaves. But what did God command them in regard to the Israelites? Some commentators explain that Moses and Aaron were commanded to be kind and patient with the Israelites.

The verse, however, might be understood as follows: Moses and Aaron were to command Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves leave Egypt. They were to command the Israelites to get "the land of Egypt" out of themselves. The time had arrived not merely for a physical redemption from slavery, but for an emotional and psychological awareness of freedom. The Hebrew slaves needed to erase the scars of servitude in Egypt, and to become self-respecting, independent people.

The experience of having been enslaved in Egypt was to have a profound impact on the future character of the people of Israel. The Torah reminds us to be compassionate to the stranger--for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. It commands us to treat others with kindness and humanity--because we had been treated with cruelty and inhumanity when we were slaves in Egypt. The Talmud defines Jews as being characterized by modesty, compassion, and lovingkindness. One lacking these qualities is suspected of not really being Jewish!

Professor Gershon Galil of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Haifa recently deciphered an inscription dating from the 10th century BCE--the earliest known fragment of Hebrew writing. How wonderful that this oldest Hebrew inscription captures the essential spirit of the Jewish people going back to antiquity:

"You shall not do it, but worship the Lord. Judge the slave and the widow; judge the orphan and the stranger. Plead for the infant, plead for the poor and the widow. Rehabilitate the poor at the hands of the king. Protect the poor and the slave, support the stranger."

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but we have learned from that experience to become ever more sensitive to the rights and feelings of others, ever more vigilant on behalf of the poor and the downtrodden, ever more righteous in our dealings with widows, orphans and strangers--and indeed with all fellow human beings. Outgrowing slavery means living as free, responsible and moral people.

\* Jewishideas.org. <https://www.jewishideas.org/outgrowing-slavery-thoughts-parashat-va-era> **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](https://www.jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.**

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## **Thoughts on Holocaust Education, Anti-Semitism, and Overcoming Bigotry: Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel \***

With the spate of anti-Semitic incidents in recent weeks, we have heard many calls for increasing education about the Holocaust. The prevailing wisdom is that when people—especially young people—learn about the horrors of the Holocaust, they will become more sympathetic to Jews and more aware of the dangers of religious and racial hatred. With more knowledge about the Holocaust, it is assumed that people will be less prone to anti-Semitic attitudes and behaviors.

It should be agreed that the various efforts at Holocaust education have had a positive impact on many. Millions of people have visited the various Holocaust museums and memorials. Large numbers of students have learned about the Holocaust in their social studies classes.

And yet, Holocaust education—unless handled very well—can have negative consequences. For those who are steeped in anti-Jewish hatred, Holocaust education may actually encourage their anti-Semitism. They see that millions of Jews were systematically slaughtered, while much of the world stood aside. They see Jews as a relatively defenseless minority group that is an easy target for hatred and violence. In the minds of rabid Jew-haters, the Holocaust is an ideal...not a disaster.

Holocaust education—unless handled very well—can have negative consequences for Jewish students. Jews—especially young and impressionable ones—may wonder why they should maintain Jewish identity if it can be so risky to do so. While I believe that most Jewish students will be moved to greater sympathy and identity with Jewish Peoplehood, some may be impacted in the opposite direction. They will see no particular virtue in being part of a hated minority, victimized so cruelly by the Nazis...and still subjected to anti-Jewish hatred today.

There is no one “silver bullet” for putting an end to anti-Semitism. Holocaust Education can successfully reach many people with a message of the dangers of hatred, the value of tolerance. Interfaith and intergroup conferences are helpful in creating normal human interchanges where all participants are viewed as fellow human beings...not as stereotypes. When Jews and non-Jews interact positively as neighbors, as business associates, as co-workers, as responsible citizens—positive attitudes naturally ensue.

With all the current news about anti-Semitism in the United States, people (including Jews) sometimes forget that national polls have found that Jews are among the most highly regarded religious groups in America. Jews are recognized for their sense of social justice, their leadership in so many fields, their contributions in education, science, medicine, the arts etc. There are currently two major Jewish candidates for President of the United States, with millions of supporters drawn from Americans of all walks of life.

This is not to ignore, or downplay, anti-Semitism or anti-Jewish behavior. But it is important to keep things in context. It is also, unfortunately, a fact that extremism in general has been increasing against other groups. The civil discourse in American society has become harsher, more strident, and angrier. There is a malady in the United States (and other countries), of which anti-Semitism is a symptom.

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Sholom Aleichem wrote a story about a Jewish young man who was conscripted into the Russian army, and was trained how to use his rifle “At the firing line the sergeant noticed Yechiel shooting up in the air instead of ahead; he poured a flood of curses and abuse on his head, with all the worst names for Jews in Russian to boot, and showed him where to aim his gun. A little later the sergeant again saw Yechiel aiming up in the air. This time he was flabbergasted: What, he wanted to know, was the matter with that crazy Jewish soldier? Hadn’t he told Yechiel where to aim his gun? ‘Yes,’ Yechiel replied, ‘but there are people there!’”

This seemingly amusing story points to a serious truth. When people see each other as fellow human beings, it is difficult to shoot at them. To engage in violent action first requires a process of dehumanization of the victim. People need to be trained to hate the “enemy,” to see the other as a villain unworthy of life.

The root of hatred in our society—in all human societies—arises with the planting of seeds of mistrust, fear and vilification of those deemed as “the enemy.” Once the victims are dehumanized, violent action against them becomes possible. There’s no need to show mercy on people who are now deemed to be vermin.

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Jews know as well as anyone—probably better than anyone—how dangerous it is to become victimized by haters. Once the hatred seeps in, violent words and actions follow. Once people come to dehumanize others, they become capable of acting against them with egregious cruelty.

It is impossible to ignore the growing polarizations within our society today. The level of hateful discourse has led to increasing acts of violence.

We Jews certainly feel the pain of being dehumanized, negatively stereotyped...but so do almost all people who are targets of one hate group or another. There are those who demonize Jews, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, Christians, Muslims, immigrants, homosexuals...the list goes on. Because hatred is aimed at virtually everyone, virtually everyone needs to rise and resist it.

Demonization of any one group threatens the moral fabric of the entire society.

Unless society as a whole can address the plague of dehumanization and demonization, all of us—of whatever background—are at risk. Each of us, in our own way, can contribute to creating a more harmonious, tolerant, humane society.

We need to strive for a society where we look into each other’s eyes and see a fellow human being. As Yechiel in Sholom Aleichem’s story said: There are people there!



## **Parshas Va'eira – Patience Is Wisdom**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer\*

There is a Medrash discussing Moshe and Aharon's initial encounter with Pharaoh, which startlingly contrasts Pharaoh's behavior with G-d's conduct. There is a passuk in Mishlei (29:11) which states "A fool lets out all of his anger, and afterwards a wise one calms it." The Medrash teaches that the first half of the passuk is referring to Pharaoh's conduct. The second half is referring to how G-d handled Pharaoh.

When Pharaoh initially saw Aharon's staff turn into a serpent, he mocked them. He thought they were simply doing magician's tricks, something any Egyptian child could do. He then brought out his entire household and asked them to do the same, showing clear and well his opinion that their display of G-d's power was nothing of significance. This is a fool releasing all of his anger and frustration.

The Medrash tells us that at that moment, G-d said that if Aharon's snake would swallow the Egyptian's snakes, it would seem to be the regular course of events, one snake eating other snakes. Therefore, G-d had Aharon's snake revert to a staff, and only then swallow the Egyptian's staffs. When Pharaoh saw this he was astounded and scared. Seeing the staff eat the other staffs, he feared what would be if they directed the staff to swallow him. This, says the Medrash, is wisdom, calming the fool's wrath at the end. (Medrash Rabbah 9:7)

The Medrash is teaching us that Pharaoh was a fool to express his opinion so clearly and extensively. Yet, when we consider the scene in Pharaoh's throne room, this Medrash requires some further thought. Moshe and Aharon walked into Pharaoh's throne room claiming to speak in the name of the Omnipotent, G-d of the Jews. Pharaoh asked for a sign of the power of their G-d, and even stated that he had never heard of an Omnipotent G-d. Moshe and Aharon then proceed to provide a sign by turning a staff into a snake. As Pharaoh goes on to demonstrate by having his entire household replicate the same trick, the sign that Moshe and Aharon used was meaningless in Pharaoh's eyes. One can only imagine the scorn Pharaoh must have felt when they used this as a sign to prove G-d. His scorn must have quickly become rage at the audacity of trying to fool him with such a simple ploy, that anyone in his household could replicate. From this perspective, one has to wonder, why was it foolish for Pharaoh to display his rage in full force and display his mockery openly? He had asked for a sign and received an insult in return.

I believe the answer lies in the question. If Pharaoh had been thinking calmly, his shock should have turned to suspicion rather than rage. Moshe had grown up in the palace, and Aharon had spent his entire life in Egypt. They were certainly aware of Egypt's magicians and what they were capable of. Rather than responding in a rage, he should have asked what they doing. Before launching himself into full-fledged mockery, he should have waited to hear if they had anything more to say. Only a fool assumes he knows all there is to know, and even releases his full wrath for all to see how right he is.

It appears to me that this is the meaning of the end of the passuk, as well. G-d waited until Pharaoh had released his full wrath, and only then responded. As the Medrash states, "At that moment" G-d said that if Aharon's snake would swallow their snakes, it would appear to be the regular course of events. G-d only completed His sign for Pharaoh once Pharaoh had finished fully expressing his opinion. The response must address the full claim. The claim must therefore be heard in full. Only then can one give a coherent response.

This Medrash is a clarion call in our day and age. To truly understand another person, one must first hear them out. Moreover, one must consider the fact that the one opposing him is also a thinking and rational human being. There may be more to someone else's claim than we first realized or expected. True wisdom is displayed by the patience to discuss and hear the other person point, even if you're convinced they're wrong.

\* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

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## **Dvar Torah for Vaeira: Roll Tide!**

by Rabbi Moshe Rube\*

I know that as a rabbi I'm not supposed to engage in partisan politics, but I hope Auburn fans on this list will forgive me as I wish a Mazal tov to the Crimson Tide for its recent victory. As long as it wasn't a game against Auburn, I think all Alabamians can come together and be proud of our local talent.

Some may read this and wonder what in the world football has to do with religion. I ask the opposite question. Is there a part of football that isn't? A successful football team thrives on the same values of a healthy spiritual life that we discuss so often. The balance between strict discipline and freedom, the shaping of raw potential into polished game play, seeing all the conflicting forces of your team as one unit, knowing and reveling in your individual mission and your place in the group, developing humility to work for the greater good and not just personal glory, and on and on...

No wonder football is so important in Alabama. Though I wonder why football never caught on in the Jewish community. Of course there are many Jewish football fans, but how many Jewish Pee-Wee football teams do you know? I always wanted to play on a youth football team, and I'm sure the only thing that stopped me from being a college football star was the fact that the games were on Shabbos. And where is Israel's football team? (Forget soccer for a moment.)

Growing up in the Jewish community, we did not have organized football, but we did have baseball and basketball teams. Because we had double the academics, which cut into our practice time, we were trounced by the non-Jewish teams, but the sports were there at least. However, even organized baseball and basketball stopped when I went to Yeshiva. The "cool" rabbis talked sports with us, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Don't get me wrong. My rabbis were wonderful, but most just couldn't talk sports.

Sports were seen as more of an energy release rather than a coordinated effort to teach and enact spiritual values. There were plenty of students back then, and some of us now who might laugh at that concept. "Rabbi, if you want students to learn spiritual values, let them learn more Torah or start a charity organization." That's all well and good, but I guarantee you that at least half of my high school class needed something like organized sports (especially a more physical game like football). Not every child is built to learn values from a book or social action club, and we have to meet people where they are. "Chanoch Linaar Al Pi Darko Gam Ki Yazkin Lo Yasur Mimenah" Train a youth according to his way, and when he gets older, he will not deviate." (Proverbs 22:6)

But it is changing nowadays. More Jewish high schools are investing in sports programs, and there's even a national tournament in Yeshiva University for Jewish high school basketball teams called Red Sarachek. The YU basketball team still is one of the crowns of my alma mater. Maybe one day Israel will develop a football team that will be good enough to come and play the Tide or at least the UAB Blazers. Maybe one day a Jewish community will have its own youth football team complete with all the gear.

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky once expressed a sentiment extolling sports and especially football in America, because it provided a way to channel energy into something positive -- and who knows what people would do with that energy without such a powerful outlet. He himself was an exercise enthusiast who rode his bike for up to an hour each day.

Shabbat Shalom!

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## **Rav Kook Torah Va'eira: Hamotzi -- For all Times**

It was definitely the low point in Moses' mission to free the Hebrew slaves. Pharaoh responded to the demand for freedom by adding more oppressive measures, and the Israelites began to wish that Moses had never come. Even Moses had his doubts. In response, God commanded Moses to relay the following message to the Israelites:

*"You will know that I am the Lord your God, the One who brings you out (ha-motzi) from under the Egyptian subjugation." (Ex. 6:7)*

## Hamotzi — Past or Future?

The tense of the verb ha-motzi (המוציא) here is unclear. The Israelites have not yet been freed. Why say, “who brings you out”? The future tense — “who will bring you out” — would make more sense.

The word ha-motzi brings to mind the blessing recited before eating bread. The Talmud (Berachot 38a) records a debate regarding this blessing. Rabbi Nehemiah felt the blessing should read, “Blessed are You ... Who brought forth (motzi) bread from the earth.” But the other sages argued that the blessing should be “the One Who brings forth (ha-motzi) bread from the earth” — as in our verse.

What is the difference between motzi and ha-motzi?

The Talmud explains that this disagreement is based on how the verse in Exodus should be understood. According to Rabbi Nehemiah, the word ha-motzi implies the future. The Jews were still slaves in Egypt, and God assured them that He would take them out in the future. The future tense, however, is not appropriate for the blessing over bread. We recite this blessing in recognition of the wheat that has already come out of the earth. The word motzi, on the other hand, refers to the past, and is therefore more suitable.

Rabbi Nehemiah’s colleagues felt that the word ha-motzi implies both the past and the future. They understood the verse as follows: the Israelites will be freed (in the future), after which they will recognize God as their Liberator (in the past). Since ha-motzi also includes past events, it is also appropriate for the blessing over bread.

What is the essence of this disagreement? Is it simply an argument over Hebrew grammar? What is the significance of the blessing over bread being in the past or the future?

## Contemplating God

There are two basic ways to attain love and awe of Heaven. The first approach is to contemplate God’s greatness by examining His works. Reflecting on His amazing creations allows one to appreciate God’s infinite wisdom and justice, and instills a tremendous longing to know God’s great Name (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah 2:1).

The second approach maintains that intellectual reflection alone is insufficient. There must also be an emotional element. We need to awaken within ourselves love and awe for the Essence that creates these spectacular works.

Rabbi Nehemiah, by preferring the word motzi, concurred with the first approach. Before eating bread, we need to raise our intellectual awareness of the event that occurred: this bread was baked from wheat that God brought forth from the earth. The word motzi is a verb, referring to an event that has taken place. Rabbi Nehemiah stressed the importance of the past tense, since appreciation of God’s greatness is achieved by objectively analyzing God’s hand in history and past events.

The other scholars disagreed. The blessing should be ha-Motzi, “the One Who brings forth.” Ha-Motzi is not a verb but a descriptive phrase. We do not only observe the event itself, but we attempt to look beyond it to the Cause of the action. This is a supra-scientific, intuitive approach, relating to God according to His actions. The scholars held that the blessing over bread is not just a way of contemplating the process of wheat growing out of the earth. We must concentrate on the Source of this process, and form a corresponding mental image of God.

## Beyond Time

Since this opinion stresses not the event but the Cause of the event, the framework of time becomes irrelevant. Ha-motzi thus implies both past and future. This changes our understanding of God’s promise to the Israelites, “You will know that I am the Lord your God, the One who brings you out from under the Egyptian subjugation.” We now understand that the present tense is just as accurate as the past and the future. For all time, we will recognize God’s attribute of Ha-Motzi, the One who liberates us from slavery.

(Gold from the Land of Israel pp. 110-112. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, pp. 176-177.)

## **The God Who Acts in History (Vaera 5779)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\*

The Israelites were at their lowest ebb. They had been enslaved. A decree had been issued that every male child was to be killed. Moses had been sent to liberate them, but the first effect of his intervention was to make matters worse, not better. Their quota of brick-making remained unchanged, but now they also had to provide their own straw. Initially they had believed Moses when he performed the signs God had given him and told them that God was about to rescue them. Now they turned against Moses and Aaron, accusing them:

*"May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Exodus 5:20–21)*

At this point Moses – who had been so reluctant to take on the mission – turned to God in protest and anguish:

*"O Lord, why have You brought trouble upon this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all." (Exodus 5:22)*

None of this, however, was accidental. The Torah is preparing the ground for one of its most monumental propositions: In the darkest night, Israel was about to have its greatest encounter with God. Hope was to be born at the very edge of the abyss of despair. There was nothing natural about this, nothing inevitable. No logic can give rise to hope; no law of history charts a path from slavery to redemption. The entire sequence of events was a prelude to the single most formative moment in the history of Israel: the intervention of God in history – the supreme Power intervening on behalf of the supremely powerless, not (as in every other culture) to endorse the status quo, but to overturn it.

God tells Moses: "I am Hashem, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:6-7). The entire speech is full of interest, but what will concern us – as it has successive generations of interpreters – is what God tells Moses at the outset: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty [E-I Shaddai], but by My name Hashem I was not known to them" (Ex. 6:3). A fundamental distinction is being made between the experience the patriarchs had of God, and the experience the Israelites were about to have. Something new, unprecedented, was about to happen. What is it?

Clearly it had to do with the names by which God is known. The verse distinguishes between E-I Shaddai ("God Almighty") and the four-letter name of God which, because of its sanctity, Jewish tradition refers to simply as Hashem – "the name" par excellence.

As the classic Jewish commentators point out, the verse must be read with great care. It does not say that the patriarchs "did not know" this name; nor does it say that God did not "make this name known" to them. The name Hashem appears no less than 165 times in the book of Genesis. God Himself uses the phrase "I am Hashem" to both Abraham (Genesis 15:7) and Jacob (28:13). What, then, is new about the revelation of God that was about to happen in the days of Moses that had never happened before?

The Sages give various explanations. A Midrash says that God is known as Elokim when He judges human beings, E-I Shaddai when He suspends judgment and Hashem when He shows mercy.[1] Judah Halevi in *The Kuzari*, and Ramban in his Commentary, say that Hashem refers to God when He performs miracles that suspend the laws of nature. [2] However, Rashi's explanation is the simplest and most elegant:

*It is not written here, "[My name, Hashem] I did not make known to them" but rather "[By the name, Hashem] I was not known to them" – meaning, I was not recognised by them in My attribute of "keeping faith," by reason of which My name is "Hashem," namely that I am faithful to fulfil My word, for I made promises to them but I did not fulfil them [during their lifetime].*[3]

The patriarchs had received promises from God. They would multiply and become a nation. They would inherit a land. Neither of these promises were realised in their lifetime. To the contrary, as Genesis reaches its close, the family of the patriarchs numbered a mere seventy souls. They had not yet acquired a land. They were in exile in Egypt. But now the fulfilment was about to begin.

Already, in the first chapter of Exodus, we hear, for the first time, the phrase Am Bnei Yisrael, “the people of the children of Israel” (Ex. 1:9). Israel was no longer a family, but a people. Moses at the burning bush was told by God that He was about to bring the people to “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8). Hashem therefore means the God who acts in history to fulfil His promises.

This was something radically new – not just to Israel but to humanity as a whole. Until then, God (or the gods) was known through nature. God was in the sun, the stars, the rain, the storm, the fertility of the fields and the sequence of the seasons. When there was drought and famine, the gods were being angry. When there was produce in plenty, the gods were showing favour. The gods were nature personified. Never before had God intervened in history, to rescue a people from slavery and set them on the path to freedom. This was a revolution, at once political and intellectual.

To most humans at most times, there seems to be no meaning in history. We live, we die, and it is as if we had never been. The universe gives no sign of any interest in our existence. If that was so in ancient times, when people believed in the existence of gods, how much more so is it true today for the neo-Darwinians who see life as no more than the operation of “chance and necessity” ( Jacques Monod) or “the blind watchmaker” (Richard Dawkins).[4] Time seems to obliterate all meaning. Nothing lasts. Nothing endures.[5]

In ancient Israel, by contrast, “for the first time, the prophets placed a value on history...For the first time, we find affirmed and increasingly accepted the idea that historical events have a value in themselves, insofar as they are determined by the will of God...Historical facts thus become situations of man in respect to God, and as such they acquire a religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer on them. It may, then, be said with truth that the Hebrews were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God.”[6] Judaism is humanity’s first glimpse of history as more than a mere succession of happenings – as nothing less than a drama of redemption in which the fate of a nation reflects its loyalty or otherwise to a covenant with God.

It is hard to recapture this turning point in the human imagination, just as it is hard for us to imagine what it was like for people first to encounter Copernicus’ discovery that the earth went round the sun. It must have been a terrifying threat to all who believed that the earth did not move; that it was the one stable point in a shifting universe. So it was with time. The ancients believed that nothing really changed. Time was, in Plato’s phrase, no more than the “moving image of eternity.” That was the certainty that gave people solace. The times may be out of joint, but eventually things will return to the way they were.

To think of history as an arena of change is terrifying likewise. It means that what happened once may never happen again; that we are embarked on a journey with no assurance that we will ever return to where we began. It is what Milan Kundera meant in his phrase, “the unbearable lightness of being.”[7] Only profound faith – a new kind of faith, breaking with the entire world of ancient mythology – could give people the courage to set out on a journey to the unknown.

That is the meaning of Hashem: the God who intervenes in history. As Judah Halevi points out, the Ten Commandments begin not with the words “I am the Lord your God who created heaven and earth,” but “I am the Lord your God who brought you out from Egypt, from the house of slavery.” Elokim is God as we encounter Him in nature and creation, but Hashem is God as revealed in history, in the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and Egypt.

I find it moving that this is precisely what many non-Jewish observers have concluded. This, for example, is the verdict of the Russian thinker Nikolai Berdyaev:

*I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint...Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance*

*under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny.[8]*

That is what God tells Moses is about to be revealed: Hashem, meaning God as He intervenes in the arena of time, “so that My name may be declared throughout the world” (Ex. 9:16). The script of history would bear the mark of a hand not human, but divine. And it began with these words: “Therefore say to the Israelites: I am Hashem, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.”

Shabbat shalom

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

[1] Shemot Rabbah 3:6

[2] Judah Halevi, Kuzari 2:2. Ramban, commentary to Exodus 6:2.

[3] Rashi commentary to Exodus 6:3.

[4] Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1996)

[5] We even find this sentiment in one place in Tanakh, in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): “Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both; as one dies so does the other.... Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

[6] Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, New York, Harper & Row, 1959, 104.

[7] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber, 1984)

[8] Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (1936), 86–87

\* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. See <https://rabbisacks.org/the-god-who-acts-in-history-vaera-5779/>

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## **Pharaoh's Repentance: An Essay on Parshat Va'eira**

By Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) \*

### **Pharaoh's character**

The narrative of the first third of the book of Exodus (through Parshat Beshalach) features a protracted confrontation between G d and Pharaoh. In this respect, it can be said that the central character of these parshot is not Moses but Pharaoh. Moses fulfills his role as G d's emissary, conducting himself in a clear and consistent fashion. By contrast, Pharaoh's character is more complex, engaging our interest and raising various questions.

One of the basic questions about Pharaoh's character is why, after suffering blow after blow, does he not respond? Granted, the Torah states that “G d hardened Pharaoh's heart;”<sup>1</sup> still, this raises the question of what underlies this whole situation.

The Kotzker Rebbe used to say that he respects Pharaoh. Here was a man who was struck by the plagues of Egypt and nevertheless stubbornly upheld his principles. This characterization not only explains the question of Pharaoh's surprising behavior, but sheds light generally on many of the other antagonists in the Torah as well.

In the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, certainly we would like to feel that we are on the side of Moses, but the truth is that most people would probably relate more to Pharaoh. Moses and Aaron are lofty characters who are in direct contact with G d, whereas Pharaoh, in terms of his personality, is more or less an ordinary human being. To be sure, not

everyone is capable of decreeing, as he did, “Every boy who is born you shall throw into the Nile,”<sup>2</sup> or of opposing G d so stubbornly. Nevertheless, in terms of a person’s basic inner tendencies, Pharaoh’s decisions seem eminently understandable.

In this respect, the wicked characters in the Torah are no less – and perhaps even more – fascinating than the righteous ones. When we study the wicked characters, we can understand them much more fully than we can understand the tzadikim. It may be that some who study the Bible feel as if they can relate to the prophets, but there is a big difference between feeling this way and fully comprehending what prophecy entails. In the case of the wicked, it is undoubtedly easier for us to understand the entirety of what motivates such a personality. Hence, Pharaoh’s character and essential nature are much more significant for us, and it is important to try to understand his mode of conduct and his responses.

### **Pharaoh’s remorse**

After the first plagues, Pharaoh already appears to be shaken, and he humbles himself when facing Moses, but the alarm that seizes him after the plague of hail is much more significant: “Pharaoh sent and called for Moses and Aaron, and said to them: I have sinned this time; G d is righteous, and I and my people are wicked.”<sup>3</sup>

Pharaoh’s alarm is understandable, considering that he lives in a land such as Egypt, where hail is a rare occurrence. When the hail falls, it is likely the first time in his life that he has seen such a thing, and it surely makes a great impression on him, all the more so when it is a heavy hail accompanied by thunder and lightning.

Nevertheless, his response on this occasion is essentially different from his previous responses. What does he mean when he says, “I have sinned this time; G d is righteous, and I and my people are wicked”? What is he talking about?

When we follow the confrontation between Pharaoh and G d, we see that, at least on the surface, it is conducted like a negotiation. At the start, Pharaoh receives a proposal to let the People of Israel have a three-day vacation in order to celebrate a festival in the wilderness. Pharaoh, of course, is not thrilled by the idea, and he flatly rejects the proposal. Clearly, this refusal creates a confrontation, but it is still limited, an obstacle the likes of which are found in every negotiation.

It is clear that part of the significance of the leave that Moses demands of Pharaoh is symbolic. Just as nowadays certain countries prohibit the waving of certain flags, the demand to leave Egypt and celebrate G d’s festival in the wilderness is not merely a demand for three days of vacation; it is a fundamental demand for recognition that the People of Israel has a certain degree of independence. It is a symbolic demand: Who is the one in charge? These symbolic actions can lead to strikes, wars, and revolutions to this very day. Pharaoh realizes this and, in the interest of preserving his sovereignty over the People of Israel, considers Moses’ request a nonstarter.

Despite the fundamental significance of the proposal to go on leave, and although the confrontation is protracted, at this stage the confrontation clearly remains a normal feature of the negotiation process.

In any case, following this rejection, Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh, this time conveying G d’s demand to let the people go. When Pharaoh refuses, G d inflicts a plague on Egypt, until he finally relents. However, like anyone who has participated in a negotiation process knows, concessions are often followed by immediate regret. Indeed, Pharaoh reneges on his promise to free the People of Israel repeatedly, sometimes refusing outright and sometimes hedging his allowance with unreasonable conditions, but never agreeing completely to the terms he accepted earlier.

After the plague of hail, however, Pharaoh expresses remorse in a way that seems striking. What causes him to suddenly say, “G d is righteous, and I and my people are wicked”? In a way, Pharaoh’s remorse evokes that of the wicked king Ahab, after Elijah rebukes him: “He rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his body. He fasted, lay in sackcloth, and walked about subdued.”<sup>4</sup> However, when Ahab shows remorse, it is for very specific sins, and he truly has reason to be remorseful. Ahab’s admission of sin is truly justified, whereas here Moses says nothing to Pharaoh about the distress he has caused the People of Israel; all that he demands of Pharaoh is “Let my people go.” Why does Pharaoh say here, “I have sinned this time”? What is this sin that he is referring to?

### **Shattering the “I am always right” mentality**

Pharaoh does not grow up as an ordinary person but as the king of Egypt. Consequently, he grows up under the simple assumption that he is no less than a G d. This assumption is not a matter of abstract theology; it is bound up with the fundamental premise of his life and with the basic way he views the world. When a person grows up under the impression that he is a G d, this also colors his understanding of the nature of justice. Whatever he wants is by definition the embodiment of justice, and if there is anyone or anything in the world that is just, it is certainly he.

In the course of the ten plagues, Pharaoh goes through a process of change in his fundamental conception of his own life, a process that reaches its climax in the plague of hail. His confrontation with Moses leads him to discover, for the first time in his life, that he is not infallible, that perhaps he is the one who is acting improperly. He is exposed to this idea for the first time, and for someone like him this comes as a great shock, shattering the foundations of his life. When Pharaoh reaches this conclusion, it is not merely theoretical knowledge; he is now forced to adopt a new attitude to his whole life. He must now re-examine and reassess all of his past actions.

Before Pharaoh's epiphany, he was capable of saying, "Every boy who is born you shall throw into the Nile,"<sup>5</sup> without suffering any pangs of conscience. As far as he was concerned, if he wanted them to drown, they drowned; if he wanted them to be killed, they were killed. Everything that he wanted was automatically defined as just and good, with no qualms whatsoever. Only when Pharaoh's basic premise that "I am always right" is shattered does he gain the ability to evaluate and assess things as they are, and only then can his self-assessment change.

Because of this, Pharaoh's remorse does not end with a simple, "I did not act properly in this case"; this is a remorse that shatters his whole value system. That is why he includes in his confession something that seems out of place. He says, "I have sinned this time," and not only that but, "I and my people are wicked." Why "I and my people"? Because now Pharaoh's thoughts go back many years, and for the first time it occurs to him that perhaps his whole life has been a great lie. This remorse is not limited to what just transpired between him and Moses but, rather, returns to the root of the matter, hundreds of years back. It returns to the order to collect straw, to the order to drown the firstborn sons, and even to the very enslavement of Israel.

The basic feeling of "I am always right," which kept Pharaoh from any kind of soul-searching, is not a phenomenon that was limited to him alone. In this regard, Pharaoh is merely an extreme example of an ordinary person. Granted, an ordinary person does not grow up under the same circumstances as Pharaoh, does not commit the same sins, and does not think the way Pharaoh thinks; but despite all these distinctions, Pharaoh is still fundamentally an ordinary person. The real obstacle to remorse and the possibility of repentance is always the same, both in its extreme expression in the case of Pharaoh and in its more banal expression in the case of an ordinary person.

Ezekiel cites in the name of Pharaoh – not the Pharaoh of Exodus but a different Pharaoh – the saying, "Mine is my Nile; I have made myself great,"<sup>6</sup> which essentially means, "I am the world's epitome of perfection." This is how Pharaoh formulates the idea, but it exists – albeit in subtler form – in the mind of every person. Only when one frees himself from this way of thinking does the gateway to remorse open for him.

Thus, Pharaoh's experience exists in other people's experiences as well when, as a result of repenting for a certain act, they suddenly discover an entirely new way of thinking in which everything has a completely different significance. In such a case, the repentance is not limited to the matter that prompted it; rather, it broadens and has implications for the person's whole life.

### **Complete remorse**

Pharaoh's remorse, both in its scope and in its attempt to get at the roots of the sin, should teach us a lesson. Remorse is never a simple matter; even when a person expresses regret and wants to repent, there are liable to be basic problems with the remorse and with the implementation of the desired repentance. In this respect, Pharaoh's case is a good example of complete remorse.

One basic problem with remorse is the question of its sincerity. There is a well-known saying that "the wicked are full of regrets."<sup>7</sup> The simple meaning of this is that even a completely wicked person is not at peace with his sins, and he, too, has moments when he feels regret and wants to repent. Why, though, does this saying read, "full of regrets," in the plural? One explanation is that the wicked are full of many "regrets" because no matter how many times they have regret, it is never true regret. There is a humorous quote sometimes attributed to Mark Twain: "To cease smoking is the easiest thing I ever did. I ought to know because I've done it a thousand times." Similarly, the wicked are full of regrets. The wicked person has remorse, but he knows that he will revert to his evil ways, and that in another week or two he will again have



remorse over the same matter, but even stronger. Thus it turns out that his life is full of regrets. Between each instance of remorse, he reverts to the very behavior that caused the remorse in the first place.

The Talmud states that “if a person commits a sin and repeats it, it becomes to him as though it were permissible.”<sup>8</sup> Regarding repentance as well, there can be an equally dangerous predicament where someone is caught in a cycle of remorse and teshuva followed by a return to the sin, followed by remorse once again. When a person does teshuva the first time, it makes an impression. But when he does teshuva twice or five times for the same sin, teshuva becomes a meaning-less -procedure, one that can be repeated over and over again, while nothing actually changes.

Another problem with remorse is that sometimes a person is truly penitent and does teshuva from the bottom of his heart, but the teshuva is misplaced – he focuses on the wrong part of the transgression.

There is a hasidic story about a woman who came to a Rebbe to seek repentance for eating on Asara BeTevet, forgetting that it is a fast day. After listening to her talk about her transgression, the Rebbe began to tell her the story of a Jew who took over for a Priest. A farmer came to confess before him and told him that he stole a piece of rope. The Jew asked him under what circumstances he stole the rope. The farmer answered that the rope was tied to a cow, and since he stole the cow, the rope was stolen together with it. When the Jew then asked him what else happened, the farmer continued, recounting that the owner of the cow noticed the theft and tried to resist. When the Jew then asked how the farmer responded, he answered, “I killed him.” When the Jew heard this, he could no longer contain himself and cried, “You killed him!?” The Rebbe, too, shouted at the woman, “You killed someone?!” and the woman fainted in shock. It turned out that she had given birth to a child outside of wedlock, strangled him, and covered up the incident. This woman came to the Rebbe to seek repentance for having mistakenly eaten on Asara BeTevet, and ended up revealing her guilt in a far more egregious matter.

Though this anecdote is an extreme example, this is a problem that many people encounter in their lives. A person can work toward self-improvement and atonement, but if he does not get to the heart of the problem, he will think that it is sufficient to rectify only a specific point, while the essential problem still exists. In such a case, the benefit of repentance would be merely temporary and local.

A similar problem exists among those who undergo cancer operations. It is often simple for a surgeon to remove the cancerous growth itself, but it is far more complicated to determine whether that particular growth is a metastasis of another growth that still remains in the person’s body. If any growths remain, the treatment will not succeed.

It can be a great accomplishment for a person to admit, “I have sinned this time.” But there is a higher level, where a person’s soul searching moves him to such a degree that he declares, “G d is righteous, and I and my people are wicked.”<sup>9</sup> His remorse reaches back three hundred years, because he understands that his sin does not begin from the present moment, from the present phenomenon – he had to return to the root of the matter.

### **Penetrating to the roots**

The thoroughness of Pharaoh’s remorse can be found also in the Torah’s description of the process of confession and atonement in Leviticus. One of the central verses reads, “They will then confess their sins and the sins of their fathers.”<sup>9</sup> At first glance, it is difficult to understand why “the sins of their fathers” are relevant. Clearly, the sinner must confess his own sins, but why should he confess those of his fathers? This point is so essential to confession that it is even included in the confession formula of the Aseret Yemei Teshuva (Days of Awe) – “But we and our fathers have sinned.” Here, too, the same question arises: What do we want from “our fathers”? Why drag our fathers into a confession of our own sins?

The point is that when remorse is sincere, it penetrates to the roots of things, reaching one’s whole value system, in its full scope. When a person looks at himself, it is easy for him to reach the conclusion that on the whole, he is not a bad person, an outlook that eliminates the possibility of comprehensive remorse. Sometimes a person looks not at himself but at his father, rationalizing that since there are areas in which he is better than his father, it must be that he himself is sufficiently virtuous. The formula, “we and our fathers have sinned,” expresses the idea that sometimes a person must confess not only his own sins but also those of his father, and sometimes even those of his ancestors before that. When a person engages in comprehensive soul-searching, he should consider the possibility that his whole life has been full of bad decisions. He must not only evaluate his actions within the framework of his value system, but also evaluate that value system itself. When a person goes back to the very roots, he sees a completely different picture, in which the whole system can take on a different character. This is what Pharaoh understands when he says, “I and my people are wicked.”

It often does not occur to us to question the broader scheme of things. Sometimes a person feels something nagging at him, a sense that something is wrong in his life. But he cannot pinpoint what this trouble is, because he cannot look beyond what he sees in front of him. He does not even raise the question of whether the entire framework of his life might need to be overhauled.

Where does such an attitude spring from? When the big picture of a person's life, with its problems and deficiencies, is acceptable to him, true remorse is impossible. If a person presupposes that his current way of life is how things should be, then he can no longer have full remorse for anything, except for superficial, local problems.

This is not to say that it is unimportant to perfect even the minor details in one's life; indeed, there is a great deal of value in this. But if someone asks whether the point of the letter yud in his tefillin is perfectly precise when the text of the parchment itself has been erased, it is a sign that he does not see things in proper perspective.

In the story of the ten plagues, Pharaoh goes through a life-changing ordeal. He suddenly experiences thunder and lightning, the likes of which he has never experienced in his life. Strange things are falling from the heavens, and he is seized with terror. He begins to think, for the first time in his life, that perhaps he is not a G d. At that moment, an abyss opens wide before him, and he asks himself: What have I done with my whole life?

Only when basic conceptions like these are shattered, and everything suddenly seems different, does it become possible to start again from the beginning.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Ex. 9:12.
2. Ex. 1:22.
3. Ex. 9:27.
4. I Kings 21:27.
5. Ex. 1:22.
6. Ezek. 29:3.
7. See Tanya, chap. 11.
8. Yoma 86b.
9. Lev. 26:40.

\* Rabbi Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) (1937-2020), one of the leading rabbis of this century and author of many books, was best known for his monumental translation of and commentary on the Talmud. © Chabad 2021.  
[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/4992085/jewish/Pharaohs-Repentance.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/4992085/jewish/Pharaohs-Repentance.htm)

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### **Vaeira: Hot and Cold** An Insight from the Lubavitcher Rebbe \*

#### **I am now going to strike the water...and it will turn into blood (Exodus 7:17)**

Water is cold, whereas blood is warm. There are two types of coldness and two types of warmth: a person whose primary orientation in life is material will be cold to spiritual concerns and warm to material concerns; a person whose primary orientation is spiritual will be cold to material concerns and warm to spiritual concerns.

River water—particularly the water of the Nile—signifies the coldness of materiality toward spiritual concerns. As we have noted, the annual flooding of the Nile gave the Egyptians the impression that their sustenance was due simply to the regular, orderly functioning of nature, without any need of recourse to a supernatural G-d. Such an environment fostered indifference to the notion that there is a Divine force that surpasses and controls nature.

In contrast, rainwater signifies the coldness of spirituality toward material concerns. The Land of Israel's dependence upon rainwater was conducive to keeping its inhabitants aware of their dependence on G-d's good graces for their sustenance. This awareness of G-d bred a healthy indifference toward the facade of the laws of nature's stranglehold over life.

The very first of the ten plagues, the ten stages by which Egypt was subdued, was transforming the coldness of its water into the heat of blood. Allegorically, this signifies the transformation of cold indifference to Divinity into warm enthusiasm for it. This had to be the first step because indifference can quickly lead to a drastic decline in commitment. Once this was precluded, the path was open to additional, more specific stages through which G-d's reality could be impressed on Egypt's (and the world's) awareness.

A similar lesson applies to anyone striving to leave the slavery of Egypt—the tyranny of his or her material drives and bodily desires. Our first step in this process must be to replace our a priori cold indifference to all things Jewish and holy with warm enthusiasm for G-d, His Torah, and its commandments.

We should not delude ourselves into thinking that it is possible to remain aloof and neutral, indifferent to both spirituality and materiality. If we neglect our responsibility to cultivate an energetic and enthusiastic attitude toward the Torah and its commandments, we face the specter of a swift decline into the decadence of Egypt.

— From the Kehot Chumash\*

\* An excerpt from the Kehot Chumash, with an insight by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, z"l, of righteous memory.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
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## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### Overcoming Setbacks

At first, Moses' mission seemed to be successful. He had feared that the people would not believe in him, but God had given him signs to perform, and his brother Aaron to speak on his behalf. Moses "performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped." (Ex. 4:30-31)

But then things start to go wrong, and continue going wrong. Moses' first appearance before Pharaoh is disastrous. Pharaoh refuses to recognise God and he rejects Moses' request to let the people travel into the wilderness. Then he makes life worse for the Israelites. They must still make the same quota of bricks, but now they must also gather their own straw. The people turn against Moses and Aaron: "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Ex. 5:21)

Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh to renew their request. They perform a miraculous act – they turn a staff into a snake – but Pharaoh is unimpressed. His own magicians can do likewise. Next they bring the first of the 10 Plagues, but again Pharaoh is unmoved. He will not let the Israelites go. And so it goes on, nine times. Moses does everything in his power to make Pharaoh relent and finds that nothing makes a difference. The Israelites are still slaves.

We sense the pressure Moses is under. After his first setback at the end of last week's parsha, he had turned to God and bitterly asked: "Why, Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all." (Ex. 5:22-23)

In this week's parsha of Vaera, even when God reassures him that he will eventually succeed, he replies, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?" (Ex. 6:12).

There is an enduring message here. Leadership, even of the very highest order, is often marked by failure. The first Impressionists had to arrange their own art exhibition because their work was rejected by the established Paris salons. The first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of*

Spring caused a riot, with the audience booing throughout. Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime despite the fact that his brother, Theo, was an art dealer.

So it is with leaders. Lincoln faced countless setbacks during the Civil War. He was a deeply divisive figure, hated by many in his lifetime. Gandhi failed in his dream of uniting Muslims and Hindus together in a single nation. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison, accused of treason and regarded as a violent agitator. Winston Churchill was regarded as a spent force in politics by the 1930s, and even after his heroic leadership during the Second World War he was voted out of office at the first General Election once the war was over. Only in retrospect do heroes seem heroic and the many setbacks they faced reveal themselves as stepping-stones on the road to victory.

In our discussion of parshat Vayetse, we saw that in every field – high or low, sacred or secular – leaders are tested not by their successes but by their failures. It can sometimes be easy to succeed. The conditions may be favourable. The economic, political or personal climate is good. When there is an economic boom, most businesses flourish. In the first months after a general election, the successful leader carries with him or her the charisma of victory. In the first year, most marriages are happy. It takes no special skill to succeed in good times.

But then the climate changes. Eventually it always does. That is when many businesses, and politicians, and marriages fail. There are times when even the greatest people stumble. At such moments, character is tested. The great human beings are not those who never fail. They are those who survive failure, who keep on going, who refuse to be defeated, who never give up or give in. They keep trying. They learn from every mistake. They treat failure as a learning experience. And from every refusal to be defeated, they become stronger, wiser and more determined. That is the story of Moses' life in both parshat Shemot and parshat Vaera.

Jim Collins, one of the great writers on leadership, puts it well:

The signature of the truly great versus the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty, but the ability to come back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before... The path out of darkness begins with those exasperatingly persistent individuals who are constitutionally incapable of capitulation. It's one thing to suffer a staggering defeat... and entirely

another to give up on the values and aspirations that make the protracted struggle worthwhile. Failure is not so much a physical state as a state of mind; success is falling down, and getting up one more time, without end.[1]

Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner once wrote a powerful letter to a disciple who had become discouraged by his repeated failure to master Talmudic learning:

A failing many of us suffer is that when we focus on the high attainments of great people, we discuss how they are complete in this or that area, while omitting mention of the inner struggles that had previously raged within them. A listener would get the impression that these individuals sprang from the hand of their creator in a state of perfection... The result of this feeling is that when an ambitious young man of spirit and enthusiasm meets obstacles, falls and slumps, he imagines himself as unworthy of being "planted in the house of God" (Ps. 92:13)... Know, however, my dear friend, that your soul is rooted not in the tranquillity of the good inclination, but in the battle of the good inclination... The English expression, "Lose a battle and win the war," applies. Certainly you have stumbled and will stumble again, and in many battles you will fall lame. I promise you, though, that after those losing campaigns you will emerge from the war with laurels of victory on your head... The wisest of men said, "A righteous man falls seven times, but rises again." (Proverbs 24:16) Fools believe the intent of the verse is to teach us that the righteous man falls seven times and, despite this, he rises. But the knowledgeable are aware that the essence of the righteous man's rising again is because of his seven falls. [2]

Rabbi Hutner's point is that greatness cannot be achieved without failure. There are heights you cannot climb without first having fallen.

For many years, I kept on my desk a quote from Calvin Coolidge, sent by a friend who knew how easy it is to be discouraged. It said: "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

I would only add, "And seyata diShmaya, the

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help of Heaven.” God never loses faith in us, even if we sometimes lose faith in ourselves.

The supreme role model is Moses who, despite all the setbacks chronicled in last week’s parsha and this week’s, eventually became the man of whom it was said that he was “a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his energy unabated.” (Deut. 34:7)

Defeats, delays and disappointments hurt. They hurt even for Moses. So if there are times when we, too, feel discouraged and demoralized, it is important to remember that even the greatest people failed. What made them great is that they kept going. The road to success passes through many valleys of failure. There is no other way.

[1] Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In* (New York, Harper Collins, 2009), 123.

[2] Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, *Sefer Pachad Yitzchak: Iggerot u-Ketavim* (Gur Aryeh, 1981), no. 128, 217-18.

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### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

“But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Exodus 9:12) One of the more difficult theological problems raised in the book of Exodus is precisely this verse, in which the Bible declares that it was God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart to be impervious to the cries of his forced laborers.

To be sure, during the first five plagues, it was Pharaoh himself who was responsible for his stubborn cruelty, who hardened his own heart. Now that we have come to the sixth plague of boils, how can we blame the Egyptian monarch if it was God who prevented him from freeing his Hebrew slaves?!

Such conduct on the part of the Creator of the Universe goes against those very axiomatic standards by which the world and humanity first came into being. “And God said, Let us make a human being in our image and like our likeness...” (Gen. 1:26), to which Seforno comments that only the human being has untrammelled and independent freedom of moral choice: the “angels” act with knowledge and recognition, but are totally functional and devoid of volition, whereas God is volitional—He cannot, by definition, choose evil, as God is consummate goodness.

This Biblical commentary is therefore saying that the human being is created with the capacity to choose to do even that which God would not have wanted him to do—as we certainly see in the unfolding stories of the book of Genesis again and again (Gen. 6:6).

So how can it be that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, preventing him from hearkening to God, Moses and the Hebrews, preventing him from repentance? Our Biblical text iterates and reiterates God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, not only once but four more times, with

reference to the plague of hail (Ex. 10:1), the plague of locusts (10:20), the plague of darkness (10:27), and the plague of the death of the first-born (11:10). How can God hold Pharaoh responsible for a heinous and ongoing crime when it was He, God, who prevented Pharaoh from repenting?

Seforno, in a most creative interpretation, does not believe that God prevented Pharaoh from repenting: “Had Pharaoh wished to submit himself to the Divine Will, may He be blessed, and to return to Him in complete repentance, there would have been nothing to serve as a deterrent. Behold, when God may He be blessed, says, I shall harden the heart of Pharaoh, it merely means that (Pharaoh) will be strengthened by the suffering of the plagues, and not release the Hebrews because of his fear of the plagues....” (ad loc. 7:3)

Seforno is almost turning the verse on its head by insisting that, in hardening Pharaoh’s heart from “running scared” and freeing the Hebrews, He was only enhancing Pharaoh’s freedom to make moral decisions; God was removing the malaise and mayhem being wrought upon Egyptian society by the plagues from becoming the cardinal reason for his sending the Hebrews out, which would have made the decision not at all a matter of morality but rather an issue of political expediency.

On the basis of this commentary, the entire logic of the plagues becomes much clearer. During the second plague of frogs, Moses explains that the reason for the horrific discomfiture, the turn-around of the Nile from being a life-giving god of Egypt into becoming a macabre and ridiculous repository of blood and frogs is “in order that you may know that there is none like the Lord (YKVK) our God” (Ex. 8:6); and the fourth plague of swarms of insects is “in order that you know that I am the Lord (YKVK) in the midst of the land” (Ex. 8:18).

In the beginning of our Biblical portion of Va’Era, God’s opening words are: “I am the Lord YKVK; I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as Kel Shakkai, powerful God of omnipotence, but with My Name YKVK I did not make Myself known to them. Therefore say to the Israelites: I am YKVK; I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt...” (Ex 6:2,3,6).

What is in a Name? It is the most understandable partial definition of a being whose very essence insists that “he” will ultimately remain incomprehensible to mortal humans. The Hebrew letters of YKVK, in accordance with their vocalization, spell out the very “He will effectuate”; given the content, it means that He (God) will bring about redemption—freedom for the Israelites and ultimately freedom and redemption for all humanity. It is in the future tense because God acts in history (“I will be who I will be”) and it

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is open-ended, because the God of history acts in concert with Israel and the nations, and is thereby “limited” by their actions or lack thereof. Most important of all, the root noun HVH, as in ahavah, means love, as our Talmudic Sages understood when they defined this particular ineffable Name of God (the Tetragrammaton) as referring to the God of love and compassion (Hebrew-midat ha’rahamim, Ex: 34:6, Rashi ad loc.). And therefore the God who loves humanity will turn His back, as it were, upon those who exploit, enslave and murder innocent human beings.

This is the lesson that God wanted to teach Pharaoh, totalitarian ruler of the most powerful nation at that time. God, YKVK, the unique creator and owner of all of creation who loves His creation, will act in history and in the world to free all slaves and redeem all who are oppressed. Hence, it was crucial that God harden Pharaoh’s heart to free him from succumbing to pressure from the plagues; Pharaoh had to free the Israelites only because he recognized the ultimate authority of the one God whose universal laws of freedom must govern the world if there is to remain a world.

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### **The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

#### **“Work and Will”**

There was a time in my life when I was fascinated by the works of the great psychoanalytic thinkers. Chief among them, of course, was Sigmund Freud, whose attitude towards his Jewish origins piqued my curiosity.

Although Freud’s work has now fallen out of fashion, he unquestionably had some profound things to say about humanity. There is one remark of his that has remained with me over the years. He said, “Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.” He considered the ability to love and the ability to work the two criteria of mental health.

There was a lesser-known psychoanalyst, a disciple of Freud, whose writings also fascinated me. His name was Otto Rank, and he disagreed with his mentor in many ways. He left “love” out of the formula for the healthy personality. Instead, he inserted his concept of “the will.” For him, our ability to work productively and to express our will creatively were the cornerstones of our humanness.

Rank wrote entire volumes about the nature of man’s will, and of its importance. In simplified terms, the will is the directive intention by which we get things done in life. In his words, “It is a positive guiding organization of the self which utilizes creativity” to accomplish one’s objectives.

In a much more recent time in my life, I have come to ponder the nature of spirituality. I have become convinced that ability to engage

in meaningful work and the capacity to exercise one's will creatively are two essential components of spirituality.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Va'era (Exodus 6:2-9:35), we read about the first stages of the redemption of the Children of Israel from bondage in Egypt. We learn that freedom from slavery does not come easily. A measure of spiritual preparedness must first be achieved.

Were the Jewish people spiritually ready for redemption? When we read last week's parsha we were inclined to believe that they may very well have been ready. "Aaron repeated all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses... and the people were convinced... they bowed low in homage" (Exodus 4:30-31).

This week, however, we learn that that level of spiritual readiness was short lived. "But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, because their spirits were crushed [literally, 'out of shortness of breath'] and their bondage cruel [literally, 'out of difficult labor']" (Exodus 6:9).

Two factors stood in their way. "Their spirits were crushed." In Otto Rank's terms, their "will" was crippled. They could not dream, they could not plan, and they could not utilize their creativity. In no way could they "get things done" in their lives. A person without will is a person paralyzed. Such a person cannot transition from slavery to freedom.

Their "bondage was cruel." Freud was correct that productive work was one of the "cornerstones of humanness". Meaningful work nourishes the soul. But the work that the Jews were forced to do in Egypt was far from meaningful. Besides being physically tortuous, it was purposeless. Our Sages teach us that the labor that Egypt forced the Jews to do was not only unbearably strenuous; it was belittling and demeaning. Such work is poison for the soul, and a poisoned soul is not ready for redemption.

Pharaoh knew all too well how to thwart the initiative of his slaves, how to assure that they would take no effective steps to attain their freedom. "Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises" (Exodus 5:9).

Denied the access to their creative will and deprived of the rewards of meaningful work, the Jews were spiritually handicapped. They could not hear the words spoken to them by Moses—not because their hearing was impaired, but because they were spiritually deaf. Moses had his work cut out for him, and only with Divine assistance could he hope to advance his people to the point where they would be ready to hear the clarion call of incipient redemption.

There is a lesson here for all of us. We too are deaf to God's redemptive messages. Our spiritual condition is woefully inadequate to prepare us to hear higher callings.

Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto puts it so well in the second chapter of his *Mesillat Yescharim*: "This is, in fact, one of the cunning artifices of the evil inclination, who always imposes upon men such strenuous tasks that they have no time left to note whither they are drifting. He knows that, if they were to pay the least attention to their conduct, they would at once reconsider what they were doing... This ingenuity is somewhat like that of Pharaoh... for Pharaoh's purpose was not only to prevent the Israelites from having any leisure to make plans or take counsel against him, but to deprive them also of the very opportunity to reflect."

Nowadays, it is as if each of us has an "inner Pharaoh" whose malicious intent it is to entrap us into a lifestyle where we not only overwork, but where our work is unfulfilling and, therefore, spiritually unrewarding. This "inner Pharaoh" is also shrewd enough to know how to stunt that creative human will that is such an essential component of spirituality.

Mankind's struggle against "crushed spirits" and "cruel burdens" is a historical struggle, one that is certainly relevant in our times. There are obstacles to finding and defining a work-life that is meaningful. There are impediments to our ability to exercise our creative wills. But we must use whatever tools are at our disposal to lift those cruel burdens and free our crushed spirits. Those tools include introspective reflection, contemplation of pertinent religious texts, conversation with like-minded friends, and dialogue with experienced spiritual mentors.

There are many practical lessons to be garnered from the story of the Exodus. Passover is, of course, the occasion on the calendar for reflecting upon that story. But at this wintry time of year, with the springtime Passover festival still long months away, a careful reading of the weekly Torah portion will serve to motivate us to strive to learn those lessons.

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### **Dvar Torah** **Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

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What's the connection between the Waldorf Astoria and the 10 plagues? In the 1890s there were two hotels right alongside each other in Manhattan. The Waldorf and the Astoria. The Waldorf was owned by William Waldorf and the Astoria by his aunt, Caroline Astor. The two were engaged in a bitter family feud and in fact, the hotels existed alongside each other in order to compete with each other. But then William Waldorf's manager suggested to him one day "Why don't you make up with your aunt? Can you imagine what kind of a hotel we could have if we break down the walls in

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between and join the two together? We could have the best hotel in the world. William was convinced, he then approached his aunt and they made up. Together they created the Waldorf Astoria hotel and the rest, as they say, is history.

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky makes a connection between the historical background of the Waldorf Astoria and the plague of hail as is described in Parshat Va'era. The hail that fell upon the Egyptians then was not hail as we know it today. The Torah tells us "V'aish mitlakachat b'toch habarad" "there was fire flashing from within the hail and therefore that hail was a combination of fire and water. Now we know that fire can melt ice, and water can douse flames, however, when brought together and fused into one fire and water produced hail which was a mighty, powerful force. Indeed this is something Pharaoh king of Egypt noticed, it was after this plague that he called Moshe and he said "Hashem Ha'Tzadick, v'ani v'ami harashaim" "this time God is right, I and my people are wrong". Pharaoh was obviously deeply impressed with this phenomenon of the hail to be convinced that actually instead of being pitted against his adversary, the Israelites, he momentarily saw the value of making peace with them. Unfortunately his heart quickly hardened once again, but at that particular moment the hail made an impact.

From the plague of hail, we therefore, learn a hugely important lesson which applies to each and every one of us. Instead of engaging in unnecessary feuds within our families and our communities – nationally and globally – let's combine forces. If the Waldorf and the Astoria can do it, we too can produce a power for good within our lives to the benefit of all of humanity.

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### **OTS Dvar Torah**

#### **Va'era in the Age of Corona: Who are the True Heroes of the Exodus?**

#### **Dr. Tammy Jacobowitz**

Parshat Va'era begins with God's second call to Moshe. Echoing the scene at the burning bush (Shmot 3), God again declares to Moshe His plan to redeem the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. Earlier, the mission was framed as a rescue mission: the people were suffering unjustly, and they needed to be saved. These terms would have easily resonated with Moshe, the emerging social justice warrior of chapter 3. But here, in chapter 6, God adds an additional explanation, thus unveiling the fullness of the mission. These people, suffering in Egypt, descend from Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov, with whom God established a covenant. Redeeming them now from Egypt would fulfill that long-ago promise to the forefathers.

While the covenant and the redemptive act fundamentally belong to God, Moshe is nevertheless invited into a partnership with God. Much like the covenantal partnership

extended to Avraham, God chooses to act in history through human agency; He does not go at it alone. In the biblical account, Moshe plays a central role in negotiating the safe passage of the Jewish people out of slavery. Beginning with his early pleas to Pharaoh, Moshe's presence is felt in nearly every moment of the narrative. He does not only take them out of Egypt; he shapes them as they emerge as a nation. He is their teacher, guide, arbiter, parent. Moreover, he bridges the gaping chasm between God and His people; Moshe navigates a critical space that holds all the pieces together.

It is puzzling, then, that the Haggadah downplays Moshe's role almost entirely, while declaring in unequivocal terms that God is the sole redeemer from Egypt.

“And the Lord took us out of Egypt” – not through an angel and not through a seraph and not through a messenger, but [directly by] the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, as it is stated (Exodus 12:12); “And I will pass through the Land of Egypt on that night and I will smite every firstborn in the Land of Egypt, from men to animals; and with all the gods of Egypt, I will make judgments, I am the Lord.”

On the night of the seder, the narrative arc bends directly towards our praise for God's might and compassion. And there are good reasons for focusing ourselves as such on Pesach. But on all other nights – or shabbatot – when we read the story in Exodus, we confront multiple heroes responsible for the Exodus. In addition to Moshe, Shifra, Puah, Bat-Pharaoh, Miriam, Yochved, and Aharon each play a central role in helping to resist Pharaoh's death narrative. Each of them, in their own way, embraces the possibility of a way out of the darkness of Egypt. Working in tandem, and all on their own, each of these named heroes shines a light forward that steadily yields to the dramatic exodus, where it was finally clear to all: God is the Savior of the Jewish people.

All these heroic, extraordinary individuals are evident in the text. But just beneath the surface of the text, lurks a hidden narrative of everyday people, engaging in seemingly mundane activities, whose individual and collective behavior is responsible for the redemption. I am referring here to the “righteous women” of the Exodus, about whom the Midrash tells many inspiring stories. These are the women behind the multiple births recounted in Exodus 1:7:

But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

In the Midrash Tanhuma's account: Our sages said: They bore twins. Others say: Six were formed in a single womb. Others say: twelve were born from one womb. And still others contend six hundred thousand.

Commenting on verse 7, the midrash offers a series of escalating suggestions as to the number of babies in each birth. The first three opinions hover somewhere within the range of plausibility: two, six, 12. Each position correlates to the number of verbs (six) or to the plural form of the verb, and serves to explain, implicitly, how soon enough Pharaoh will look at the Israelites and suddenly see a grotesque swarm, overtaking his landscape.

But the final position — 600,000 — signals a departure from the plausible to an entirely different realm. That each woman had 600,000 babies in each birth is not only physically impossible, it does not even make mathematical sense. 600,000, of course, is the number of all the males who left Egypt to constitute the Israelite nation! Instead, this midrashic suggestion must be read in another way. The midrash signals that with each pregnancy, every Israelite woman bore the potential for the entire nation. In other words, the commitment to conceive, birth, and raise even a single child, despite the all-consuming darkness of slavery, reflected enough bravery, insight, and heroism to be held responsible for the entirety of the nation.

When all is said and done, and we can finally emerge from the darkness of 2020, who will our heroes be? How will we tell the story of this exodus? This story we are living through, of darkness to light, of locked-in, closed-in “meitzarim” months, working our way to openness, to freedom.. how will we tell it? Who will be our heroes? Who will we hold up as responsible for the darkest parts, as well as the redemptive parts? We will surely tell stories about the doctors and nurses, the frontline workers, the human hands and hearts that pushed to the limits in order to safeguard our lives. We will also, I think, eventually know and laud the names of the scientists who defied the odds and created our life-saving vaccines. But will we forget the individual sacrifices, the anguish, the heartache, the bravery? Can we hold all our stories?

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### **Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org**

**Rabbi Daniel Stein**

#### **The Cup of Hope**

According to the Talmud Yerushalmi (Pesachim 10:1), the four cups of wine that we drink at the Pesach seder, correspond to the four expressions of redemption including, "I will take you out", "I will deliver you", "I will redeem you", and "I will acquire you" (Shemos 6:6-7). This is to extenuate that our redemption from Mitzrayim took place in phases and entailed four distinct aspects, namely, our geographical removal from the land of Mitzrayim, our physical freedom from the bonds of slavery, our emergence as an emotionally liberated nation, and our spiritual designation as the chosen people. However, some rishonim cite an alternative version of the Gemara (Pesachim 118a) which records the existence of a fifth cup of wine. The Raavad in his commentary to the Rif (Pesachim 26b) as

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well as the Daas Zekeinim m'Baalei Ha'Tosfos (Shemos 12:8) claim that this additional cup reflects a fifth manifestation of the redemption, "and I will bring you into the land" (Shemos 6:8), referring to our development as a sovereign state in the Land of Israel.

Since the rishonim debate the legitimacy of this text of the Gemara, and the existence of a fifth cup altogether, as well as the permissibility of drinking extraneous amounts of wine at the end of the Pesach seder, the fifth cup is traditionally only poured but not imbibed. The Vilna Gaon asserts that this compromise is the basis for our practice regarding the cup of Eliyahu, which is ceremoniously filled towards the conclusion of the seder, but is left untouched, for it is Eliyahu who will resolve all Talmudic disputes including the validity or necessity of a fifth cup of wine. However, perhaps the fifth cup is ascribed to Eliyahu, not only because he alone will resolve its halachically controversial status, but also because it is associated with the culmination of our ultimate redemption and the resettlement of the Land of Israel in the times of Moshiach which will be heralded and preceded by the return of Eliyahu hanavi.

Indeed, Rabbi Meir Horowitz of Dzikov (Imrei Noam) notes that the numerical value of the fifth term of deliverance, "and I will bring you" - "ve'heveisi" - is four hundred and twenty four, and equal to that of "Moshiach ben David", which further underscores that this expression is connected with the coming of Moshiach and the future redemption. For this reason, the fifth cup is prepared but not consumed, because despite our confidence in the final geulah, we can only rejoice and toast its arrival after it has materialized. This is supported by Rav Chaim Soloveitchik's (quoted in Emek Bracha) interpretation of the pasuk, "But I have trusted in Your mercy, my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation, I will sing to the Lord for He has dealt bountifully with me" (Tehillim 13:6), where he explains that while we can preemptively "rejoice in God's salvation" since it is inevitable, it is only appropriate to celebrate externally and sing to the Lord, or raise our glasses in triumph, after the geulah has actually occurred.

Nevertheless, even though the fifth cup of wine cannot presently be enjoyed, it must be prepared, in order to demonstrate our persistent yearning for the advent of Moshiach. The fifth cup serves as a symbol of our eternal hope and constant anticipation of the final geulah, which enables us to withstand what can appear to be an interminable galus. Yaakov Avinu summoned his children at the end of his life and attempted to disclose to them the precise date of the end of days. His plan was thwarted by Hashem, but his intentions were clear, as the ensuing pasuk states, "For your salvation I hope Hashem" (Breishis 49:18). Yaakov understood that in order to persevere throughout the long journey of galus

Mitzrayim, Klal Yisrael would need to be able to hope and foresee a brighter future for themselves. In fact, the Kozhnutzer Maggid (Avodas Yisrael) notes that from the start of Parshas Mikeitz until this pasuk in Parshas Vayechi the name of Havaya - which reflects the merciful aspect of Hashem's providence - is entirely absent. This is because Parshas Mikeitz marked the beginning of a prolonged period of galus, which ostensibly eclipsed any trace of mercy or compassion. However, through the penetrating power of hope it is possible to pierce through even heaviest veil of darkness, and to begin to discern the infinite mercy of Hashem.

It seems that galus is only manageable when there is at least a glimmer of hope for redemption. For this reason, none of the cities of refuge, where an accidental murderer could be exiled and protected, were operational prior to the final conquest of Eretz Yisrael. The Meshech Chochmah (Masei) explains that this is because the detention of the accidental murder can only be alleviated and dismissed by the death of the Kohen Gadol, and Hashem had already pledged that Ahron's successor, Eliezer Hakohen, would live to oversee the entire process of conquering and dividing Eretz Yisrael. Therefore, during this transitional stage of Jewish history, any accidental murderer sentenced to galus would have had no potential path towards parole or liberation. This kind of bleak existence is so harsh and excruciating that it could not be justified as a punishment for any crime committed inadvertently.

For this reason, at the very same moment that Hashem informed Avraham that, "your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years" (Breishis 14:13), Hashem also foretold that, "the nation that they will serve, I will judge, and afterwards they will go forth with great possessions" (Breishis 14:14). Why was it necessary to foreshadow to the manner of their emancipation before the period of slavery had even begun? Rav Yerucham Levovitz (Daas Torah) suggests that this relationship underscores that our ability to endure the difficulties of galus is directly dependent on the prospect and promise of salvation. Therefore, the Rambam in his commentary on the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:1) demands that we not only believe in the coming of Moshiach, but that we also resolve to "wait for him every day." It is this kind of optimistic mindset, our hope for deliverance and rescue, that will propel us to the time of our true redemption when we can rejoice fully and enjoy all five cups of wine at the seder, with the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash be'meheirah be'yameinu!

## Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

### The Flavor of Freedom

Moreover, I have heard the groan of the Children of Israel whom Egypt enslaves and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the Children of Israel, "I am HASHEM and I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I shall take you to Me for a people and I shall be a G-d to you; and you shall know that I am HASHEM your G-d, who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt. I shall bring you to the land about which I raised My hand to give to Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov; and I shall give it to you as a heritage-I am HASHEM!" So Moshe spoke according to the Children of Israel; but they did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and difficult service. (Shemos 6:5-9)

This is truly astonishing! HASHEM, the Creator of the Universe is ready to intercede on behalf of the Jewish People and take them out of the slavery of Egypt and it's the Jewish People themselves who are not yet ready for this enormous paradigm shift.

I have often wondered why Moshe seems to be acting deceptively by asking from Pharaoh to let the Jewish People go away for a three day holiday. Even Pharaoh was not fooled by the request. Otherwise why did he bargain each time to hold back some part of the population?!

The goal of the Ten Plagues was twofold. They were certainly intended to coerce Pharaoh and all of Egypt to loosen the grip of slavery they had on People of Israel to the point where they would surrender and let them go.

However, they served another great and necessary purpose. The Jewish People needed to be educated as well. They were not ready to understand that life could be experienced in any other way than as a slave. Unfortunately, this slave mentality is what they had grown to accept as their myopic reality.

On Erev Rosh HaShana many years ago I made haste to head to the local Mikvah-ritual bath- to beat the rush. There was only one other person there and he was just entering the "pool". He shouted repeatedly, "OHHHH! The fires of Gehinom (Hell)", as he inched into the extra hot waters of the Mikvah. A little scared but still determined I prepared for my entry and found out that he had been right. It was hot but there was no turning back. I crept continually forward until I was almost entirely immersed and lo and behold there was the other fellow, his head bobbing like a beach ball. Steam rising all around and he had this serene grimace on his face. I couldn't resist. I said to him, "We get used to Gehinom, don't we!"

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The Chazon Ish writes in Emunah v' Bitachon, "When a person with a sensitive soul finds some quiet time to meditate on existence, away from the pulls of desire, astonishment overtakes him. The sight of the heavens above and the earth below fills him with emotion and wonder. The world suddenly strikes him as a mystery, a marvelous enigma...and the desire to fathom this mystery consumes his soul. He is willing to brave fire and water to gain understanding. He wonders, "What is the point of this life, however pleasant it may be, if its purpose eludes him?"

I remember how impossibly hard it was to get people to come to a Seminar and to separate from the daily routine for three days. Yet after the seminar it was hard for the assembly to go back to regular life again. What they had experienced was so true and real and profoundly pleasant that parting was a sweet sorrow. Once you play chess you don't want to play checkers anymore. The Jewish People were not ready to accept the notion of leaving for more than three days. Only after such a glorious experience of three days of serving HASHEM could they ever begin to imagine wanting even more of the flavor of freedom.

## OU Dvar Torah

### Left with No Choice: Understanding the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וְאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה... וְלֹא יִשְׁמַע אֶלְכֶם פֶּרְעֹה וְנִתְתִּי אֶת יְדֵי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת צְבָאתִי אֶת עַמִּי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים

I shall harden Pharaoh's heart... Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I shall put My hand upon Egypt, and I shall take out My legions – My people, the Bnei Yisrael – from the land of Egypt, with great judgments.[1]

### Introduction: When "Yes" was Not a Option

One of the major questions pertaining to our redemption and Exodus from Egypt relates to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. As our verses state, Hashem removed Pharaoh's capacity to agree to let the Jewish people go, in response to which he was visited with Hashem's retribution in the form of the ten plagues. This presents us with a basic problem: If Pharaoh was rendered unable to say "yes", how could he then be punished for saying "no"?

Various classic answers have been provided for this question by the early commentators:

The Rambam states[2] that, in subjugating and persecuting the Jewish people as he did, Pharaoh had sinned to such a heinous extent that his punishment itself entailed having his free-will removed from him and then being punished for saying no.

The Ramban,[3] based on Midrash, explains that Pharaoh hardened his own heart during the first five plagues, in response to which Hashem hardened his heart regarding the second five.[4]



### The Maaseh Hashem: A Natural Process

A fascinating and illuminating approach to the entire concept of Hashem hardening Pharaoh's heart is found in the writings of the Maaseh Hashem.[5] Rather than understanding that Hashem reached into Pharaoh's decision-making apparatus and turned off the switch, leaving him fundamentally incapable of deciding to let the Jewish people go, the Maaseh Hashem explains this idea in a much more natural way.

Often, people are in situations where they may say that they 'have no choice' but to pursue a certain course of action, when in reality what they mean is that the personality traits that govern them leave them no choice. Someone who has been insulted may feel that he is 'forced' to leave the room. Of course he can choose to stay if he wants, but his pride will not allow him to do so. Similarly, someone who subscribes to the notion that he is all-knowing or all-powerful may feel 'compelled' to cover up a mistake or a weakness. In truth, he is fully capable of admitting his error, but the way in which he wishes to see – or project – himself effectively bars this option from him.

The Maaseh Hashem explains that it was in this sense that Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart.

### First Encounter: Stepping Back toward Redemption

It is quite striking to note that the first meeting between Moshe and Pharaoh did not go very well at all. In fact, as a result of that meeting, things only got worse for the Jewish people, and Pharaoh actually increased their workload. Indeed, following that first episode, Moshe returns to Hashem and complains on the Jewish people's behalf: Not only had the redemption not begun moving forward, things had actually moved backward!

To this, Hashem responds:

עתה תראה אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לְפָרְעֹה כִּי בְיַד תִּזְקָהוּ שְׁלָחַם  
 “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he will send them out.” [6]

Let us ask: How has Hashem's response addressed Moshe's complaint? Moshe asks why things went badly so far, and Hashem responded that from this point on things will go well! Seemingly, the question still persists: why did the first meeting have to go badly?

The answer is, Hashem is telling Moshe that now that things have gone badly in the first meeting, that is what has set the scene for Pharaoh sending the Jewish people out “with a strong hand”. According to numerous commentators, the term ‘strong hand’ refers to the idea of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Why is Hashem mentioning this idea to Moshe at this stage? Because it is this effect that has achieved through the first meeting going badly for Moshe, and well for Pharaoh! This initial victory allowed Pharaoh to conclude that he

was indeed stronger than whatever force Moshe represented – a conclusion which he was egotistically only too happy to embrace. Once Pharaoh had adopted this view, it was then possible to smite him with any number of plagues with confidence that he would not relent, for to do so would be for him to admit that his initial assessment of the situation had been mistaken. Pharaoh's ego would never allow him to make such an admission, and thus was his heart hardened.

### Viewing Compassion as Weakness

This idea will also explain to us something else that happened during that first encounter, namely, Moshe's threat in Hashem's name that He will smite Pharaoh's firstborn.[7] As we know, the smiting of the firstborn was the last of the ten plagues. That being the case, we may wonder why Moshe is warning Pharaoh about it before even the first plague has begun!

This, too, was part of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Being the tenth plague, the smiting of the firstborn was clearly the most severe blow to Pharaoh and to Egypt; and indeed, Hashem brought nine relatively lesser plagues first. The reason why Pharaoh was warned about the tenth plague first was that, being the most severe, it was also the plague whose foretelling was most likely to cause Pharaoh to consider letting the Jewish people go. Indeed, had Pharaoh responded to this warning, he could have thereby avoided all of the plagues.

In Pharaoh's mindset, however, the exact opposite was true. For if he was capable of inflicting such a harsh blow to his enemy, he would not settle for a milder one. In his lexicon, there was only one possible reason why one would not inflict the harsher blow – because he was unable to do so! The alternative suggestion, i.e. that Hashem was fully capable of killing his firstborn but was refraining from doing so as an act of compassion, sadly did not register with Pharaoh. And thus he weathered the first nine plagues clinging on to his conviction that Moshe's Deity was not as powerful as He seemed to be; after all, had He not threatened to kill Pharaoh's firstborn and yet had not done so?[8]

Here, too, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart took the form of presenting him with a statement which the corrupt forces that governed him were then able to develop into a narrative that effectively guaranteed he would not relent.

### Second Encounter: An Indecisive Victory

In a similar vein, the next meeting between Moshe and Pharaoh sees Pharaoh demanding a sign to demonstrate the veracity of Moshe's claim. In response to this, Moshe tells Aharon to throw his staff on the ground, where it turns into a snake. Pharaoh then tells his magicians to do likewise, and their staffs also turn into snakes, at which point Aharon's staff devours

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those of all the magicians.[9] This encounter, too, requires some reflection. For while it ultimately ended in victory for Moshe and Aharon and defeat for the Egyptians, nonetheless, there was a stage early on where they seemed well capable of matching Aharon's sign. As such, the victory somehow does not seem to have been quite as decisive as we might have hoped. To phrase it in more contemporary terms, Moshe and Aharon would appear to have won this encounter on points, while we might have rather been expecting a knockout.

Here we see a progression in the process of hardening Pharaoh's heart by allowing him to form the initial impression that his magicians' powers were equal to those of Aharon. After all, didn't they, too, all turn their staffs into snakes? In manipulating his ego-driven tendency to reach conclusions instantly and then stick with them even as they unraveled before his eyes, Hashem was furthering the hardening of his heart, allowing him to conclude that he was winning even as he was losing! And so, while Pharaoh's wise men all left that meeting in a hurry to go acquire new magic staffs, Pharaoh went home to celebrate another round of victory.

Indeed, the commentators point out that this process continued in each of the ten plagues. Even as his country was being systematically devastated in front of him, there existed some form of anomaly in each plague, whereby the way in which the plague arrived or was removed did not match up entirely with the way this was predicted. Although these discrepancies did nothing to mitigate against the essential impact of the plague even slightly, nonetheless, they allowed Pharaoh to cling to his assessment that Moshe's God was not as powerful as He claimed to be. Each plague contained, as it were, a “loophole for delusion,” such that Pharaoh's heart was effectively hardened on an ongoing basis during the plagues by the plagues themselves!

### From Egypt to the Red Sea

In truth, it is possible to see the Maaseh Hashem's more “natural” approach to our topic in the verses that describe the final chapter of the Exodus – the splitting of the Red Sea. In the prelude to that episode, Hashem instructs Moshe regarding drawing Pharaoh out from Egypt to the sea:

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁבוּ וַיִּחַגְּרוּ לִבְנֵי פִי הַחַיִּית... וְאָמַר  
 פָּרְעֹה לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִבְכִּים הֵם בְּאֵרֶץ סִגְר עָלֵיהֶם הַמַּדְבָּר.  
 וַחֲזַקְתִּי אֶת לֵב פָּרְעֹה וַיִּרְדֵּף אַחֲרָיהֶם וַיִּאֲבָדָה בְּפָרְעֹה וּבְכָל  
 חֵילוֹ

Speak to the Bnei Yisrael and let them turn back and encamp before Pi Hachiros... And Pharaoh will say of the Bnei Yisrael, “They are confused in the land, the wilderness has locked them in.” I will strengthen the heart of Pharaoh and he will pursue them, and I will be glorified through Pharaoh and his entire army.[10]

Let us ask: Through what means, practically, was Pharaoh drawn out? The first verse implies that it was done through the Jewish people acting as if they were lost, thereby emboldening Pharaoh to chase after them. However, the second verse states that Hashem would “strengthen” Pharaoh’s heart so that he would pursue them. If so, then why was the ruse necessary?

Here we see quite clearly that these two ideas were not distinct from each other; rather, they worked together. The “strengthening” and “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart took the form of his acting in accordance with his interpretation of events, as presented to him by Hashem.

#### Later Examples – Sichon

It is most interesting to note a similar discussion of the concept of ‘hardening someone’s heart,’ as relates to a lesser known case of this phenomenon later on in the Chumash.

When the Jewish people were approaching the land of Israel at the end of their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, Sichon, the king of the Emorites went out to wage war against them.[11] The Midrash points out that this was an act of great folly on his part, for his cities were heavily fortified, and in leaving that protected setting he exposed himself to enormous harm. Why did he leave his cities? In referring to this event later on in the Torah, the verse states:

כִּי הִקְשָׁה ה' אֶל־לִבּוֹ אֶת רֹחוֹ וְאִמְצָה לְבָבוֹ לְמַעַן תִּתּוּן  
בְּיָדָךְ

“For Hashem hardened his spirit, and fortified his heart, in order to deliver him into your hands.”[12]

Once again we encounter the idea of Hashem hardening someone’s heart and forcing them to make a decision which they otherwise would not have made. How was this done? The Sefer Ha’ikarim[13] explains that the background to this event is described earlier on, when the Jewish people send a delegation to the king of Edom and ask for safe passage through his territory into the land of Israel. The king of Edom refuses this request, and then threatens the Jewish people with military action should they try and pass through his land. In response to this threat, the Jewish people back away move towards the territory of Sichon with the same request.[14] Sichon views the evasive action of the Jews as a sure sign of weakness, for he reasons that if they were capable of conquering the army of Edom, surely they would have done so! Having thus concluded that the Jews are not as strong as Edom, Sichon, who is stronger than Edom, is convinced that he will be able to go out and destroy them. Thus, he leaves his fortified cities, and rushes headlong to his defeat.

Here, too, we see the idea of Hashem ‘hardening someone’s heart’ through a presentation of events which is then interpreted

by their corrupt perception, leading them to make decisions which are ultimately their undoing.

#### Conclusion: Acting on Ego and Pleading Egomania

In light of this approach, let us now return to the question with which we opened this discussion. We will appreciate that understanding the idea of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in this way will have major implications when we come to consider whether he was ultimately responsible and culpable for his decisions. At every point in the proceedings he was essentially capable of choosing the right path, but his corrupt character traits prevented him from doing so. A person cannot claim immunity from the consequences of his wrongful actions simply because they are product of ego and stubbornness. With the fundamental capacity to say yes intact, Pharaoh was thus held accountable and culpable for each of the times he said no.

[1] Shemos 7:3-4.

[2] Hilchos Teshuva 6:3.

[3] Commentary to Shemos 7:3.

[4] See also Commentary of Seforno to Shemos ibid.

[5] Shemos chap. 11

[6] Ibid. 6:1

[7] Shemos 4:23

[8] R’ Yaakov Ettlinger, Minchas Ani, Parshas Tazria, quoting his father

[9] Shemos 7:8-13.

[10] Shemos 14:2-4.

[11] See Bamidbar 21:21-24

[12] Devarim 2:30

[13] Sefer Ha’ikarim Sec 4 chap. 25

[14] See Bamidbar 20:17-21



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### **Overcoming Setbacks**

#### **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ztz"l**

At first, Moses' mission seemed to be successful. He had feared that the people would not believe in him, but God had given him signs to perform, and his brother Aaron to speak on his behalf. Moses "performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped." (Ex. 4:30-31)

But then things start to go wrong, and continue going wrong. Moses' first appearance before Pharaoh is disastrous. Pharaoh refuses to recognize God and he rejects Moses' request to let the people travel into the wilderness. Then he makes life worse for the Israelites. They must still make the same quota of bricks, but now they must also gather their own straw. The people turn against Moses and Aaron: "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Ex. 5:21)

Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh to renew their request. They perform a miraculous act – they turn a staff into a snake – but Pharaoh is unimpressed. His own magicians can do likewise. Next they bring the first of the 10 Plagues, but again Pharaoh is unmoved. He will not let the Israelites go. And so it goes on, nine times. Moses does everything in his power to make Pharaoh relent and finds that nothing makes a difference. The Israelites are still slaves.

We sense the pressure Moses is under. After his first setback at the end of last week's parsha, he had turned to God and bitterly asked: "Why, Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all." (Ex. 5:22-23)

In this week's parsha of Vaera, even when God reassures him that he will eventually succeed, he replies, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?" (Ex. 6:12).

There is an enduring message here. Leadership, even of the very highest

order, is often marked by failure. The first Impressionists had to arrange their own art exhibition because their work was rejected by the established Paris salons. The first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* caused a riot, with the audience booing throughout. Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime despite the fact that his brother, Theo, was an art dealer.

So it is with leaders. Lincoln faced countless setbacks during the Civil War. He was a deeply divisive figure, hated by many in his lifetime. Gandhi failed in his dream of uniting Muslims and Hindus together in a single nation. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison, accused of treason and regarded as a violent agitator. Winston Churchill was regarded as a spent force in politics by the 1930s, and even after his heroic leadership during the Second World War he was voted out of office at the first General Election once the war was over. Only in retrospect do heroes seem heroic and the many setbacks they faced reveal themselves as stepping-stones on the road to victory.

In our discussion of parshat Vayetse, we saw that in every field – high or low, sacred or secular – leaders are tested not by their successes but by their failures. It can sometimes be easy to succeed. The conditions may be favourable. The economic, political or personal climate is good. When there is an economic boom, most businesses flourish. In the first months after a general election, the successful leader carries with him or her the charisma of victory. In the first year, most marriages are happy. It takes no special skill to succeed in good times.

But then the climate changes. Eventually it always does. That is when many businesses, and politicians, and marriages fail. There are times when even the greatest people stumble. At such moments, character is tested. The great human beings are not those who never fail. They are those who survive failure, who keep on going, who refuse to be defeated, who never give up or give in. They keep trying. They learn from every mistake. They treat failure as a learning experience. And from every refusal to be defeated, they become stronger, wiser and more determined. That is the story of Moses' life in both parshat Shemot and parshat Vaera.

Jim Collins, one of the great writers on leadership, puts it well:

The signature of the truly great versus the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty, but the ability to come back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before ...The path out of darkness begins with those exasperatingly persistent individuals who are constitutionally incapable of capitulation. It's one thing to suffer a staggering defeat...and entirely another to give up on the values and aspirations that make the protracted struggle worthwhile. Failure is not so much a physical state as a state of mind; success is falling down, and getting up one more time, without end.[1]

Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner once wrote a powerful letter to a disciple who had become discouraged by his repeated failure to master Talmudic learning:

A failing many of us suffer is that when we focus on the high attainments of great people, we discuss how they are complete in this or that area, while omitting mention of the inner struggles that had previously raged within them. A listener would get the impression that these individuals sprang from the hand of their creator in a state of perfection... The result of this feeling is that when an ambitious young man of spirit and enthusiasm meets obstacles, falls and slumps, he imagines himself as unworthy of being "planted in the house of God" (Ps. 92:13)... Know, however, my dear friend, that your soul is rooted not in the tranquillity of the good inclination, but in the battle of the good inclination...The English expression, "Lose a battle and win the war," applies. Certainly you have stumbled and will stumble again, and in many battles you will fall lame. I promise you, though, that after those losing campaigns you will emerge from the war with laurels of victory on your head...The wisest of men said, "A righteous man falls seven times, but rises again." (Proverbs 24:16) Fools believe the intent of the verse is to teach us that the righteous man falls seven times and, despite this, he rises. But the knowledgeable are aware that the essence of the righteous man's rising again is because of his seven falls.[2]

Rabbi Hutner's point is that greatness cannot be achieved without failure. There are heights you cannot climb without first having fallen.

For many years, I kept on my desk a quote from Calvin Coolidge, sent by a friend who knew how easy it is to be discouraged. It said:

“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

I would only add, “And seyata diShmaya, the help of Heaven.” God never loses faith in us, even if we sometimes lose faith in ourselves.

The supreme role model is Moses who, despite all the setbacks chronicled in last week’s parsha and this week’s, eventually became the man of whom it was said that he was “a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his energy unabated.” (Deut. 34:7)

Defeats, delays and disappointments hurt. They hurt even for Moses. So if there are times when we, too, feel discouraged and demoralised, it is important to remember that even the greatest people failed. What made them great is that they kept going. The road to success passes through many valleys of failure. There is no other way. [1] Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In* (New York, Harper Collins, 2009), 123.

[2] Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, *Sefer Pachad Yitzchak: Iggerot u-Ketavim* (Gur Aryeh, 1981), no. 128, 217-18.

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date: Jan 14, 2021

**Rav Frand**

**What Was the Kal V'Chomer?**

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1146 – Polling Place/AA Meeting in a Bais Avodah Zara – A Problem? Good Shabbos!

What Was the Kal V'Chomer?

Parshas Shemos ends with Moshe’s complaint to the Almighty: “Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he made matters worse for Your nation, and You have not saved Your people.” [Shemos 5:23]. In the pesukim at the beginning of Parshas Vayera, Hashem appears to Moshe and tells him to again speak to the Nation of Israel and tell them that they are on the verge of redemption. However, when Moshe does speak to Bnei Yisrael “they do not listen to him because of shortness of spirit and hard work” [Shemos 6:9].

At that point, Hashem tells Moshe to go back and speak to Pharaoh once more. Moshe responds with a Kal V'Chomer argument: “Behold the Children of Israel did not listen to me (even though this would be “good news” for them); how can I expect Pharaoh to listen to me (when this will be “bad news” for him) and I am of uncircumcised lips.” [Shemos 6:12]. Rashi notes that this is one of ten places where we find a Kal v'Chomer argument in the Torah.

Many commentaries point out that this Kal V'Chomer apparently has flawed logic: The pasuk explicitly states why Klal Yisrael did not listen to Moshe Rabbeinu. They did not listen because of “kotzer ruach v'Avodah kashe” (because of their depression and oppression). Pharaoh was a free man sitting in his palace. He might well be in a state of mind to pay attention to what Moshe was going to tell him!

This is a famous question that everyone asks. The sefer Ohr HaYashar answers very logically that the Kal V'Chomer is a legitimate Kal V'Chomer. Why? The truth of the matter is that in Parshas Shemos, when Moshe Rabbeinu came to Klal Yisrael, they did believe him [Shemos 4:31]. The Ohr HaYashar interprets the Kal V'Chomer Moshe argued as follows: “If the people who at one time believed me and were willing to hear my message – but now after my promises did not materialize and their situation has deteriorated, they no longer believe me, then certainly Pharaoh who never believed me in the first place, and on the contrary, was responsible for why it got worse – he certainly is not going to believe me now!

I saw a second interpretation in the sefer *Darash Mordechai* from Rav Mordechai Druk: He rejects the “pircha” (the question posed to destroy the logical argument). The “pircha” was – the Jews didn’t believe Moshe because they were oppressed slaves, but Pharaoh was a free man – he might believe Moshe. Rav Druk observes that Pharaoh was not a free man. He was almost as oppressed as the people were. Why is that? Pharaoh was oppressed because he was forced to live up to the image that he created about himself that he was a deity!

Chazal say that Pharaoh had a major problem in trying to portray himself as a god. Gods do not need to go to the bathroom and that is one problem Pharaoh could not solve. What did he do? Once a day, in the early morning, before anyone else got up, he went down to the Nile and took care of his bodily needs. Imagine that – he could only go once a day and he had to ensure that nobody else saw him! Pharaoh was as oppressed as Klal Yisrael. This is not being facetious. He was so obsessed with his self-image and the image that he needed to maintain – that he literally drove himself to self-torture. He had to watch his every move! Pharaoh too was a slave. He was a slave to his own visions of grandeur. So, if Bnei Yisrael could not listen to Moshe because of their status as slaves – all the more so Pharaoh, who suffered a more intense force of slavery, would not be able to listen to Moshe!

**Prayer Helps**

After Pharaoh begged Moshe to remove the plague of Frogs from Egypt, “Moshe cried out (Va'Yitz'ak Moshe) to Hashem concerning the Frogs He sent to Pharaoh” [Shemos 8:8]. The Torah does not use this expression of Va'Yitz'ak by the other plagues. The Torah says that Moshe prayed (Va'Ye'etar) when requesting the cessation of the other makkos, but not this expression of “crying out” (tz'a'kah).

The Zohar explains that tz'a'kah is a more dramatic or more panicked form of prayer. Va'Yitz'ak shows an urgency. What was Moshe Rabbeinu’s urgency in stopping the plague of Frogs? Why not let Pharaoh suffer a little longer?

In our minds, Hitler y'mach shmo (may his name be obliterated) is the personification of evil to Klal Yisrael. That is because the Nazi’s atrocities are relatively fresh in our memories. Pharaoh was as big a Rasha as Hitler, if not worse. He bathed in Jewish blood. He took Jewish babies and squashed them into the walls of the pyramids. It was no less horrible than the Holocaust. So – Pharaoh is feeling the pressure of the Tzefardim – what is the problem? Why didn’t Moshe take his time with a long leisurely Shmoneh Esrei when he prayed for cessation of the plague?

The Rebbe, Reb Bunim of Psische, asks this question. He answers that Moshe Rabbeinu was trying to prove another point. The whole purpose of the plagues was to demonstrate that there is a Ribono shel Olam that rules the world, and that He is the Master of the universe. He controls the world.

However, Moshe wanted to demonstrate here that there is another “Power” in the world as well, and that is the Power of Prayer (Koach haTefillah). Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to show that despite the fact that the Almighty wanted Pharaoh to suffer, there is something that – as it were – could stop the Will of the Ribono shel Olam. This is as much a fundamental of our faith as the fact that there is a Ribono shel Olam and that He runs the world and cares about what happens in the world. Another fundamental belief of our faith is the idea that prayer helps.

By employing the most intense form of Tefila – “Va'Yitz'ak,” Moshe wanted to show the amazing power of prayer. I can stop a steaming locomotive in its tracks. Let the plague of Frogs end immediately!

**A Novel Interpretation of an Ambiguous Pasuk**

By the plague of Arov (Mixed Animals), the pasuk says “Behold if you do not send out My people I will incite against you, your servants, your people, and your houses the mixture of wild beasts; and the houses of Egypt will be filled with the mixture of wild animals and even the ground upon which they are” [Shemos 8:17]. Egypt was invaded by an army of wild animals. But what is the pashut pshat (simple reading) of the above cited pasuk?

The Vilna Gaon offers an incredible explanation. The Bartenura on the

Mishneh in Kilayim [8:5] mentions that there is a type of animal (referred to as Adnei haSadeh in the Mishna), which obviously no longer exist today, that had an umbilical cord which was attached to the ground. If someone cut the umbilical cord of this animal, the animal would die. The pasuk reads as follows: All the wild animals that existed in the world at that time attacked Egypt, including this unique animal. But how would this animal come – since it is attached to the ground in some far away location? The pasuk therefore states that this animal came – together with the land upon which it resided! This is a fantastic interpretation.

However, I would like to share an interpretation which is a little closer to the simple reading of the pasuk! Those who have an appreciation of Hebrew grammar should enjoy this interpretation immensely.

The sefer HaKesav v'Ha'Kabbalah – like the Malbim and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch – analyzes the linguistics of a pasuk. He asks – what is the simple interpretation of this pasuk? He says that the phrase “the ground upon which they are” refers to the land upon which the houses that will be inundated with wild animals stand. But he then adds that it could refer to something else entirely. He says the word “v'Gam” (which literally means ‘and also’) could be a form of the word Gamam. (There are certain words in Hebrew that have double letters in the second and third position of the shresh (root) of the word. For instance, the word Balal (Beis Lamed Lamed) can also be written with the last letter dropped – as Bal (Beis Lamed). Such words are called “kefulim” (doubled words). There is a word in the Hebrew language called Gamam (Gimel Mem Mem), which means to cut up or to dissect. He cites places in Mishnayos and in the Book of Doniel where we have such a usage.

The HaKesav v'Ha'Kabbalah explains the expression “v'Gam ha'Adamah asher ale-ha” (and also the land upon which it was), not as “and also” (v'Gam) but as Gamam – meaning these wild animals would rip up the land of Egypt to the extent that it would no longer be possible to plant there. According to this explanation, the word v'Gam is not a conjunction – and also – but rather it is a verb. V'Gam – as if to say v'Gamam es ha'Adamah asher ale-ha.

So, the HaKesav v'Ha'Kabbalah writes that part of the plague was that the wild animals would dig up and make holes in the ground to the extent that it would no longer be fit for agriculture.

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Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD [dhoffman@torah.org](mailto:dhoffman@torah.org) This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. ...A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail [tapes@yadyechiel.org](mailto:tapes@yadyechiel.org) or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2020 by Torah.org. Do you have a question or comment? Feel free to contact us on our website. Join the Jewish Learning Revolution! Torah.org: The Judaism Site brings this and a host of other classes to you every week. Visit <http://torah.org> to get your own free copy of this mailing or subscribe to the series of your choice. Need to change or stop your subscription? Please visit our subscription center, <http://torah.org/subscribe/> -- see the links on that page. Permission is granted to redistribute, but please give proper attribution and copyright to the author and Torah.org. Both the author and Torah.org reserve certain rights. Email [copyrights@torah.org](mailto:copyrights@torah.org) for full information. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/> [learn@torah.org](mailto:learn@torah.org) (410) 602-1350

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**Ha-Rav SHLOMO AVINER** answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here's a sample: Wedding Hall which also Davening with Earplugs

Q: Is it permissible to Daven the Shemoneh Esrei with earplugs in order to block out people who are Davening Shemoneh Esrei loudly?

A: Yes.

Ahavat Yisrael

Q: I have a friend who is filled with hatred of Yisrael, and says all the time: Resha'im (evil ones) and Erev Rav. What should I suggest for him to learn?

A: Mesilat Yesharim, especially Chapter 11 and the end of Chapter 19.

Yehoshua as Military Chief of Staff

Q: How was it that Yehoshua did not know what the noise was in the camp during the incident of the Golden Calf, and he thought it was the sound of war (Shemot 32:17-18)? After all, he was the military Chief of Staff!

A: Quite simply, he was far away and it was hard to hear. But the Meshech Chochma explains that it was Moshe Rabbenu's role to stop Am Yisrael from the sin of the Golden Calf and not Yehoshua's. Yehoshua therefore heard incorrectly. This is similar to the Gemara in Taanit (21a) about Rabbi Yochanan and Ilfa who left the Yeshiva to work because they had no money, and only Rabbi Yochanan heard a Divine voice to return to the Yeshiva. Since it was only meant for Rabbi Yochanan, Ilfa did not hear it.

Deceitful Declaration at Hotel

Q: We are ordering a hotel room, and although we have 4 children, we only need 3 beds for them. Is it permissible to say that we are only coming with 3 children?

A: Ask the hotel directly.

Paintball with the Rav

Q: May students play paintball with the Rav of their class?

A: No. It's disrespectful.

Prehistoric Man

Q: Is it true that prehistoric man existed before Adam?

A: Maran Ha-Rav Kook writes an affirmative response based on the Zohar.

Greeting a Non-Jew on Shabbat

Q: Is it permissible to greet a Non-Jew with Shabbat Shalom?

A: It's irrelevant. Shalom is sufficient.

Traveling Outside of Israel

Q: When my wife and I got married we were not religious and I promised to travel overseas with her. When we became religious we learned that leaving Israel is forbidden. Now I have work abroad but I don't agree to travel for leisure. My wife claims that my work takes priority and this causes a rift between us. Is there any loophole to permit sightseeing?

A: Your wife may accompany you to help you somewhat with your work. You won't be alone and you may also sightsee for a few days.

Neighbor's air-conditioner

Q: My neighbor regularly places the drainpipe of his air-conditioner in my garden. I approached him on a number of occasions, to no avail. What should I do?

A: Summon him to a Din Torah (Rabbinical court). If he refuses to appear, consult the municipal authorities.

Serving Non-Kosher Food

Q: May I serve non-Kosher food and beverages for people to taste at a supermarket?

A: Absolutely not.

Special thank you to Orly Tzion for editing the Ateret Yerushalayim Parashah Sheet

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**Pearls of Wisdom**

**Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser**

**It's All A Matter Of Will**

By Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser - 2 Shevat 5781 – January 14, 2021

“Moshe spoke before Hashem saying: Bnei Yisrael have not listened to me, how will Pharaoh listen to me? And I have closed lips” (Shemos 6:12).

Rashi states that this argument is one of 10 kal vachomers in the Torah. R' Yitzchak of Volozhin says this kal vachomer needs clarification, though. After all, the Torah clearly states that the Jewish people didn't listen to Moshe “because of shortness of breath and hard labor.” Pharaoh meanwhile lived in a palace, calmly ensconced on his throne. So it doesn't follow that because Bnei Yisrael didn't listen to Moshe, Pharaoh wouldn't either.

R' Yitzchok Volozhin offers the following explanation of this kal vachomer in his Sefer Peh Kadosh: If an individual with a severe speech impediment approached a prisoner who has been incarcerated for a very long time and offered to work on his release, the prisoner would patiently listen to him as he struggled to form his words because the person represents hope and freedom.

However, if that same individual tried to speak to the warden about the prisoner, the warden would have no patience for him at all. He would dismiss him and suggest he send someone else to speak on the prisoner's behalf.

Moshe Rabbeinu was arguing that if the Jewish people wouldn't listen to him even though he was offering them release from harsh servitude, why would Pharaoh listen to him?

It's interesting to note that sometimes an individual has difficulty hearing, but when he is interested or sympathetic, he suddenly hears very well. Similarly, a person may think he is unable to accomplish a certain task, yet when he is strongly motivated, he suddenly finds himself able to harness the stamina and determination necessary to complete the undertaking. A similar situation: Someone may have an overwhelming fear of the dark, and refuse to enter a dark tunnel, for example. But if he is offered \$1,000 to go in for a minute, he will overcome his phobia.

All three individuals can do what was previously thought unachievable because their will and resolve unearth hidden strengths and embolden them to succeed.

This lesson brings to mind a depiction of the great Steipler Gaon by HaGaon Rav Eliezer Turk. Growing up in Hornesteipel, the Steipler suffered serious inflammations of the ear from the harsh cold weather. As the years passed, he began to lose his hearing. Petitioners who came to the great gaon would have to write their requests on a piece of paper, and he would respond to them in a loud voice.

Yet, curiously, if a talmid chacham came to the gaon to converse divrei Torah with him, there was no need for written communication. The Steipler would listen attentively and speak as if he could hear perfectly.

How is this possible? Since he was especially passionate about Torah, he exerted every effort to focus his heart, mind, and powers to listen.

Similarly, it is told of the Brisker Rav that when he was elderly, he was often distracted when people would engage in idle chatter. He would even doze off sometimes. But when they conversed in divrei Torah, he was alert and participated fully in the discussion.

Rav Yerachmiel Boyer related that when an ophthalmologist came to the home of HaGaon Rav Shach, the rosh yeshiva of Ponovezh, to check his vision, he took out the Sefer Ketzos HaChoshen (by R' Aryeh Leib Heller) and asked him to read from it. He was astounded when Rav Shach began to read flawlessly and enthusiastically, without a moment's hesitation.

He was sure Rav Shach was reciting it from memory because he knew that the rosh yeshiva required much stronger lenses than what he currently had. The ophthalmologist then took out the Sefer Shev Shmaitza (also by R' Heller) and Rav Shach once again faultlessly read the lines. However, when the doctor took out a secular book, it was immediately obvious that the rosh yeshiva needed stronger lenses.

Rav Nosson Wachtfogel takes this concept a step further in commenting on the medrash in Vayikra Rabbah which states: If a person is meritorious – i.e., he is a tzaddik – he is told, “You preceded the creation of the world,” and if he is not – i.e., he is a rasha – he is told, “Even the lowly mosquito preceded you.” Rav Wachtfogel notes that there are many degrees of achievement between the two extremes of a tzaddik and a rasha. Why is reference only made to these two?

Rav Wachtfogel explains that the medrash is referring to one's spiritual aspirations in life. One either desires and yearns to achieve an ever loftier spiritual level – or the antithesis. And one has to be tenacious and mobilize his energies to succeed in his endeavors.

פרשת וארא

Qassem Soleimani and the Ten Plagues

**Simon Wolf**

As we discussed last week, Parshat Shmot deals with the development of the leadership of the nascent nation of Yisrael. It also lays the foundation of God's plan for the Jews and His expectations of their leaders. This week's parsha continues the “building of a nation” by establishing God's credentials and is a forceful response to Paraoh's query and doubt (5,2), “who is God (יְקוֹק) that I should listen to his voice to send out the Jews; I do not know God (יְקוֹק) and I will not send out the Israelites.”

The mission or purpose of the plagues is to establish God's unequivocal and irrefutable power and control over the world. In order to understand the plagues, one must first define what would demonstrate the “power” that God is trying to display. In the past, people would define super-powers or powerful countries by the fire power they could bring to bear in the battlefield. This approach culminates in WWII where the warring sides would bomb each other into submission. While some of the attacks were targeted, much of the war involved flattening whole cities and resulted in tremendous “collateral” damage in civilian casualties. In order to avoid a prolonged and costly land invasion of Japan, this reaches its climax with the American nuclear bombing of Japan which took a huge human toll, but finally forces the Japanese into submission. With the rise of the nuclear age and the nuclear arms race, the super-powers slowly began to realize that nuclear weapons are a means of deterrence, but not a vehicle for offensive or even defensive waging of war. This was only exacerbated by the advent of asymmetric warfare which led to a new definition of power. Power then became defined not only by raw strength, but by the ability and the knowledge of one to carry out precise and targeted attacks. This was on full display with the recent targeted elimination of Qassem Soleimani. In this week's shiur, we will attempt to show that the ten plagues were an evolving and developing lesson in demonstrating God's tremendous power, from the raw destruction unleashed by God on Egypt to the precision and knowledge demonstrated in the execution of the plagues that finally convert Paraoh and his people and the Jews into believers in God (יְקוֹק).

The initial plague of Dam (Blood) is a broad strike at the Nile River, the key to Egypt's sustenance, the heart of Egypt's economic success and the focal point of much of its religious worship. It is the initial salvo in God's establishing his credentials by attacking and “shaming” the Egyptian's god. The plague leaves a trail of dead fish and rotting in the Nile (7,21), but is little more than an inconvenience for the Egyptians (7,24). In addition, the sorcerers' ability to replicate the plague only serves to further neuter the plagues potency (7,22). It lures Paraoh and his people into thinking that they are dealing with a great magician, but not a transcendental all powerful God.

The plague is the baseline from which we will slowly and progressively see God's power and control unveiled as we move from plague to plague.

The plague of Tzfardeah (Frogs) is not much different than Dam in that the sorcerers are able to also replicate this plague (8,3). The plague unleashes an unbridled and uncontrolled frog infestation. It is slightly more potent than the plague of Dam since it creates a situation that is uncomfortable enough to precipitate Paraoh's requesting of Moshe to remove the plague (8,4). At this point, we get our first glimpse at God's unveiling of his precision and power when Moshe offers Paraoh the choice of when exactly to end the plague (8,5-6) and declares that upon the cessation of the plague, the frogs will only be found in the Nile (8,7). Paraoh takes the bait and asks that the frogs be removed the next day (8,6). Moshe immediately prays to God and God acquiesces to Moshe's plea that He fulfill the wish of Paraoh that the plague subside on the subsequent day.

The plague of Kinim (Lice) begins the process of demonstrating God's unique abilities when the sorcerers are forced to admit to Paraoh that for the first time they are unable to replicate this plague. This leads them to the conclusion that the plague must be “a finger of God” (8,15). There is still a long way to go in convincing Paraoh and his followers of God's absolute dominion. Although some progress has been made, the sorcerers downplay and limit their acknowledgement of God by declaring the plague to be only a

finger of God and not a hand of God (Ramban) or the result of a higher power (יְקוּם, not אֱלֹהִים) that is not necessarily acting for the benefit of the Jews (Ibn Ezra).

The plague of Arov (Swarms of Animals – Rashi, Wolves – Rashbam, Smaller Animals – Ibn Ezra HaKatzar, Snakes and the like that emerge from the ground – Seforno, Gnats - Koren) takes a clear step-up in the precision with which it is carried out. For the first time (8,18) God declares that the land of Goshen, the dwelling place of the Jews will be free of the upcoming plague. This development not only sheds light on the plague of Arov, but possibly also on the preceding plagues as well. According to the Ramban, the reason God needed to specify this distinction by Arov was because the previous plagues were stationary (do not naturally spread), therefore it was not surprising that they were not found in Goshen, whereas the nature of the plague of Arov was to spread and move (Rashbam), therefore it was unique that it did not reach the land of Goshen. One could also suggest that the reason for the declared separation by Arov is either because the previous plagues were also found in Goshen (Malbim) or because the earlier plagues were not dangerous or life-threatening and, therefore, there was no reason to spare the land of Goshen or maybe even the Jews. Be that as it may, as opposed to the previous plagues, it is clear here that God is demonstrating his capabilities to not only bring punishing plagues, but to control and manage the extent of those plagues. Not only is there a powerful God (8,6), but He is also actively engaged in the world – ki ani Hashem b'kerev ha'aretz (8,18).

The plague of Dever (Pestilence) seems to follow the same pattern as Arov when God declares (9,4) that once again He will distinguish between the Jews and the Egyptians with the regards to the devastating impact of the Dever. If one looks closely, they will note that there is a nuanced difference in the nature of the distinction drawn by the two plagues. By Arov, the land of Goshen is indiscriminately spared from the plague, irrespective as to whether the inhabitant is an Egyptian or a Jew (see 8,18 and Malbim there). On the other hand, by Dever, the distinction is between the Jewish and Egyptian owned flocks, irrespective of their location (9,4). That means Jewish flocks in Egypt were spared and Egyptian flocks in Goshen were stricken by the plague. Once again, this demonstrates God's even finer control over nature and His ability to direct its impact on particular targets. The Egyptians are clearly impressed with this additional demonstration of power, because the Torah not only tells us that not a single Jewish animal died, but emphasizes that Paraoh specifically sent to check as to whether any Jewish animals had died in the plague (9,6-7).

The plague of Shechin (Boils and Blisters) continues the pattern of the previous two plagues. Only here instead of the distinction being between the land of Egypt and the land of Goshen or the animals of the Egyptians and the Jews, it now also distinguishes between the Jews and the Egyptians themselves. The "airborne" plague (9,8) miraculously only affects the Egyptians and their animals and not the Jews and their animals.

The plague of Barad (Hail) continues the pattern of drawing distinction between the land of Egypt and the land of Goshen (9,26), but here the task is all the more difficult. Each one of the plagues of Arov, Dever, Shechin and Barad are successively harder to control. Incrementally, it becomes harder in each plague to rationalize as to why the land of Goshen or the Jews should be spared the impact of the plague. There are no state lines or boundaries when it comes to weather or precipitation from the sky (Ramban) and there is no reason Goshen should have been spared the impact of the Barad unless God was controlling the situation. In addition, God's ability to manipulate nature is on full display in this plague since this was no ordinary Barad. The Torah tells us (9,24) that there was fire inside the hail and that miraculously against their nature the fire and water were able to coexist in their mission to carry out God's will.

The next two plagues increasingly continue to demonstrate God's power by exhibiting his ability to exert control even over items that seem completely uncontrollable. The plague of Arbeh (Locust) is not only exceptional in the swiftness by which it is brought upon Egypt (10,13), the intensity of the plague (10,14-15), the utter destruction that it wrought (10,15) and the reaction of Paraoh (10,16), but also in the way that the plague is stopped.

Anyone who has ever experienced a locust plague knows that even when the plague subsides, there is a large trail of dead locusts left in every location upon which the locust have visited their destruction. In this instance, the Torah tells us (10,19) that with the same expediency that the plague was brought upon Egypt, it was reversed and that not a single locust was left in the land of Egypt. The trail of the locust's devastating destruction was complete (10,15), but amazingly, lo nishar Arbeh echad, there was not a single trace of their presence (10,19).

The plague of Choshech (Darkness) takes this to the next step where God controls a completely intangible item. The Torah describes the darkness as being so absolute and pervasive that no one saw their fellow man for three days (10, 22-23). Whether it was simply the absence of daylight (Ibn Ezra) or a tangible darkness (Rashi, Ramban), it should have affected everyone in the vicinity. Yet, the Jews had light in their dwellings (10,23) and moreover even the more textually based commentators (Rashbam) add that even a Jew found in an Egyptians dwelling had light. In this penultimate plague, God successfully demonstrates His tremendous power and fine control over even the most amorphous and intangible of creations. At this point, much to Paraoh's chagrin, the establishing of God's credentials have been so convincing that Moshe, His representative, is now held in very high regard in Egypt (11,3). Though, it will still take one more plague to finally and irrefutably demonstrate who the true God is.

Of course, the ultimate demonstration and pinnacle of God's power is found in the final of the ten plagues. It is the climax of the progression of the plagues. The plague of Makat Bechorot (Killing of the First Born) is incredible not only in God's unleashing of death upon the Egyptians while sparing the Jews, but in His ability to kill only the eldest born child in each Egyptian family. No human being could be that precise, discerning or knowledgeable to carry out such a pinpoint attack. It is precisely this plague of death which finally convinces Paraoh and his people of the true God and causes them to accede to God's demand that the Jews be let out of Egypt to worship Him.

As an addendum, it is worthwhile to note that the midrashei chazal serve to reinforce the thesis we have established here, by superimposing it on all the plagues. For instance, the midrash (Shmot Rabbah Parsha 9) describes how when a Jew and an Egyptian shared the same water, when the Jew drank from the jug it was water while when the Egyptian drank from the jug it turned to blood. While in the Torah, the plague of Dam does not indicate any such distinction, Chazal are taking the realized conclusion from the culmination of the plagues, the demonstration of God's power and precision, and superimposing it on all the plagues. This serves to reinforce and emphasize the main purpose and theme of the plagues in every individual plague.

Shabbat Shalom

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<https://www.torahweb.org/parsha/breishis/mikeitz.html>

**Rabbi Hershel Schachter**

### **The Proper Approach to Analysis**

The Gemarah distinguishes between the Greek language and the Greek philosophy. The Greek language was considered very eloquent and, based on a possuk in Chumash, the chachomim permitted a sefer Torah to be written in Greek. However, the chachomim frowned upon chochma Yevonis. The Gemarah has a comment that Olam Hazeh is compared to night time. The Mesilas Yesharim explains this Gemarah by pointing out that in the dark of the night people can make two typed of mistakes. Sometimes they can see a human being from a distance and think mistakenly that it is a lamppost; and sometimes they can see a lamppost from a distance and think that it is a human being. Similarly in this world, it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between right and wrong. Sometimes we will be facing a mitzvah and think that it is an aveira and sometimes the reverse. Dovid Ha'melech says in Tehillim that the words of the Torah are compared to a candle and a torch in that they give illumination. The Midrash explains that when one begins to learn, the Torah only illuminates like a candle but the more one

learns, the gates of learning open up before him, one thing leads to another, until all of the gates will open up and the Torah will illuminate like a torch. Knowledge is compared to a light that illuminates the darkness. We daven to Hashem every day v'hoer eininu b'sorosecha, i.e. that we should succeed in Torah learning to illuminate our lives. When the possuk says in Parshas Bereishis that there was darkness all over the world, the Midrash has a comment that this is referring to the Greek philosophy. The Gemarah has a famous statement that there is much chochma to be found amongst all of the nations of the world but not Torah. Torah means knowledge that guides us to know the difference between right and wrong, between mitzvah and aveira.

It is said over in the name of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik that in addition to the thirteen principles that guide us in deriving halochos by reading in between the lines in the chumash, there is a fourteenth middah, namely sevara (logical analysis). However, it is also recorded in the name of Rav Caim Soloveitchik that he instructed his sons that they should not dare to suggest a sevara in learning before they complete all of Talmud Bavli with Rashi. Each discipline has its own self-contained logic. One cannot impose outside sevaras onto the Gemarah. The sevaras have to flow from within the sugya.

The Gemarah tells us that Avraham Avinu volunteered to observe all of the mitzvos on his own even though he was never commanded to do so,. The midrash elaborates on this idea and says that Avraham Avinu was able to understand on his own, intuitively, what the mitzvos were. Where did this intuition come from? It is traditionally understood based on the midrashim in Parshas Bereishis which state that when Hashem created the world He looked into the Torah first and created the world accordingly. So in a certain sense, the Torah was the blueprint of the world, and therefore if one looks at the world he should be able to figure out what the blueprint was.

However, when looking at the world one has to take the correct approach to understanding it. The Greek philosophers did not believe in experimentation, since they felt that manual labor is only for slaves and free men should always be involved in thinking only. Instead of collecting the data from experimentation, they would philosophize about everything, even physical phenomena. But one cannot impose outside sevaras on science, and therefore this approach led them to incorrect understandings.

It is well known that Rav Chaim Soloveitchik developed a new analytic approach to Gemarah study. It is well known that in order to answer many apparent contradictions in the Gemarah Rav Chaim would explain that the two Gemarahs that seem to be contradictory are dealing with two different halochos. Many students of Gemarah today imitate this style of Rav Chaim even when there are no contradictory passages in the Gemarah and they always will be splitting hairs in distinguishing between two dinim that seem to be identical. The Malbim in his commentary in Parshas Miketz points out that Pharaoh had two different dreams and all of his advisors and scholars were explaining to him that the two dreams were "tzvei dinim" and contained two unrelated messages about the future. Yosef came and explained to Pharaoh that even though they were two different dreams, they actually comprised one big dream with one overall interpretation. Logical sevaras are certainly valuable but they all have to flow from within the sugya and not to be imposed from without.

More divrei Torah from Rabbi Schachter

More divrei Torah on Parshas Mikeitz

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*Shema Yisrael Torah Network*

*Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Vaeira*

פרשת וארא השפ"א

ולא שמעו אל משה מקצר רוח ומעבודה קשה

**But they didn't listen to Moshe from impatience of spirit and from hard labor. (6:9)**

One would think that, if someone were to appear at the domicile of a down-trodden slave to inform him that the end of his bondage is near and he would soon be a free man, his immediate reaction would be joy – overwhelming joy. Instead, when Moshe *Rabbeinu* informed *Klal Yisrael* that Pharaoh would no longer be their Master, they seemed impatient and not really interested in hearing his message of liberation. The Torah explains that they were victims of *kotzer ruach*, which *Sforno* interprets as: *l'hisbonein*, to comprehend, think it over; in short, they were plagued with an inability to process Moshe's message. They were unable to believe that the end was near, and they would soon be leaving for the Promised Land. Thus, *Sforno* explains, unlike Avraham *Avinu* whose *emunah*, faith, in Hashem was impeccable, they just could not get it together. As a result, they did not enter the Land. In place of them, their children, who were raised on a steady diet of *emunah* and *bitachon*, trust in Hashem, believed in Hashem, and entered the Land.

What is the meaning of *kotzer ruach*, and why was this "affliction" so overpowering that it caused the members of that generation to ignore Moshe's wonderful news and continue with business as usual, as if nothing had changed? *Kli Yakar* explains: *Neshimassan ketzarah k'ish mevuhal*, "Their breathing was short, like a person who is anxious, terrified, unable to think properly. Furthermore, Moshe posited that the nation had no interest in leaving Egypt. Indeed, if the people did not indicate their desire to leave, why should Pharaoh extend himself? What prevented the nation from thinking properly; processing their predicament; having a strong desire to leave their misery?"

Denial. Refusing to acknowledge that something is wrong is a way of coping with adversity of all shapes and forms. Initially, short-term denial gives one time to adjust, to think, to accept, to prepare a coping mechanism. Long-term denial is dangerous. It does not allow one to acknowledge that he/she is confronting a difficult situation, thus downplaying the potentially devastating consequences. One can have a medical problem that requires a doctor's examination to diagnose the problem, severity and plan of treatment. When one denies the existence of the problem in the hope that it will vanish, he deprives himself of the appropriate action that might alleviate or cure the problem, until it is too late.

*Klal Yisrael* was having a difficult time accepting that they had plunged from honored status to wretched slaves. They entered Egypt as Yosef's family, and now Pharaoh no longer remembered Yosef. This was a difficult reality to accept. Their short-term denial became long-term, until they accepted this as their way of life. When Moshe came and informed them that Hashem would liberate them, their response was: "Why do we need liberation? We are not slaves."

This form of denial has been plaguing us throughout history. From those who refused to leave Egypt (and succumbed during the plague of darkness) because they denied that they were slaves, to the most recent denials of anti-Semitism (it just does not exist), we have allowed denial to assuage our consciousness, believing that if we say that we have no problem, it will go away. The consequence of denial can be devastating. If a person has an illness which he ignores, he will eventually succumb to it. If he acknowledges the illness and battles it head on, he has hope for survival. Likewise, with the difficulties that present themselves throughout our lives – both personal and national. They are messages from Hashem, messages to which He wants us to respond. By ignoring them, the portent of the message will not go away. If we want to survive, we must listen, digest and respond to the message.

A well-known story relates the reaction of the *Klausenberger Rebbe* to the reading of the *Tochachah*, Rebuke. It was *Parshas Ki Savo*, and the custom is to read the ninety-eight maledictions quietly and quickly because we do not dwell on curses. We dwell on blessings. The entire future of *Klal Yisrael* is foretold in this *parsha*. Sadly, not all of it brings joy to our hearts. These curses represent punishments which we would receive for distancing ourselves from Hashem.

It was shortly after the *Rebbe* arrived in America, broken in body, but not in spirit, a survivor of the Nazi's diabolical plan to murder European Jewry.



That *Shabbos*, the *Rebbe* was listening to the *baal korei*, Torah reader, follow the custom of reading the *Tochachah* in a quiet, somber tone, when he banged on the lectern and called out, “Louder!”

The *baal korei* raised his voice a few decibels, but it was not enough to satisfy the *Rebbe*, who once again called out, “Louder, even louder! Read it the way you read any other *parsha*.” The *baal korei* followed the *Rebbe*’s instructions and read the *Tochachah* in the same tenor as he read the rest of the *parsha*. After he concluded, he asked the *Rebbe* why he had insisted on him reading in his usual loud tone.

“Let me explain to you why, in past generations, the *Tochachah* was read in a low tone. To the people of those generations, these curses were distant, unimaginable, mere words which they wanted to run through quickly, without dwelling on them. Our generation has sadly lived through the curses. We experienced firsthand what no other generation experienced. We are entitled to read the *Tochachah* out loud.”

The *Rebbe* did not live in denial. He affirmed what he had experienced. We neither run nor hide from the curses, regardless of their message. We acknowledge, accept and take responsibility upon ourselves to make the necessary changes demanded of us. Denial is equivalent to lacking faith.

**יעשו כן חרטומי מצרים בלטיהם**

**The necromancers of Egypt did the same by means of their incantations. (7:22)**

Pharaoh did not heed Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s warning. Hashem instructed Moshe to have Aharon strike the Nile and stretch out his hand to bring the plague of *dam*, blood, all over the land. The reaction of Pharaoh and his magicians defies comprehension: they also demonstrated the magical ability to transform the water into blood. Is this sane? Imagine a fire breaks out in a city inhabited primarily by imbeciles. So what do the imbeciles do in reaction to the fire that has broken out in one end of the city? They start another fire in the other end of the city! Is this not what happened in Egypt? Moshe turned the water into blood. Rather than attempt to counter Moshe’s plague and somehow turn the blood back into water, the imbeciles create more blood! Totally ludicrous!

Let us first address the question that is on everyone’s lips: Why blood? Ten plagues struck Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Why did Hashem select blood to be the first plague? Hashem does nothing without a reason that imparts a message. What is the message of the blood?

*Horav Nachman Breslover, zl (Likutei MoHaran)*, explains that the primary concept of *teshuvah*, repentance/return, is achieved when a person hears his humiliation, accepts it silently, and, yet, *v’yidom v’yishtok*, remains mute and silent. The Egyptian Pharaoh and magicians could have altered the course of history by acquiescing to Moshe and Aharon’s message of the blood.

Instead, like a bunch of fools, they made more blood. It was not the blood which Moshe was underscoring, but the *dam* related to *yidom*, mute, that he attempted to convey to them. Keep your mouth shut. Accept the humiliation with dignity and remain silent. This is your chance to make it good. Instead, they made more blood!

Are we any different? We reach out to those who are distant from Torah and *mitzvos*. They see clearly that the path they have chosen to live is doomed.

Yet, they make more blood and continue living the way they have – with absolutely nothing to show for it. All one has to do is ask: “What do you do that is remotely Jewish?” They have no answers, because the answer is “nothing.”

*Rav Lazar Brody* calls attention to the word *chartum*, which is also translated as nose. A fool is someone who cannot see beyond his nose. His vision is myopic and stigmatized. The *chartumei Mitzrayim*, Egyptian magicians, looked at the truth, but refused to see it. They ignored its message, because it meant acquiescing and confessing to having wasted their lives believing in a worthless pagan. They were unable to transform the blood back into water. They could only make more blood.

The *baal teshuvah* transforms the passion/anger of blood (when he listens to his humiliation and remains silent) into water. *Ikar ha’teshuvah she’yishma bizyono v’yishtok*. Had Pharaoh kept his mouth shut, had he accepted Heavenly justice with acquiescence and love, he would have emerged a king

who became a penitent, who transformed blood to water. As a result of his obstinacy, he was “awarded” nine more plagues, and he lived to see his nation devastated.

The *Pele Yoetz* writes, “A person who is humiliated should sit quietly alone and remain silent (in acceptance of his shame). Not only should he be quiet, he should not in any way manifest anger (of any sort) in response to his humiliation.” This is a tall order. It is one thing to quietly reconcile to humiliation, it is totally another not to become angered by it. When one thinks about the reward that he will receive, however, it likely compensates for it.

*Horav Chizkiyah Medini, zl*, was a Torah scholar without peer. He is remembered for his extraordinary anthology on *halachah*, an 18 volume encyclopedia entitled, *Sdei Chemed*. Even in contemporary times, with computer search engines that have access to thousands of *sefarim*, the *Sdei Chemed* stands out as a work of sheer brilliance, representing a Torah scholar who had access to the entire corpus of Torah literature. This set of *sefarim* received widespread acclaim by a world of Torah scholars who were the greatest and most knowledgeable pundits of their respective generations. Rarely has a volume of Torah literature received such outstanding unanimous praise. The author attributed this unusual attention to an incident that happened to him when he was younger, and for which he felt the *Sdei Chemed* was his Heavenly reward.

*Rav Chizkiyah* was a member of a *kollel* comprised of prodigious young scholars, of which he was among the elite. His exceptional *hasmadah*, diligence in study, coupled with his uncanny scholarship, caused him to stand out among his peers. When *Chazal (Pirkei Avos 4:28)* teach that *kinaah, taavah* and *kavod*, “jealousy, desire and pursuit of honor drive a person from this world,” they are not referring only to people of base character; even scholars who are devoted to Torah study are able to fall prey to these character flaws. Thus, we understand that another member of this *kollel* could have been consumed with envy over all the attention given to the young *Rav Chizkiyah*. Envy is a shameful character trait, and, when one is envious, he should swallow his pride and move on. Sadly, this tormented fellow could not live unless he succeeded in destroying *Rav Chizkiyah*’s life. He bribed a young woman who cleaned the *kollel* premises to spread false rumors concerning an illicit relationship she had with *Rav Chizkiyah*. The community was in an uproar. (This was in a time when morality had meaning.) The *Sdei Chemed* did not respond at all to the charges, remaining mute as if nothing had occurred. He swallowed the shame and moved about with business as usual. Even after the woman confessed to accepting a bribe from his rival to set him up and destroy his reputation, *Rav Chizkiyah* said nothing. Furthermore, when the community ostracized her, depriving her of her livelihood, *Rav Chizkiyah* supported her. He never talked about the incident, never disparaged his rival who had attempted to destroy him. He did say one thing: From the day that the incident occurred (and he remained silent), his mind opened up to the wellsprings of Torah like never before. With this Divine intervention, he was able to work diligently and produce his landmark work.

**ושרץ היאר צפרדעים ... ובאו בבייתך ... ובעמך ובתנורריך ובמשארותיך**

**The river shall swarm with frogs, and they shall ascend and come into your palace ... and of your people and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls. (7:28)**

The frogs were a hardy bunch who swarmed all over Egypt. No place was considered off limits to them. Even the burning hot ovens did not prevent them from fulfilling Hashem’s command. When the Almighty said, “Go,” they went. It took enormous *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, for those frogs to enter the burning oven. For all intents and purposes, it spelled certain death. In the end, they were the only frogs who did not die. Whoever carries out Hashem’s *mitzvah* comes to no harm. *Chazal (Yoma 85:b)* teach that years later Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah entered the fiery cauldron, motivated by a *kal v’chomer, a priori* argument, derived from the Egyptian frogs. They conjectured, “Frogs do not have a *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hashem*, to sanctify Hashem’s Name; yet, the frogs entered the Egyptian ovens, knowing that they probably would not emerge. Certainly Jews, who have this *mitzvah*, are

obligated to enter the fiery cauldron to demonstrate their inextricable, uncompromising devotion to Hashem.”

The *Maharsha* presents a counter question to this *kal v'chomer*. Since frogs do not have the *mitzvah* of *V'chai bahem*, “And you shall live by them,” which compels every Jew to live and not relinquish his life in the performance of a *mitzvah*, the frogs had nothing to cause them to refrain from expressing their devotion to Hashem – not even their lives. Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah had a very powerful reason for seeking life. Furthermore, the *tzelem*, image, that Nevuchadnezer placed before them was not really an idol. It did not represent a pagan deity, which is another reason why these holy men did not have to give up their lives. Thus, we return to our original question: What was the *kal v'chomer*?

*Horav Avraham Kalmanowitz, zl* (quoted by *Horav Elyahu Svei, zl*), explains that indeed they had no underlying obligation to sanctify their lives, because they had not been asked to bow down to an idol. Nonetheless, just because there is no *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hashem* does not detract from the fact that what they were being asked to do was a denigration of the *kavod*, glory, of *Shomayim*, Heaven. To bow down to this image at the behest of an evil gentile king, one who had earned his stripes murdering Jews, was a gross *chillul Hashem*, profanation of Hashem’s Name. Thus, the general community was obligated to take action to preserve the glory of Heaven. Someone had to take a stand in defiance of Nevuchadnezer. Now, the question began: Agreed that someone has to give up his life, who says that it should be “me”? Let it be someone else. I would like to avail myself of the *mitzvah* of *V'chai ba'hem*; and live by them.

Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah ruminated over this question and ruled for themselves, based upon the *kal v'chomer* from the frogs. The frogs were given a general command: “Go all over Egypt.” They, too, had a question: “Why should I be the one to enter the ovens? Let it be the next frog. I would rather lay on Pharaoh’s soft pillow. This, too, is a *mitzvah*.” Regrettably, there will always be the other fellow. “Let him be the one, not me.” Certain frogs did not take this attitude. They understood that when action must be taken, we do not defer to someone else – we act! This was the lesson which Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah derived from the frogs. Thus, they entered the fire to demonstrate to Nevuchadnezer that the glory of Hashem is sacrosanct and supersedes everything.

הנני ממסיר כעת מחר ברד כבד מאד ... שלח העז את מקנך ... כל האדם והבהמה אשר ימצא בשדה ... וירד עליהם הברד ומתו ... הירא את דבר ד ... הניס את עבדיו אל הבתים ... ואשר לא שמ לבו אל דבר ד ויעזב את עבדיו

**Behold, at this time tomorrow, I shall rain a very heavy hail... and now send, gather in your livestock... All the people and the animals that are found in the field... the hail shall descend upon them and they shall die ... Whoever feared Hashem chased his servants to the houses. And whoever did not take the word of G-d to heart he left his servants. (9:18,19,20,21)**

*Makas Barad*, the plague of hail, begs elucidation. *Horav Baruch Dov Povarsky, Shlita*, presents us with a number of questions concerning this plague. Moshe *Rabbeinu* pinpointed to Pharaoh the exact time when the plague would commence by making a mark on the wall. He explained that when the sun would reach this mark, it would begin to hail. Afterwards, he told Pharaoh to have all his servants and possessions remanded indoors or else they would die or be destroyed. Why did Hashem warn them? The purpose of the plague was to punish the Egyptians. Why give them an exit strategy to save themselves? Furthermore, why did he tell them to immediately take in their slaves, if, in fact, he had told them that the plague would not begin until a specific time on the next day? What was their rush to seek shelter? The language of the *pesukim* is redundant. “Any man or animal who is in the field, who is not in the house.” Obviously, if they were in the field, they were not in the house. The Torah refers to the Egyptian who protected his slaves and possessions as being G-d-fearing. What does protection have to do with the fear of G-d? It is common sense to remain indoors during a storm.

In order to respond to these questions and present a new understanding of this plague, the *Rosh Yeshivah* quotes a *chiddush*, novel idea, from the

*Brisker Rav, zl*. Every other plague (except the smiting of the firstborn) lasted for one week. *Makas barad*, contends the *Brisker Rav*, fell every moment of the seven (allotted) days. Thus, whoever left the protection of his home/shelter was immediately “downed” by a hailstorm. Hail did not fall on the houses, only on people, animals and the open fields. Any protected edifice remained protected.

Having quoted this, *Rav Povarsky* advances this idea further, positing that the plague of hail had two distinct aspects to it. One aspect was identical with all the other plagues: it devastated the Egyptians. This is what it was meant to do, and it achieved its purpose. A second aspect to the plague was exclusive to *makas barad*: Hashem had given a command to the Egyptian people to remain in the shelter of their homes and to do likewise concerning their animals. The purpose of this component of the plague was to teach the Egyptians that whoever follows Hashem’s command will not experience harm: *Shomer mitzvah lo yeida davar ra*, “He who obeys the commandment will know no evil” (*Koheles* 8:5). *Makas barad* had an educational component. The command to stay home and protect oneself and his possessions went into effect immediately. Although the hail would not begin until the morrow, today they were to stay home to demonstrate that they were obeying Hashem’s command. The *yarei Shomayim*, G-d-fearing, Egyptian who obeyed Hashem’s command was spared from harm, as were his home and his possessions. The one who (was) *lo sam libo*, “who did not take the word of G-d to heart,” and did not immediately follow Hashem’s command paid dearly the next day when, even in the protection of his own home, he experienced the devastation that resulted from the hail, as the hail came crashing through his home. He did not follow instructions; he waited too long. Indeed, those who listened, and, by chance, their animal wandered out the next day, were not affected by the hail. They obeyed, and those who obey do not suffer harm.

The Torah’s use of *asher lo sam libo* as the opposite of *yarei es dvar Hashem* is interesting. One would think that the adverse of G-d-fearing is not G-d-fearing. Why does the Torah alter the description of the individual who disobeys? *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, derives from here that *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, is a natural instinct that is part and parcel of the psyche of every human being. A human being fears G-d. The reason that his innate fear of G-d remains dormant is that he does not apply it to his heart. The average human being does not take the time to think that a Divine Supreme Being guides and maintains the world. He goes through life with nary a care in the world until something goes wrong, and then he suddenly realizes that he has been ignoring Hashem. Any deficiency in *yiraas Shomayim* is self-imposed due to his lack of recognizing and acknowledging the *metzius*, reality/essence, of Hashem.

***Va’ani Tefillah***

שים שלום טובה וברכה הן וחסד ורחמים

***Sim shalom, tovah u’vrachah, chein v’chesed v’rachamim* – Establish peace, goodness, blessing, graciousness, kindness and mercy.**

It seems as if we are presenting a tall order, asking for so much. However, as *Horav Shimon Schwab, zl*, explains, the peace that we are requesting is inner peace, tranquility of mind, lack of anxiety – basically to have it all together in such a manner that a person is at peace with himself. To some, this may seem to be unimportant, until they realize that they do not have it. Without peace of mind, one cannot function properly. Indeed, not only is it the highest form of peace, it is the most fundamental, without which nothing else really matters. In this *brachah*, blessing, we ask for more: goodness, blessing, graciousness, kindness and mercy. These are the attributes through which a person is able to realize that Hashem loves him. When a person is at peace with Hashem, i.e. he is the beneficiary of the above qualities, he realizes how truly fortunate he is. Thus, he is able to achieve tranquility of soul with Hashem. The person who is not at peace with himself will invariably not realize that Hashem loves him. It is a vicious cycle which can be avoided only once a person is willing to open his eyes and see how much goodness he has in his life. This will lead to the appreciation that is critical to the establishment of inner peace.

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<http://www.5tjt.com/rabbi-yehuda-kelemer-ztl/>

### **Rabbi Yehuda Kelemer, zt'l**

By David Feder

This past erev Shabbos, the West Hempstead community and Klal Yisrael at large lost a tremendous talmid chacham and tzaddik, HaRav Yehuda Kelemer, zt'l.

I would like to share some of Rav Kelemer's words of Torah as a small way to illustrate the greatness of the man and the depth of our loss.

In Parshas Vayeira, when the malachim tell Avraham that Sarah will finally have a child, they say, "והנה בן לשרה אשתך." This is in contrast to the haftarah where the prophet Elisha tells the Shunamite woman: "כעת חיה את חובקת בן." ("In a year from now you will be embracing a child.") Why doesn't Elisha also just say, "You will have a child?" What is the meaning of the dramatic characterization that she will be "cradling" a baby?

Rabbi Kelemer explained that in Parshas Vayeira, these were angels, not human beings, bringing the message, and therefore they could not comprehend what it means to have a child. But regarding the Shunamite woman, Elisha, while a prophet, was a human with human feelings. He understood her pain, and so when he gave her the good news he expressed it in sympathetic, comforting language. "You will cradle your baby in your arms and hold him tight as you care for him." An angel cannot transmit this compassion, only a fellow human being.

Anyone who knew our rabbi was familiar with his incredible compassion and sensitivity. He lived by these words. Rabbi Kelemer, zt'l, "cradled" each person who came to him for help and advice like a mother would her child. Everyone felt a personal connection to him.

One year during the Three Weeks he posed a question: Why do we refrain from making the berachah of Shehechyanu during this time? As always, he proceeded to give over a profound and learned explanation so powerful that I can still say it over, almost verbatim, to this day.

He said that during this time of mourning for the destruction of our two Batei Mikdash we need to realize that this is not our natural way of existence. As a nation, we cannot accept our current situation without the Beis HaMikdash as status quo. It's not the way things should be.

Therefore, during this time, we do not have the presence of mind needed to recite Shehechyanu with simcha.

As a proof to this theory he brought a Rebbe Akiva Eiger in Shulchan Aruch (O.C. siman 223) about the following halachah: If a father dies and leaves his son a large inheritance, the son makes the berachah of Shehechyanu. What about if a son dies, R'l, and leaves his father a large inheritance?

Although the father is left with a sizable inheritance from his son, he is nonetheless bereft of his child. Would the mourning man say a Shehechyanu on this sadly acquired yet tremendous newfound fortune? R' Akiva Eiger answers no! He explains, based on a Gemara in Bava Basra, that although the father has now gained a large sum of money, the natural life cycle has been broken. Children are supposed to inherit from their parents, not vice versa. There is no greater tragedy than a parent burying a child, and, therefore, no matter how great the financial windfall, no berachah is recited. Rabbi Kelemer used this as a proof to his premise, saying that there is no greater national tragedy for Klal Yisrael than the loss of the Beis HaMikdash. The natural cycle is broken. The Jewish nation without a Beis HaMikdash is akin to parents left without their child.

For so many of us, hundreds of families and thousands of individuals, we never imagined an existence without our revered rav. He was our Beis HaMikdash, our connection to Hashem on this earth. We cannot imagine our community without his shiurim, leadership, and unparalleled concern for each and every one of us. No matter what life threw at us, Rabbi Kelemer was a calm and guiding presence in our midst who had the siyatta d'Shmaya and heavenly wisdom to navigate any storm. As a gentle giant in Torah and chesed, he carried us all on his shoulders.

Senator Todd Kaminsky remarked, "Rabbi Kelemer was the definition of a mensch, who always put the needs of others above himself. We will all miss his humility, piety, and dedication, but the legacy he left of community leadership will continue to live on for generations to come. His memory should be a blessing for us all."

Baruch Dayan ha'emes—Blessed is He who has taken from us what we can never replace. Woe to us who are bereft of our rav. May Hashem provide us with strength, renew us, and sustain us (שהחינו וקימנו), as we learn to navigate by the light left behind by our mara d'asra, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda ben Dov Ber, zt'l.

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Parsha Parables

### **Drasha Parshas Vaera - Sour Milk**

#### **Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky**

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

This week Hashem tells Moshe to inform the B'nai Yisrael, that the good times will soon come. "I shall rescue you, I shall redeem you with an out stretched hand, I shall bring you to the land which I have promised your fathers, Abraham Isaac and Jacob" (cf. Exodus 6:6-8).

It did not mean much. "The Children of Israel did not listen to Moshe from shortness of breath and hard work" (ibid v.9).

Next Hashem tells Moshe to tell Pharaoh to let the Jews out. Moshe responds with a reply filled with deductive reasoning. "Behold the Children of Israel did not listen, so how will Pharaoh listen?" (ibid v.12).

Our sages explain that this is on of ten "kal v'chomer" instances in the Torah. It is an example of reasoning used to logically come to halachic conclusions. ( eg. If a weightlifter can not lift the stone, surely a child can not!)

The problem is, that the reasoning seems flawed. "The Children of Israel did not listen to Moshe from shortness of breath and hard work." Pharaoh did not suffer from either of those shortcomings! If the weightlifter with a broken back, can't lift a stone, it plays no role in telling us whether or not a child can.)

So what was Moshe's logical refutation to G-d's command?

Last week, on Thursday 23 Teves, the great Gaon, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter z"l passed away. As a student at the Telshe Yeshiva in Europe he developed a strong relationship with one Europe's foremost scholars of that era, Rav Mordechai Pogramanski z"l. He used to relate on a story Rav Pogramanski would share with his students.

A disheveled man was touring the Louvre with a group of tourists. As they passed Rembrandt's works the man looked at everyone and yelled, "Sour milk!" Puzzled, everyone thought he was crazy. He repeated it again. "It looks like sour milk!" They moved on and passed the Mona Lisa. Again he screamed, Sour milk!" This went on a few more times until a wise man looked at the fellow. "Let me see your glasses." The critical man gave them to him. "What did you have for breakfast?" he asked. "Why cereal and milk," he answered.

The wise man laughed. Look at your glasses! They are speckled with milk! No wonder everything you look at appears as sour milk!

Moshe knew that Jews inherently believe. However the suffering of hard work and the evil treatment of Egyptian masters tainted their faith. But hard work alone does not taint faith. It is only when it is exasperated by the torment of the taskmasters, and their cruel taunts. How much more so, he figured, would Pharaoh be inattentive of the command that Hashem is in charge, and the Jews should be let free. If hard work stains the thought process, blocking the beauty of Hashem's word to filter through, how much more so does the idolatry and heresy of Pharaoh impede them from penetrating!

We look at Hashem's creation. We go to synagogue. We hear mussar. We read the prophets. But somehow it does not get through. The words are beautiful. Those who hear them can be inspired. But so many impediments block our vision and our hearing. Our lifestyles. Our desires. Even our work.

If we'd open our eyes we would see so much holiness! But only if their glasses are not tainted with sour milk.

Dedicated in memory of A. Milton Brown – Avraham Mordechai ben Benzion – Rosh Chodesh Shevat by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Brown

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### **The Fourth Brocha of Birkas Hamazon Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff**

Parshas Va'eira opens with Moshe Rabbeinu receiving admonition from Hashem for not being appreciative of His Ways. Thus, this is certainly an excellent time to study the brocha of bensching called Hatov Vehameitiv, "He Who is good and does good."

Question #1: Why Beitar?

Why was a brocha created to commemorate the events that transpired in Beitar?

Question #2: Why in Birkas Hamazon?

Why was that brocha added to Birkas Hamazon?

Question #3: What a strange brocha!

Why does the brocha Hatov Vehameitiv have such an unusual structure?

Introduction:

The fourth brocha of bensching, which is called Hatov Vehameitiv, has little to do with the rest of the bensching. Whereas the first three brochos are to thank Hashem for our sustenance, the fourth brocha was created by Chazal for a completely unrelated reason. This brocha is called Hatov Vehameitiv because of the words it contains, "hamelech Hatov Vehameitiv lakol." This article will discuss some of the halachos and concepts of this unusual brocha.

Although in two different places (Brochos 46a; 49a) the Gemara quotes opinions that this fourth brocha is min haTorah, the consensus is that it is only rabbinic in origin. (We should note that the Midrash Shmuel [13:9] attributes the opinion that Hatov Vehameitiv is min haTorah to a very early authority, the tanna, Rabbi Yishmael.) To quote the Gemara:

Hatov Vehameitiv was established by the Sanhedrin when it was located in Yavneh, because of those who were killed in Beitar, as noted by Rav Masneh, "On the very day that those killed in Beitar were allowed to be buried, they established, in Yavneh, Hatov Vehameitiv. 'Hatov' is to acknowledge that their bodies did not decompose; 'Vehameitiv' is to acknowledge that permission was granted to bury them" (Brochos 48b; Taanis 31a; Bava Basra 121b; see also Yerushalmi, Taanis 4:5).

Hatov Vehameitiv

To avoid confusion, we must realize that there are two completely different brochos that Chazal call Hatov Vehameitiv. The other brocha, which is only eight words long, Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam Hatov Vehameitiv, is recited upon hearing certain special, wonderful events or when breaking out a new bottle of wine. The laws germane to the shorter brocha will be left for a future article.

What happened in Beitar?

The Mishnah in Taanis (26b) records the calamities that occurred on Shiva Asar beTamuz and on Tisha Be'Av. Regarding Tisha Be'Av, it states, "On the ninth of Av, it was decreed upon our forefathers that they would not enter Eretz Yisroel, both the first and the second Batei Mikdash were destroyed, the city of Beitar was conquered, and the city of Yerushalayim was plowed under." The Talmud Yerushalmi (Taanis 4:5), quoting the tanna, Rabbi Yosi, dates the destruction of Beitar as being 52 years after the churban of the second Beis Hamikdash, or, almost exactly 1900 years ago. To understand the extent of the tragedy that happened in Beitar, let us quote some of the sources of Chazal.

A large city called Beitar, whose population was many tens of thousands of Jews, was ruled by a great Jewish king. All the Jews, including the greatest of the chachamim, thought that this king was the Moshiach, until he fell in battle to the non-Jews and the entire city was slaughtered (Rambam, Hilchos Taanis 5:3).

The Roman emperor Hadrian owned a massive vineyard, twelve mil long and twelve mil wide (about fifty square miles). The Romans used the bodies of those who were killed when Beitar was destroyed as a wall, the height of a man, around the vineyard. Hadrian refused to allow the casualties of Beitar to be buried. Only with the succession of a new emperor was their burial permitted (Yerushalmi, Taanis 4:5).

The city of Beitar had 400 shuls, each of which had 400 cheder rabbei'im teaching in them, and each rebbe taught 400 children. When the Romans conquered the city, they wrapped all the students and all the teachers in their seforim (which, in their day, were rolled like scrolls) and set them ablaze (Gittin 58a).

Enough pairs of tefillin shel rosh were found from those who died in Beitar to fill a mikveh. According to a second opinion, enough pairs of tefillin shel rosh were found to fill three mikvaos (Gittin 57b).

For seven years, the non-Jews fertilized their vineyards, exclusively, with the Jewish blood of those who were martyred in Beitar (Gittin 57a).

Fifteenth of Av

We should also note the following passage of Gemara: "No festivals of the Jews were celebrated to a greater extent than were the Fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur. We understand why Yom Kippur has this unique quality – it is the day that forgiveness is granted – but why the fifteenth of Av?" Among the many answers the Gemara provides is "Rav Masneh explained, because that was the date when permission was granted to bury those killed in Beitar" (Taanis 30b-31a).

An unusual brocha

Now that we know a bit about the history behind this brocha, let us discuss the brocha itself, particularly, its structure. Of the many questions that we can ask, let us focus on the following three, which were our opening questions:

1. Why was a brocha created to commemorate this particular calamity?

2. Why was that brocha made part of Birkas Hamazon?

3. Why does this brocha have such an unusual structure?

1. Why a brocha?

Why was a brocha created to commemorate this particular calamity?

Unfortunately, there have been many catastrophes in Jewish history, which we have, thank G-d, survived, but we do not have extra brochos to commemorate them (Kenesses Hagedolah, Tur Orach Chayim 189). Most tragedies are commemorated with fast days and the recital of selichos, and most miraculous events are celebrated on their anniversary, but not with a brocha that we recite daily.

These questions are already asked by very early authorities, who suggest the following answers:

The tragedy of the destruction of Beitar was great and unique in the bizayon haTorah that resulted, when thousands and thousands of observant Jews lay unburied. When Hadrian died, and his successor permitted their burial, Chazal felt the need to demonstrate, significantly, that this chillul Hashem had ended and was, on the contrary, accompanied by a tremendous kiddush Hashem, that the bodies of the fallen had not deteriorated, notwithstanding that they had been exposed to the elements for many years.

In addition, the events of Beitar teach that, even when Hashem is angry at us, He still performs miracles. This is to teach us that Hashem never abandons us, even at times when we sin and deserve punishment (Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim 189:2)

2. Why in bensching?

Why did Chazal place this brocha in bensching (Rosh, quoted by Tur, Orach Chayim 189)? The rest of Birkas Hamazon is acknowledgement to Hashem for providing for us and for the wonderful land of Eretz Yisroel that He gave us. Why commemorate the tragedy of Beitar during Birkas Hamazon?

This brocha was instituted in Birkas Hamazon as a constant reminder (Shu"t Binyamin Ze'ev #351; Shu"t Mishpetei Shmuel #11). In addition, it was placed in Birkas Hamazon, which is, in its entirety, thanks to Hashem (Rosh, Brochos 7:22).

Furthermore, the Rosh notes that the Yerushalmi (see our version, Sukkah 5:1 at end) states that the loss that the Jews suffered at Beitar will not be restored until the Moshiach comes. It is unclear to which specific loss this Gemara is referring, but regardless, this is another reason why the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv was placed immediately following the brocha of Boneh Yerushalayim.

Several prominent gedolim provide an additional reason why this brocha was added specifically to bensching. After celebrating a joyous meal, people might lose sight of life's priorities. To prevent this from happening, Chazal instituted a brocha reminding people of the tragedy of Beitar (Rabbeinu Bachya, Kad Hakemach #60; Shu"t Binyamin Ze'ev #351). This is similar to the idea of breaking a glass at a wedding and mentioning the churban then, so as to keep our celebrations in a balanced perspective. We celebrate, but still need to remember that we are missing important aspects of life that we require as Jews.

Why not in Shemoneh Esrei?

The Binyamin Ze'ev, who lived in Greece and in Venice, Italy, during the first half of the sixteenth century, asks that, if Chazal wanted the association of this new brocha to be with the rebuilding of Yerushalayim, why was the brocha placed in Birkas Hamazon and not in the weekday Shemoneh Esrei, after Boneh Yerushalayim?

The answer is that inserting this brocha in the midst of the Shemoneh Esrei would be an interruption, whereas at the time that Chazal incorporated this fourth brocha into Birkas Hamazon, bensching included only the Torah required portions, which end with the words Boneh Yerushalayim (Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim 189:1). (The other requests that begin with the word Harachaman, the pesukim that we traditionally recite at the end of the bensching, and the blessing we recite for the household where we ate were all added to Birkas Hamazon after this time in history.)

Text of brocha

3. Why does this brocha have such an unusual structure?

Let me explain. The numerous brochos that we recite daily follow three specific structural patterns:

A. Either they are very short brochos, such as those that we recite prior to eating, performing mitzvos, seeing unusual sites, or enjoying other pleasures, which begin with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam and then close with the appropriate ending. These are called brochos ketzaros, short brochos.

B. A second structure of a brocha is the most common for a longer brocha. This type of brocha begins with the same words, Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, and ends the brocha by repeating the words Boruch Attah Hashem and closing with the theme of the brocha. These brochos are called brochos aruchos, long brochos.

Part of a series

C. The third type of brocha is one that follows another brocha in a series. Such a brocha does not begin with Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, but ends with Boruch Attah Hashem and closes with the theme of the brocha. This type is categorized as a brocha hasemucha lachaverta, literally, a brocha that follows another brocha; in other words, a brocha that is part of a series. For this reason, the brochos of Shemoneh Esrei, the brochos that surround the Kerias Shma, and the second and third brochos of Birkas Hamazon do not begin with Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam (except for the first brocha in the series). All begin by explaining the theme of the brocha and end with Boruch Attah Hashem and an appropriate conclusion.

The brochos of bensching

Now that we realize that all brochos fit into one of three categories, let us examine the four brochos of Birkas Hamazon and see under which category each brocha belongs.

The first brocha, Ha'zon es ha'olam, begins with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam and closes with Boruch Attah Hashem hazan es hakol, "He who sustains all." This structure fits our rules nicely, as category B: It is a classic "long brocha."

The second and third brochos are part of a series and, therefore, do not begin with a brocha, but end either with the words Boruch Attah Hashem al ha'aretz ve'al hamazon, or with Boruch Attah Hashem boneh (berachamav) Yerushalayim. This follows the rule of brocha hasemucha lachaverta, a brocha that follows another brocha, which we called category C.

The unusual fourth

However, the fourth brocha of Birkas Hamazon does not seem to fit any of the above three categories. It begins with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, which means it is not considered part of a series. Although it is always recited as the fourth brocha of Birkas Hamazon, immediately after the brocha of Boneh Yerushalayim, and you would think that it should be considered part of a series (Tosafos, Brochos 46b s.v. Vehatov), our introduction can help explain why it is not. Since this brocha was not originally part of Birkas Hamazon, but was added for a completely unrelated reason, it is considered a beginning brocha and not a brocha hasemucha lachaverta.

Which remaining category?

The list above contains two categories of brocha that begin with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam: category A, the short brochos, and category B, the long brochos. However, Hatov Vehameitiv does not seem to fit either category. It is too long to be considered a short brocha, nor does it follow the structure of a long brocha, since it does not end with Boruch Attah, Hashem and a closing.

As you can imagine, we are not the first to raise this question. The rishonim do, and provide three answers to resolve this conundrum. But first, we need to provide another introduction.

Chazal instituted that the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv should include three references to Hashem being King, a concept that Chazal call malchus (Brochos 47a). This we do, when we recite the following: (1) the word melech in the very beginning of the brocha, Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, (2) the next words of the brocha are ha'keil avinu malkeinu, (3) ro'einu ro'eih Yisroel hamelech hatov (Divrei Chamudos, Brochos 7:69).

Why three times? The Gemara (Brochos 49a) explains that since the third brocha of Birkas Hamazon (that ends with the words, Boneh Yerushalayim) mentions the kingdom and royal family of David, there should be mention of Hashem's monarchy in all four brochos of Birkas Hamazon. However, the mention of Hashem's malchus that should be in the second and third brochos of Birkas Hamazon are delayed until the fourth. (The first brocha of Birkas Hamazon, begins with Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, and therefore contains a reference to Hashem's monarchy.) Thus, in addition to the basic theme of acknowledgement and thanks to Hashem for His performing a miracle, Chazal added a theme to the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv, making sure that Hashem's malchus is mentioned three times.

Three hatavos

The rishonim quote a midrash that states that Chazal required adding to the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv three hatavos: We are to say three times that Hashem is beneficial to us. Although I was unable to locate this midrash, it definitely existed at the time of the rishonim but has been lost since their era.

Among the rishonim, I found several different texts for this concept. The standard nusach Ashkenaz says hu heitiv, hu meitiv, hu yeitiv lanu, "He has done good, He does good, and He will do good to us". The Rosh discusses the correct text, and concludes that the correct text should be hu heitiv lanu, hu meitiv lanu, hu yeitiv lanu, with the word lanu repeated each time ("He has done good to us, He does good to us, and He will do good to us."). The Shulchan Aruch rules that this is the correct practice, and this is the standard, accepted nusach used by eidot hamizrah and Sefardim. This is a very interesting point, because the Rosh is usually the source for minhagei Ashkenaz that differ from Sefardic practice, and here, he is the source for the Sefardic custom, and most Ashkenazim do not follow his approach.

Hu Gemalanu

In addition, the rishonim mention that we should also mention three times that Hashem grants us good, which we add with the words, hu gemalanu, hu gomleinu, hu yigmeleinu la'ad – "He granted us, He grants us and He will grant us forever..."

Why no ending?

Thus, we see that the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv is a long brocha, and yet it does not end with the words Boruch Attah Hashem and a closing, as a long brocha normally does.

Why not?

Again, the rishonim raise this question and provide several differing approaches to answer it. Rabbeinu Yonah (Brochos 36a) quotes two reasons:

I. Notwithstanding that the brocha is somewhat lengthy, it is still considered a short brocha, because all the ideas included are simply different aspects of the same theme – that Hashem is Hatov Vehameitiv.

II. When the original brocha was created, Hatov Vehameitiv was a short brocha that did not warrant an ending. Although other parts were gradually added, the original structure of the brocha was not changed (see also Tosafos, Brochos 46b s.v. Vehatov).

III. The Rashba (Brochos 46a s.v. Teida) provides a third answer. Although this brocha should have been a long brocha, Chazal did not treat it as such, because they did not want this brocha, which is midrabbanan, to be more prominent than the two brochos that precede it, which are min haTorah and which each have the words Boruch Attah Hashem only one time. Therefore, they decided to omit an ending to this brocha, making it an exception to the rule.

Conclusion

The most important message of Birkas Hamazon is our expressing thanks to Hashem for everything He provides for us. We see how Chazal also wanted us to remember to thank Hashem for kindnesses that He did for our people, thousands of years ago. It certainly behooves us to recite the Birkas Hamazon carefully and with kavanah, and to demonstrate at least a small expression to praise Hashem.

# Parasha Va'era: Making Sense Of The Plagues: The Education Of Pharaoh

## By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

### INCONSISTENCIES WITHIN THE PLAGUES

Then YHVH said to Mosheh, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, 'YHVH, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness." But until now you have not listened.' Thus says YHVH, "By this you shall know that I am YHVH." See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. (Sh'mot [Exodus] 7:14-17)

In this account of the warning of the first plague (blood), there are several details which show up again in some – but not all – of the other plagues:

Mosheh warns Pharaoh about the upcoming plague – but not every time (only before the plagues of frogs, wild beasts, pestilence, hail, locusts and the first-born).

Some of these warnings take place in the early morning by the banks of the Nile (wild beasts and hail) while others take place in Pharaoh's palace.

A theological message (e.g. "By this you shall know that I am YHVH") is appended to the warning – whereas other warnings are bereft of such a message.

Mosheh's staff is used in some of the plagues – but not all (it is only used in the plagues of blood, frogs, lice, hail and locusts).

Our first simple and straightforward question is: Is there any rhyme or reason to the plagues and their attendant warnings which would explain these apparent inconsistencies?

### II. "I WILL HARDEN PHARAOH'S HEART"

The second question begins in the text, challenges our basic theological and philosophical assumptions – and is answered right back in the text. This question has troubled religious thinkers throughout the ages:

And YHVH said to Mosheh, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go." (Sh'mot 4:21 – see also 7:3)

Not only does God promise that He will make Pharaoh stubborn – the Torah also recounts this divine intervention several times throughout the "plague-driven negotiations" (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27)

Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart?

There are two parts to this question:

How could Pharaoh be held responsible for his wickedness if God was "pulling the strings"?

If God made Pharaoh stubborn until something changed which would allow B'nei Yisra'el to go free – what "changed" after the smiting of the first-born that allowed our freedom – which couldn't happen before?

Rambam (MT Hilkhos Teshuva, Chapter 6) addresses this question, as do R. Sa'adia, Albo, Ramban, Ibn Ezra and many other Rishonim. Their answers vary, including the response that the punishment for Pharaoh's harsh enslavement of the B'nei Yisra'el was to "close off the doors of repentance" by hardening his heart.

### III. THE S'FORNO'S APPROACH

Rabbenu Ovadiah S'forno suggests an independent and original approach:

And I will harden his heart: Since he will be unable to tolerate the plagues, he would certainly emancipate the people – not because he accepts the sovereignty of God and to do His will – therefore He hardened his heart to be able to withstand the plagues and not to free them. (Commentary to Shemot 4:21 – see also his commentary to 7:3).

In other words, God wanted Pharaoh to let B'nei Yisra'el go – but only for the right reason. To let them go as a political move or as a visceral reaction to the onslaught of plagues was not sufficient. Pharaoh had to learn a lesson of sorts which would affect his overall attitude towards God and the B'nei Yisra'el before the process could be completed and the B'nei Yisra'el could be allowed to leave. In order to "keep Pharaoh in the game" until he could learn this lesson, God had to strengthen his will (=heart) to withstand the plagues.

Although S'forno doesn't point this out explicitly, the implication of this is that something took place in Pharaoh's consciousness – even if only for a fleeting moment – in reaction to the plague of the first-born which signified the proper attitude and the desired change. The text indeed bears this out.

In response to those plagues which caused Pharaoh to temporarily “give in” (although he always changed his mind once the plague had passed), the text tells us that the king allowed us to Go, sacrifice to your God (8:24). Pharaoh’s responses in the other cases, although varying in scope (sacrifice in the land, only the men could go etc.), remained constant in style: It is your God whom you seek to worship – not mine!

In response to the final plague (12:32), Pharaoh added two key words: uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti (And bring a blessing on me too!). The Rishonim generally understand these words to mean that Pharaoh was asking the B’nei Yisra’el to either pray or to present an offering on his behalf (when they reach their worship site in the desert).

In other words, the understanding that Pharaoh achieved via the final plague was that this God – YHVH – who the B’nei Yisra’el worship, was a God Whose blessing even the Pharaoh needed. He also recognized one other facet – this Supreme Ruler had a special relationship with the B’nei Yisra’el, such that their intercession on his behalf would be more effective than his own prayer.

As I explained in last week’s shiur, this turnabout was necessary not only for Pharaoh’s spiritual welfare and theological enlightenment – but, most significantly, for the benefit of B’nei Yisra’el. For these people, steeped in Egyptian culture and self-subjugated to Egyptian icons, to have their own king make this sort of declaration and express this awareness would do more to bring the B’nei Yisra’el back into their own proper place in their relationship with God (and awareness of their own greatness) than any miracle.

#### **IV. THE PROCESS OF AN ATTITUDE-SHIFT**

I would like to propose that the process which culminated in Pharaoh’s cry of uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti can be discerned in the structure of the plagues and of Mosheh’s warnings in advance of them. For purposed of this shiur, we will focus on the first nine – and then view the tenth (the first-born) independently.

First – the facts as they are presented in the text:

#1: Dam (blood)  
Warning: YES  
Where: NILE  
When: MORNING  
Message: YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH  
Vehicle: STAFF

#2: Tz’farde’a’ (frogs)  
Warning: YES  
Where: PALACE  
When: ???  
Message: (none)  
Vehicle: STAFF

#3: Kinim (lice)  
Warning: NO  
Where: n/a  
When: n/a  
Message: n/a  
Vehicle: STAFF

#4: ‘Arov (wild beasts)  
Warning: YES  
Where: NILE  
When: MORNING  
Message: YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND  
Vehicle: (none)

#5: Dever(pestilence)  
Warning: YES  
Where: PALACE  
When: ???  
Message: (none)  
Vehicle: (none)

#6: Sh’khin (boils)  
Warning: NO  
Where: n/a  
When: n/a  
Message: n/a  
Vehicle: (none)

#7: Barad (hail)  
Warning: YES  
Where: NILE  
When: MORNING  
Message: YOU WILL KNOW THERE IS NONE LIKE ME IN ALL THE LAND  
Vehicle: MOSHEH'S HANDS/STAFF

#8: Arbeh (locusts)  
Warning: YES  
Where: PALACE  
When: ???  
Message: (none)  
Vehicle: MOSHEH'S HANDS/STAFF

#9: Hoshekh (darkness)  
Warning: NO  
Where: n/a  
When: n/a  
Message: n/a  
Vehicle: MOSHEH'S HANDS

Note the following:

**Wherever Mosheh encounters Pharaoh at the river in the morning, there is also a theological message attached to the warning. This is followed by a plague with a prefatory warning given inside the palace – without a theological message – which is followed by a plague given with no warning. If we can decipher this structure, we will only need to explain the role of the staff and Mosheh's hands to complete the picture. [emphasis added]**

## V. A FOUR-STEP EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

As we all know, attitudes which are dramatically shifted in one shot are often just as easily shifted back. In order to permanently and effectively educate someone, we need to use slow and even steps, giving the student time to digest, reflect and integrate the new information in such a way that a new attitude may be adopted.

God (through Mosheh) had to lead Pharaoh from I don't know YHVH (Sh'mot 5:2) to uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti (12:32). In order to clarify the steps needed for this process, we'll use an analogy from our own world of Torah education.

If a teacher would like to encourage a potential student – who is not even aware of Talmud Torah as an academic discipline at all – to take a year off to go study in Yeshivah in Israel, there are several shifts which the teacher must effect in the student:

Make the student aware of Torah as an academic discipline;  
Demonstrate the special qualities of Talmud Torah;  
Demonstrate the superiority of Talmud Torah over all other disciplines;  
Demonstrate the special and unique relationship which this future student has with Talmud Torah.

In much the same way, Pharaoh had to:

Be made aware of YHVH's existence;  
Be shown the uniqueness of YHVH;  
Be shown the ultimate superiority of YHVH;  
Admit to the special relationship that the B'nei Yisra'el – and he – have with YHVH.

If we look through the three theological messages (in context) given in the warnings (before plagues #1, 4 and 7), we can note that this progression covers the first three steps:

(1): "YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH" (God's existence) (4): "YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND" (The uniqueness of God's powers) (7): "YOU WILL KNOW THERE IS NONE LIKE ME IN ALL THE LAND" (The superiority of God)

The progression of Pharaoh's education is capped with his request following the plague of the first-born: uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti – indicating that a recognition of the special relationship which he has with God (he is dependent on God's blessing) and which the B'nei Yisra'el have with God (he is dependent on their intercession on his behalf).

## VI. EACH STEP: THREE "SIGNS"

Earlier in the narrative, we are introduced to the notion that three demonstrations of a truth will suffice to persuade the targeted audience. When Mosheh asks God for a sign through which he can prove the veracity of his divine agency (4:1), God gives him three signs (staff, scale-disease, blood; these signs are themselves a mystery which we hope to unravel in a future shiur). As God Himself says, the goal of these signs is:



“This,” said YHVH, “is so that they may believe that YHVH, the God of their fathers -the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak and the God of Ya’akov -has appeared to you.” (4:5)

Note that this “message” and goal of the three signs is given subsequent to the first sign – as if to say: Mosheh, the purpose of this entire series which has just begun is to establish your credentials as My messenger.

**In the same way, each step in Pharaoh’s education took three signs/plagues to be accomplished, allowing him to move on to the next step. This explains the following pattern:** [emphasis added]

The first plague in each set (blood, wild beasts and hail) follows a pattern: Early morning warning at the river, theological message – and then the plague.

Why was the warning at the river in the morning? Ibn Ezra and Rashbam point out that the river was a spot where the king would take walks – and where the people would be present, watching him as he sojourned. I would like to suggest that since the Nile was considered a divinity in Egypt, the Pharaoh was likely involved in some form of worship at the banks of the river early in the morning. Mosheh’s confrontation of Pharaoh in the middle of a worship service, in front of his priests and the people, became a public statement and challenge to the entire Egyptian culture and belief system.

This warning was the preface to all three plagues in the set – including a public declaration and the theological lesson of these three plagues.

The second one in each set (frogs, pestilence and locusts) also has a consistent pattern: Warning in the palace with no theological message – and then the plague.

In these cases, Mosheh challenges and warns Pharaoh in his palace – there is no need for either public declaration or a theological message, as these have already been given at the beginning of the set. The warning, however, was still given to show Pharaoh that the upcoming plague was part of that same system.

The final one in each set (lice, boils and darkness) also has a pattern: No warning at all – just a plague. At this point, the message and warning are moot – Pharaoh needs to internalize the lesson of the series.

This entire structure and explanation is buttressed by R. Yehudah’s acrostic of the plagues – D’Tza”kh ‘Ada”sh B’acha”v:

## **VII. R. YEHUDAH’S \*SIMANIM\***

In the Sifri (Devarim #301) we first encounter R. Yehudah’s famous acrostic for the ten plagues: D’Tza”kh ‘Ada”sh B’acha”v (which stands for \*Dam\* – \*Tz’farde’a\* – \*Kinim\* , \*Arov\* – \*Dever\* – \*Sh’khin\* , \*Barad\* – \*Arbeh\* – \*Hoshekh\* – \*makat B’khorot\*) – which is incorporated into the Haggadah shel Pessach.

There are many explanations of the meaning behind this acrostic (the simplest is that it is a mnemonic device) – but it may hold the key to understanding the structure of the plagues and the educational process driving them.

**Leaving the final plague aside for a moment, let’s reexamine our list, keeping R. Yehudah’s acrostic in mind. Following his set-up, there are three sets of plagues. Each set carries an increasingly radical and impactful message to Pharaoh – until he is ready to be affected by the plague of the first-born and to declare uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti.** [emphasis added]

Before examining the consistent pattern within the sets, let’s see if we can discover the lesson of each set. We will also be able to explain the role of the staff in the plagues.

### **SET #1: THE EXISTENCE OF YHVH**

When first approached by Mosheh, appearing in the Name of YHVH, Pharaoh’s response was: “I do not know YHVH” (5:2). The first goal, therefore, was to “introduce” Pharaoh to God.

We see this in the theological message attached to the first plague – That you will know that I am YHVH. At this point, Mosheh was to make Pharaoh aware of the God of the Hebrews – if you will, as an “equally valid” God to the rest of the Egyptian pantheon. This is accomplished through blood, frogs and lice. Note that all three of them involved using the staff as the direct catalyst for starting the plague (Blood: “he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river”; Frogs: “So Aharon stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt”; Lice: “Aharon stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth”) – just like the Egyptian wizards would do their magic. Note that through these three plagues the Egyptian magicians stayed in the plague-competition, finally bowing out during the third one.

In other words, this first set of plagues was designed to introduce God into the Egyptian power picture: YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH.

### **SET #2: THE SPECIAL POWERS OF YHVH**

Now that Pharaoh realizes that YHVH exists and that He has powers (at this point) akin to those of the Egyptian gods (and even surpassing them, as his wizards had already bowed out of the competition), the time had come to impress upon Pharaoh God’s unique power. Unlike the gods of the Egyptians, who are distant but need a human intermediary

(wizard) to trigger the plague with a vehicle (staff) – God is ...in the midst of the land. This is demonstrated by plagues which, unlike the first three, do not come out of the ground (river, earth), but from the environment. In addition, Mosheh no longer uses the staff – the message here is that God Himself is present and it isn't Mosheh's staff that triggers the plague as much as Mosheh's command/request.

Through the second set, including wild beasts, pestilence and boils, Pharaoh is finally taught that: I AM YHVH IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND. As before, the first plague is preceded by a public warning with this message, the second is preceded by a private warning and the third has no warning attached.

### **SET #3: THE SUPERIORITY OF YHVH**

Pharaoh is ready to embrace the superiority of God over all members of the Egyptian pantheon. Significantly, God tells Mosheh to lift his hands heavenward to trigger all three of these plagues (hail – 9:22; locusts – 10:12; darkness – 10:21); however, in the case of the first two, Mosheh lifts his hands and holds the staff up – whereas in the third, he only lifts his hands to the heavens.

The staff, which did not play a role in the second set, serves a different function from the first set. In the first set the staff was the catalyst of the plague, mimicking the Egyptian wizards. In the third set, Mosheh lifted the staff as an extension of his hands, showing everyone that the same God Who brought the first three plagues was also behind these. The staff is not a catalyst, it is a sign. This explains why Mosheh did not use the staff for the third plague in this set – darkness. Once he lifted his arms, absolute darkness fell and no one (of the Egyptians) would see either his hand or the staff!

Through these final plagues, Pharaoh has been taught the penultimate lesson: THERE IS NONE LIKE ME IN ALL THE LAND.

Pharaoh was now prepared for the ultimate lesson, brought through the plague of the first-born – but that will have to wait for another shiur.

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## Parshat Vaera: Rise of a Leader by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

### PARASHAT VA-ERA (not):

Last week's shiur was about the Egyptian attitude toward Bnei Yisrael and how Bnei Yisrael's lack of strong leadership contributes to their weakness and the ability of Paro to enslave and murder them. We did not develop the second major theme in Parashat Shemot: the appearance of Moshe Rabbeinu. We will begin with that theme this week (we will not actually make it into Parashat Va-Era).

### MOSHE'S BIRTH AND SALVATION:

The way the Torah tells of Moshe's birth and his adventures in the Nile (at the age of three months) brings to mind some events we looked at a long time ago:

### SHEMOT 2:-3 --

The woman [i.e., Moshe's mother] conceived and bore a son. She saw ["va-teireh"] that he was good ["ki tov"], and hid him for three months. She then could no longer hide him. She took a box ["teiva"] of reeds, smeared it with sealing and tar, put the boy into it, and put it among the reeds at the edge of the river.

These two pesukim (verses) contain two kernels which hint to themes which will occupy the rest of the sefer (book). By using particular words or phrases, the Torah often hints to connections between events. Here, the parallels jump right out at us:

### PARALLEL #1:

Va-TEIREH oto KI TOV hu: "She SAW that he WAS GOOD"  
Va-YAR Elokim KI TOV: "Hashem SAW that it WAS GOOD"

The Torah uses the same phrase: ". . . saw . . . was good" with regard to both Hashem's appraisal of Creation, way back in Parashat Bereishit, and here as well, with regard to Moshe's mother's appraisal of her newborn son.

### PARALLEL #2:

The second parallel is a word, not a phrase: the word "teiva," "box" or "ark," appears both here with regard to Moshe, and, much earlier, with regard to No'ah ("No'ah's Ark").

The first parallel stands on its own: the language of the two phrases is sufficiently similar that it seems the Torah means for us to make these connections (Hazal, in fact, do connect these pesukim). But the second parallel ("teiva") needs more justification -- how do we know that the Torah truly means to connect the story of Moshe with the story of No'ah just because of this one word? One way to be more certain that a pattern is truly meaningful is to check how rare the word is. "Teiva" turns out to be pretty rare: the word appears in only two places in all of Tanakh (the Bible) -- here, referring to Moshe's little ark, and in Parashat No'ah, referring to the Ark built by No'ah for himself, his family, and a zoo's worth of animals.

Now that we have noted these linguistic parallels, we need to make sense of them: what are the thematic connections between Moshe's birth and Creation, and between Moshe's ark and Noah's? In order to understand these connections, we need to first look at these phrases in context:

- 1) "Va-yar Elokim ki tov": Creation
- 2) The teiva of No'ah: salvation from destruction.

### CREATION:

What is the parallel between "Va-yar Elokim ki tov" and "Va-teireh oto ki tov hu"? Both are stories of creation: the story of Creation itself clearly deals with "creation"; the story of the birth of Moshe heralds creation in a more subtle way:

- 1) The birth of the nation Yisrael. Moshe is to lead his enslaved brothers out of Egypt, to the revelation at Har Sinai, and through the desert toward their future homeland. In the process, they become a nation, developing a national consciousness and identity.
- 2) The rebirth of the world: the revelation of the Torah at Har Sinai so transforms the people who witness it and the world at large that it can be understood as a spiritual recreation of the world. From this point, monotheism begins its public career, as the Jewish people spread the belief in One God all over the world. In a sense, the world is created physically during the first seven days, but spiritually and morally, it is first truly "created" with the revelation of the Torah, Hashem's instructions for how He wants to be served.

### SALVATION:

How does the salvation of No'ah thematically in a "teiva" parallel the salvation of Moshe in a "teiva"? Both stories share:

- 1) An environment of mass destruction (in the case of No'ah, the whole world is doomed; in the case of Moshe, all Israelite baby boys are doomed).
- 2) The mass destruction is accomplished by water (the flooding of the whole world in the time of No'ah, the drowning the babies in the Nile in the time of Moshe). (Note also that the ultimate come-uppance of the Egyptians is also through flood, as the waters of the Red Sea "un-part" and swamp the Egyptian pursuers.)
- 3) An individual who is deserving is saved from the watery destruction (the Torah tells us that No'ah is an "ish tzaddik," and that Moshe "was good").
- 4) The deserving individual is saved in a "teiva."

Why does the Torah draw this parallel? What is the Torah trying to communicate?

In our discussions of Parashat Bereshit and Parashat No'ah, we noted that at first, Hashem seems to want to establish a close relationship with all of humanity. When He creates the first human(s), He makes clear that the purpose of humanity is to achieve the status of a "tzelem Elokim" -- an image of Hashem. Humanity is supposed to attempt to emulate Hashem's (a) creativity, (b) control of the universe, and (c) morality, by being (a) creative (procreating), (b) asserting control over the world, and (c) behaving morally. But before long, humanity fails this mission, and "the earth was full of evil/violence" (Bereshit 6:11 and 6:13). Humanity may have achieved creativity and control, but morally, it has failed. Hashem decides that creating humanity was a mistake -- "I regret that I made them" (Bereshit 6:7) -- and that the "experiment" is over. Humanity must be destroyed.

But Hashem saves No'ah because he is an "ish tzaddik." This act signals Hashem's new strategy: before, the plan had been to relate closely to all of humanity. Now, Hashem will choose either individuals or a group from among humanity to carry out His mission. The selected people will be held to the high standards of morality necessary for maintaining a relationship with Hashem, and may also have the job of educating the rest of the world about morality.

The selection of No'ah to survive while the rest of humanity dies exemplifies this new strategy. Shortly after humanity is re-established after the Flood -- and begins once again to flout Hashem's wishes by building the Tower of Bavel -- Hashem acts on His new strategy and chooses an individual to found the group with which He plans to establish a close relationship. This is, of course, Avraham, who is chosen to found a special nation. In the salvation of No'ah -- a righteous individual -- is "hidden" the kernel of Hashem's plan to select a nation to call His own.

If so, then the Torah evokes the No'ah theme now, as Moshe is saved from death, in order to hint that with the salvation of Moshe, Hashem's plan of choosing that special nation is about to unfold. The saving of Moshe 1) from mass destruction 2) through drowning 3) which takes place through a "teiva," 4) because "he was good" (= "No'ah ish tzaddik"), flashes us back to Parashat No'ah and hints that the process of selecting the people to form a relationship with Hashem is about to bear fruit.

## **A ROUGH BEGINNING:**

We now watch as Moshe grows up and takes tentative steps toward his fellow Israelites. The Torah tells us three stories about Moshe prior to Hashem's revelation to him at the (non)-burning bush; we will deal with them separately:

- 1) Moshe kills an Egyptian who is beating/trying to kill a Jew.
- 2) Moshe tries to intercede in an altercation between two Jews, but when one reveals that he knows Moshe has killed an Egyptian, Moshe fears for his life and runs away.
- 3) Moshe defends the daughters of Yitro from the shepherds, and waters their sheep.

## **DEFENDING A FELLOW JEW:**

The Torah tells us that Moshe grows up and then "went out to his brothers and saw their burdens" (2:11). This itself is somewhat surprising: Moshe identifies with Bnei Yisrael, his "brothers" ["ehav"] despite having grown up in an Egyptian household -- in fact, the household of Pharaoh. Somehow, he has maintained his identity as a Jew; he sees the lowly, enslaved Jews as his brothers despite having grown up an aristocrat in a society which looks down on the Jews as lower-class citizens, or at least slaves (and perhaps even lower-order creatures, as discussed last week). Even these slaves are his "brothers."

he gets into trouble the very next day when the most obvious witness --

The way Moshe deals with the brutal Egyptian demonstrates his powerful sense of justice. The Torah tells us that before killing the Egyptian, Moshe "looked this way and that way," but wherever he looked, "he saw that there was no one" to witness what he was about to do. Of course, there is someone right in front of him -- the very Jew whom he is saving -- but since Moshe thinks of this Jew as part of his team, "there was no one" there -- no one to be concerned about. But Moshe is

wrong, and he realizes this with surprise the next day when implicitly threatened with exposure by a Jew. It seems that the very Jew he was trying to save (who else could have told the tale?) could not keep the secret, and Moshe's brave act exposes him to danger.

One lesson Moshe is taught is that a leader cannot necessarily count on others to be his or her co-conspirators. In the future, as Bnei Yisrael's leader, Moshe will face this gap again and again. As close as any leader might come to the people he leads, there will always remain a gap between the leader and the led. The leader can never depend on the led to cover for him or look out for his interests; he can never assume (without checking) that he and the led share interests. Sefer BeMidbar (Numbers) will provide us with many instances where the Jews turn on Moshe as a group, blaming him for dragging them out of wonderful Egypt into the wasteland of the desert. While Moshe is willing to tolerate this sort of relationship for a long time, he eventually becomes frustrated (in Parashat Be-ha'alotekha) and attempts to resign his post.

**BREAKING UP THE FIGHT:**

Now we move to the second story of Moshe's early days: the two fighting Jews. Moshe quickly identifies the one at fault and tries to put a stop to the violence: "Why do you hit your fellow?" But bringing peace turns out to be much more complicated than just taking the moral high ground. Hazal tell us that offering tokhaha (reproof) is so difficult that no one has the sensitivity to carry it off anymore. Tokhaha is a form of teaching and should also manifest concern for the spiritual welfare of the sinner (as well registering a personal protest against the commission of sin). But it can also -- and usually does -- make for an adversarial relationship between reprover and reprovved. Few people like to be told they are doing something wrong, especially in front of other people and when emotions are high -- like during a fistfight. Facing a situation like the one Moshe faces, it is not simple to decide what to do. Moshe actually does very little -- all he does is ask "Why do you hit your fellow?", but the response is furious, sarcastic, and above all, contains a threat to Moshe.

Looking back now on these two stories, it looks like there might be more than just one reason why Moshe runs to Midyan. The Torah tells us that he runs away to avoid being prosecuted (read "executed") for killing the Egyptian. But on a more subtle level, he has shown concern for his people -- twice -- and twice he has been rejected. First he saves the life of the Jew being beaten by the Egyptian, but instead of keeping Moshe's act a secret, the Jew tells his family and friends, and the secret gets out. Moshe risks his life to save this man, but the man turns around and endangers Moshe's life. Then Moshe tries to defuse conflict between two Jews, who not only reject him, but also threaten him. How eager would YOU be to maintain a relationship with this group of people?

**PARO'S MOTIVATION:**

Meanwhile, Paro wants to kill Moshe. The simple reading is that he wants to execute him for killing the Egyptian who was beating the Jew. But since Moshe is Paro's adopted grandson, isn't there some sort of royal immunity?

Grandson or not, Moshe is a Jew to Paro, and the most dangerous thing in his mind is a Jew who shows signs of leadership and resistance (see last week's shiur). Paro allows his daughter to save the Jewish baby she finds in the Nile since he assumes that the child, raised as an Egyptian, will never become a threat. But now he sees Moshe as a potential troublemaker, perhaps even the first spark of Jewish resistance. Moshe's defense of his stricken brother, if not firmly punished by Paro, might send the message to Moshe or to others that there is hope for resistance.

**MOSHE AND YA'AKOV:**

The Torah next reports Moshe's flight from Egypt and his arrival at Midyan. I don't want to spend too much time here, but it's worth noting an interesting pattern:

<b>YA'AKOV</b>	<b>MOSHE</b>
*****	*****
Runs away from home	Runs away from home
Reason: to avoid death	Reason: to avoid death
Encounters a well	Encounters a well
Woman shepherd (Rahel)	Women shepherds
Gives sheep water	Gives sheep water
Moves in with family	Moves in with family
Marries shepherdess daughter	Marries shepherdess daughter
Tends sheep for father-in-law	Tends sheep for father-in-law
Has children there	Has children there

Besides noting this parallelism and offering it for you to "unpack," one other important point is also worth mentioning: this story again shows how Moshe Rabbeinu's sense of justice and fairness impels him to take action to right wrongs. He cannot stand by while evil goes on before him. Even though his interference has already landed him in trouble with Paro, he has not concluded that the smart thing to do is to ignore injustice. He stands up for the daughters of Yitro and prevents the other shepherds from taking advantage of them.

**HASHEM APPEARS:**

We now move on to Moshe Rabbeinu's first meeting with Hashem -- the burning bush. Hashem hears the cries of anguish of Bnei Yisrael, the Torah says; Hashem "remembers" His covenant with the Avot (forefathers), the promise to make their

descendants into a great nation and to give them the Land of Canaan. After giving us this peek into Hashem's thought process, as it were, the story continues with the flaming bush which attracts Moshe's attention.

#### **SHEMOT 3:1-4 --**

Moshe was tending the sheep of Yitro, his father-in-law, priest of Midyan. He led the sheep toward the desert and came to the mountain of Hashem at Horev. An angel of Hashem APPEARED ["VA-YERA"] to him in a flaming fire from a bush. He SAW ["VA-YAR"] that the bush was flaming with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Moshe said, "Let me go over and SEE ["ER-EH"] this fantastic SIGHT ["MAREH"] -- why doesn't the bush burn up?" Hashem SAW ["VA-YAR"] that he had turned to LOOK ["LI-R'OT"]. Hashem called to him from the bush: "Moshe! Moshe!" He said, "Here I am."

Within just 3 pesukim, six different variants of the root "ra-ah" -- "to see" -- appear. The irony of this root's presence here becomes clear as we read on:

#### **SHEMOT 3:5-6 --**

He [Hashem] said, "Do not come closer; take your shoes off of your feet, for the ground you stand on is holy ground." He said, "I am the God of your fathers, God of Avraham, God of Yitzhak, and God of Ya'akov." Moshe **\*\*HID HIS FACE,\*\*** because he was afraid of LOOKING at Hashem.

After all this emphasis on "seeing," and with Moshe so eager to "see" this great "sight" which has "appeared" to him, with Hashem "seeing" that Moshe has come to "see" what it is, when he actually finds out what it is, he doesn't want to "see" it at all! He hides his face, afraid to look at Hashem. This scene foreshadows and encapsulates the entire conversation which ensues between Hashem and Moshe: Hashem announces in dramatic, formal fashion that He has heard the cries of His people (this is the first time Hashem refers to Bnei Yisrael as "Ami," "My nation"), that He remembers the covenant with the Avot, and has now "descended" to pass judgment on the foe. He will redeem the people with mighty miracles, "signs" and "wonders," and the people will then serve Him on Har Sinai. They will move from there to inherit the land promised to them. But Moshe continues to "hide his face" from Hashem, expressing self-doubt and fear and refusing to accept Hashem's mission to lead the people.

In light of Moshe's future interactions with Hashem, it is curious that Moshe is now afraid to "look" at Hashem. Much later, we find Moshe actively seeking opportunities for greater levels of revelation:

#### **SHEMOT 33:18 --**

He [Moshe] said [to Hashem], "SHOW ME Your glory!"

By the time the event in the above pasuk occurs, Moshe has accepted the Torah from Hashem, discovered that the people have built an idol in his absence, and returned to the mountain for the second Tablets and to seek forgiveness for the people. Seeing that Hashem is in a favorable mood, so to speak, Moshe gains forgiveness for the people and then requests: "Show me Your glory!" Not only is Moshe not afraid to "see" Hashem's glory, he is so bold as to \*request\* this experience. Clearly, Moshe's relationship with Hashem develops over time. Earlier on, he is overcome by awe, "afraid to look at Hashem." But by the time he has served as the intermediary for the revelation of the Torah at Har Sinai, he is eager for an experience of greater divine revelation. He asks for the highest level possible. Hashem tells Moshe that he cannot truly see Him without dying in the process; He then shows Moshe His "back." We will look much more closely at this experience when we get there (Parashat Ki Tisa), but for now it is important to realize that Moshe undergoes a process of transformation and growth in his relationship with Hashem.

#### **"REMOVE YOUR SHOES":**

Hashem speaks to Moshe from the bush, calling his name. Moshe responds, but he does not yet know Who is speaking to him. Only when Hashem explicitly reveals His identity does Moshe cover his face in fear of looking at Him. Hashem commands Moshe to remove his shoes before he comes any closer: the ground before him is holy.

Where else are people told to remove their shoes because they are standing on holy ground?

Just after Yehoshua brings Bnei Yisrael over the Jordan River into Canaan, a warrior appears to him (Joshua 5). When Yehoshua asks him whether he is friend or foe, the warrior tells Yehoshua that he is actually the angel-general of Hashem's army, sent to guide Bnei Yisrael in their conquest of the Land of Canaan. He tells Yehoshua to take off his shoes, that the ground he stands on is holy.

Moshe stands in our parasha on Har Horev (Har Sinai); Yehoshua stands somewhere outside of Yeriho (Jericho). What is so special about Har Horev and "some place near Yeriho," that Hashem commands Moshe and Yehoshua to remove their shoes?

At least in the case of Har Sinai, the answer seems obvious: this ground is holy because Hashem will deliver the Torah to Bnei Yisrael on this spot. But that only begs the next question: why indeed does Hashem choose Har Sinai in particular to deliver the Torah?

Perhaps these places -- Har Sinai and "somewhere near Yeriho" -- are holy because of \*what\* Hashem tells the prophet

there, not because of any inherent quality of the places themselves. There is nothing really special about Har Sinai itself: it is a desert mountain, and not a particularly imposing one (as Hazal point out), located three days' journey from Egypt and eleven days' journey from Canaan. It is distinguished not at all; it lies, so to speak, exactly in the middle of nowhere. The same is true of the place where Hashem's warrior-general-angel appears to Yehoshua: outside of Yeriho, somewhere near the border of the Land of Canaan but not in a city or some other significant location.

Both of these revelations of Hashem have special characteristics, which may explain why the ground is made holy by the revelation. In both stories, Hashem entrusts the prophet with his life's mission:

- 1) Moshe's mission is to bring the Jews out of Egypt and mediate the revelation of the Torah to them at Har Sinai. His task will not extend to bringing the Bnei Yisrael into Canaan.
- 2) Yehoshua's mission will be to bring Bnei Yisrael into Canaan and lead the conquest of the Land. This mission is symbolized by the appearance of Hashem's chief warrior-angel.

The reason these places are considered holy is because special divine revelations take place there: two leaders of unparalleled significance in the history of Kelal Yisrael receive their missions in these revelations. The special message sanctifies the ground on which the revelation takes place.

This is also what sanctifies Har Sinai as far as the revelation of the Torah is concerned. Har Sinai is chosen because it is the quintessential "nowhere" (an idea echoed in Hazal). It is chosen because its holiness is due exclusively to the revelation which will take place there. What makes it so holy is that it is where Bnei Yisrael receive their mission -- the Torah -- just as Moshe receives his mission there and Yehoshua receives his mission outside Yeriho. It is also no accident that at the time of the revelation, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to stay away from Har Sinai because it is too holy to tread upon. Hashem warns Moshe repeatedly that anyone who steps on the mountain will die. Once again, the reason the ground is sanctified is because the revelation by Hashem of a mission of national significance is what sanctifies a place.

This would also explain why these places of revelation are holy only \*during\* the actual revelation itself, not afterward. Hashem explicitly tells Moshe that once Ma'amad Har Sinai (the revelation of the Torah) is completed, the people may ascend the mountain; only during the revelation are they prohibited to ascend. This confirms that these places are not inherently holy, and are sanctified only while the special divine presence is there. Similarly, we never hear of a place near Yeriho which has any special permanent significance; there is no warning in Tanakh about not walking there. The place of Yehoshua's revelation was holy only during the giving-over of his mission.

#### **A SUDDEN DEATH THREAT:**

As we know, Moshe finally packs up his family and heads from Yitro's home in Midyan back to Egypt. Somewhere on the road, a bizarre incident occurs: an angel of Hashem appears and tries to kill a member of Moshe's family:

**SHEMOT 4:24-26 --**

It happened, on the way, at a rest stop, that Hashem met him and wanted to kill him. Tziphora took a knife, cut off the foreskin of her son, threw it at his feet, and said, "You are a 'hatan-damim' to me." He turned away from him, and then she said, "A 'hatan-damim' for the circumcised."

Who does Hashem want to kill? Grammatically, it is ambiguous, and may refer to either Moshe or his son. Why does Hashem want to kill anyone? Why does circumcising Eliezer (Moshe and Tziphora's son) ward off Hashem's anger? And what does this story have to do with anything?

In order to understand what is going on here, we have to move back a few pesukim:

**SHEMOT 4:21-23 --**

Hashem said to Moshe, "As you go to return to Egypt, see that you perform before Paro all of the wonders which I have placed in your hand; I will harden his heart, and he will not send out the nation. You shall say to Paro, 'So says Hashem: 'My FIRST-BORN SON is Israel. I have said to you, 'Send forth MY SON, so he may serve Me,' but you have refused to send him. I will [therefore] kill your FIRSTBORN SON!'"

Hashem's firstborn is Bnei Yisrael; Moshe is to threaten Paro that if Paro does not release Hashem's firstborn, Hashem will kill Paro's firstborn. Right after this, Hashem tries to kill \*Moshe's\* firstborn! But why? To answer, we must follow through on the reference to the plague of the firstborn which will strike Egypt after all the other plagues. Looking ahead to then, Hashem has decided to carry out the threat He makes here -- He decides to kill the firstborn of Egypt because Egypt refuses to release His firstborn. At that time, Moshe is commanded by Hashem to tell Bnei Yisrael that if they want their own firstborn sons not to be struck down by the plague, they must paint blood on their doorposts to identify their houses as Jewish houses. This blood is to come from the Korban Pesah, the sacrifice that Bnei Yisrael are commanded to offer on the afternoon before they are to be redeemed from Egypt.

The same thing happens here! Just after Hashem threatens to kill the firstborn of Egypt, Hashem's angel comes and tries to kill Moshe's firstborn. Tziphora suddenly realizes that she and Moshe have done nothing to show that this child is a Jewish child. Just as the houses must be marked (with blood) to show that they are Jewish houses, this child must be marked (with blood) to show that he is a Jewish child.

Perhaps the reason why blood is necessary in both cases -- in this case, the blood of the child, and later on, the blood of the sacrifice -- is as a form of self-sacrifice. The Ramban says that one reason we offer sacrifices is because we are offering something we own to be sacrificed in place of ourselves. We are, on a certain level, offering ourselves. The same theme may be present in circumcision: shedding a few drops of blood symbolizes our total devotion to Hashem, to the degree that we are willing to be "moser nefesh" (sacrifice our lives) for His sake. In order to deserve to be saved from the destroying angel, Moshe's son, in this story, and the Jewish firstborn sons, later on, must bear a sign of their complete dedication to Hashem.

Perhaps one other level of meaning here is that in order to be saved, we must do something to "deserve" it. One reason why the Jews may be commanded to bring the Pesah sacrifice is so that Hashem can give them "credit" for their obedience. The first-born sons, who at this time serve as "kohanim," priests, are key players in the bringing of the sacrifice. Their participation in this mitzvah, and the painting of the symbol of this good deed -- the blood of the sacrifice -- on the doorposts of their houses, merits them salvation. The same is true for Moshe's son: in order to escape the fate with which Hashem has just threatened Egypt, the family must perform a mitzvah with this son. The opportunity most readily available is an act which was commanded to Avraham long ago: circumcision. Tzipora thinks quickly and saves her son by performing this mitzvah.

This structure -- that the plagues of Egypt often have a precursor in earlier events -- is a theme we will explore more fully next week.

Shabbat Shalom



# OHRNET

SHABBAT PARSHAT VAERA • 3 SHVAT 5781 JANUARY 16, 2021 • VOL 28 NO.12

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### The Pandemic and the Endemic

“...but with My Name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them” (6:3)

One of the side-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is claustrophobia. Recently, I went to visit my mother (who, *bli ayn hara*, is more than half-way through her nineties), in England, and as the plane left the sky and we crested the white cloud cover and broke through to the blue, I had a feeling of exhilaration that reminded me of the first time I ever travelled in a plane. I realized that I was feeling the liberation from being cooped up like a battery hen. The psychological effects of this disease may turn out to be more pervasive and long lasting than the illness itself.

Even before the pandemic, our generation was already suffering from endemic low self-esteem. Enforced isolation has exacerbated this to new levels.

The name of two of the Tribes of Israel bear a striking resemblance: Yehuda, the most exalted of the tribes, is called "Yehuda Gur Aryeh" – “A lion cub is Yehuda.” (Ber. 49:10) However in the Book of Devarim, the lowliest of the tribes, Dan, is also called Gur Aryeh, "Dan Gur Aryeh" (33:22). (*Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tissa 13*)

Dan was the tribe that was so steeped in the idol worship of Egypt that they carried their idols with them into the sea when it split. Idol worship was so endemic in the tribe of Dan that the mystical "Clouds of Glory" that accompanied and protected the Jewish People in the desert would not accompany them. (*Pesikata d'Rav Kahana – Piska 3:12*)

What can link the lowest with highest?

In the Torah portion of Vayechi, in the middle of his blessing to Dan, Yaakov seems to suddenly stop and

exclaim, "For Your salvation do I long, Hashem!" Ostensibly, this sudden exclamation has no connection to the blessing that Yaakov is giving. On a deeper level, however, this is the essence of Yaakov's blessing to Dan.

There's a famous Midrash that compares different kinds of Jews to the four species of Succot. The lowliest is the Jew who has neither Torah nor good deeds, who is compared to the *Arava* – the Willow that has no fruit, no taste and no aroma. Why is the lowly *Arava* part of the four species? And more, why does it have its own special day during Succot – Hoshana Rabba?

The awesome power of the *Arava* is that despite its lowliness, it yearns and it thirsts for connection to Hashem, just as the Willow thirsts for water and typically grows by a river.

The Tribe of Dan, despite its lowliness, yearns for connection to Hashem: "For Your salvation do I long, Hashem!"

It is this yearning that makes the Tribe of Dan worthy to be given the same name as Yehuda, the Prince of the Tribes.

We are now reading the Book of *Shemot*, literally the Book of Names. In our current situation, it is easy to lose track of our identity – of our value, our place in this world – of our name. We may be in the lowest part of world history, cut off and lonely, but our yearning for connection, for spirituality, to be close to Hashem, can raise us to the levels of the greatest.

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Vaera: *Pesachim 58-64*

### One Mitzvah, Coming Up!

*Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said, "Mitzvahs should not be passed over."*

What does this principle mean and what is its source? Rashi explains here on our *daf* that it means that once a mitzvah "comes to one's hand" (i.e. presents itself), one should not bypass it or delay it. However, from the word *m'achar* in Rashi's commentary, there seems room to ponder whether Rashi is merely making a statement to explain the words or if he is also giving the reason for this principle. If *me'achar* means "once" – i.e. "Do not pass over a mitzvah *once* it comes to your hand" – this is a statement but not a reason. But, if *m'achar* means "since" – i.e. "Do not pass over a mitzvah *since* it came to your hand – this would indicate a reason for not passing over it. "Since" and "because" it is in front of you to do, it would be a disgrace to the mitzvah to pass over it or delay it.

This same teaching of Reish Lakish of "*Mitzvahs should not be passed over*" is taught in other places in *Shas* as well. For example, it appears in *Yoma 33a*. There, Rashi clearly offers a reason for this important Torah principle, a teaching that is found in the *Mechilta*: The Torah states, *U'shmartem et ha'matzahs* – "And guard the *matzahs*" – which can also be read as "And *guard the mitzvahs*." This means that if a mitzvah presents itself to a person, he should guard it and do it immediately, not waiting until it becomes "like *chametz* and old." Accordingly, Rashi here is also using the word *m'achar* in the sense of "since," and as being the *reason* behind the halacha.

There is also a deeper, spiritual idea behind this Torah principle of not delaying the performance of a mitzvah. Rabbi Akiva Tatz has explained it in the following manner: Just as *matzah* becomes *chametz* if left too long, so too a mitzvah, which is spiritual life for one who performs it, becomes *chametz*, fermented, sour, if it is allowed to become part of the natural. A mitzvah is a physical action containing unbounded spiritual energy, but if it is performed as no more than a physical action, it may lose its connection with the spiritual world. Mitzvahs are like *matzahs*. When performed with zeal and alacrity,

they are transcendent, but when performed sluggishly, they sour.

Returning to Reish Lakish's statement in the *gemara*: What is the context? The *mishna* teaches the order of the numerous steps involved in bringing the Pesach sacrifice in the Beit Hamikdash. After the *shechita*, the blood is received by a *kohen* in a bowl (*bazich*) of silver or gold, which is then passed from *kohen* to *kohen* until it arrives to a *kohen* who is near the Altar, who sprinkles its blood there. One halacha in the *mishna* is that a *kohen* should receive the full bowl from the previous person, on its way to the Altar, *before* he returns the empty bowl, on its way back from the Altar. Why does he receive the full bowl before returning the empty one? The *gemara* says that this supports the statement of Reish Lakish. Since the full bowl is being received and passed on to fulfill a mitzvah, it takes precedence over the empty bowl.

It is important to note that there can be an exception to this rule, if warranted by the halacha. Normally the *tefillin* of the arm should be put on before the *tefillin* for the head. Why? The Torah says that the head *tefillin* will be *v'hayu*. *Chazal* (*Menachot 36a*) explain that this word teaches that when the head *tefillin* are on, the arm *tefillin* need to already be on (*v'hayu* is plural – Rashi). What should one who is putting on *tefillin* do if he mistakenly takes out the *tefillin* for the head first? Should he pass over it, putting it aside until first wrapping the *tefillin* for the hand – and not follow the principle on our *daf*? The halachic authorities rule that he should indeed put it down and first put on the *tefillin* for the hand, due to the Torah decree of *v'hayu*. And to be more careful next time! (*Aruch Hashulchan 25:9*)

- *Pesachim 64b*

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# Q & A

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## VAERA

### Questions

1. Did G-d ever appear to Avraham and say "I am G-d"?
2. What cause did the forefathers have to question G-d?
3. How was Moshe commanded to act towards Pharaoh?
4. How long did Levi live?
5. Who was Aharon's wife? Who was her father? Who was her brother?
6. Why are Yitro and Yosef both referred to as "Putiel"?
7. After which plague did G-d begin to "harden Pharaoh's heart"?
8. Why did Pharaoh go to the Nile every morning?
9. Give two reasons why the blood was chosen as the first plague.
10. How long did the plague of blood last?
11. Why did the frogs affect Pharaoh's house first?
12. What did Moshe mean when he told Pharaoh that the frogs would be "in you and in your nation"?
13. What are "chamarim"?
14. Why didn't Moshe strike the dust to initiate the plague of lice?
15. Why were the Egyptian sorcerers unable to bring lice?
16. What were the Egyptians likely to do if they saw the Jews slaughtering lambs?
17. Why didn't the wild beasts die as the frogs had?
18. The *dever* killed "all the cattle of Egypt." Later, boils afflicted their cattle. How can this be?
19. Why did Moshe pray only after leaving the city?
20. What was miraculous about the way the hail stopped falling?

*All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.*

### Answers

1. 6:9 - Yes.
2. 6:9 ~ Although G-d swore to give them the Land, they never actually had control over it.
3. 6:13 - With the respect due a king.
4. 6:16 - 137 years.
5. 6:23 - Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav, sister of Nachshon.
6. 6:25 - Yitro fattened (*pitem*) cows for idol worship. Yosef scoffed (*pitpet*) at his evil inclination.
7. 7:3 - After the sixth plague ~ *shechin*.
8. 7:15 - To relieve himself. Pharaoh pretended to be a god who did not need to attend to his bodily functions. Therefore, he secretly used the Nile for this purpose.
9. (a) 7:17 - Because the Nile was an Egyptian god.  
(b) 8:17 - Because an invading army first attacks the enemy's water supply, and G-d did the same.
10. 7:25 - Seven days.
11. 7:28 - Pharaoh himself advised the enslavement of the Jewish People.
12. 7:29 - He warned that the frogs would enter their intestines and croak.
13. 8:10 - Piles.
14. 8:12 - Because the dust protected Moshe by hiding the body of the Egyptian that Moshe killed.
15. 8:14 - The Egyptian sorcerers' magic had no power over anything smaller than a barley kernel.
16. 8:22 - Stone the Jews.
17. 8:27 - So the Egyptians would not benefit from their hides.
18. 9:10 - In the plague of *dever* only the cattle in the fields died. The plague of *shechin* affected the surviving cattle.
19. 9:29 - Because the city was full of idols.
20. 9:33 - The hailstones stopped in mid-air and didn't fall to the ground.

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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## Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

### Marshes, Marshes, Marshes

The Hebrew Language is seemingly blessed with three different words that mean “marsh” or “swamp.” When Pharaoh saw a dream that consisted of seven fat cows, the Bible reports that the cows were grazing in the *achu* (“marsh;” Gen. 41:2, 41:18). Yet, when bringing the Plague of Blood upon the Egyptians, G-d told Moses to tell Aaron to stretch his hand “over the waters of Egypt – over their rivers, over their canals, over their marshes (*agam*), and over all their gatherings of water” (Ex. 7:19), again using the word *agam* for “marsh.” Similar verbiage appears concerning the Plague of Frogs as well (Ex. 8:1). *Bitzah*, a third word for “marsh,” appears three times in the Bible (Iyov 8:11, 40:21, Yechezkel 47:11) and also denotes a muddy, swampy place. In this essay we will explore the etymologies and nuances of these three words *achu*, *agam* and *bitzah*.

Rashi (to Gen. 41:2) asserts that *achu* means *agam*. To support this claim, Rashi cites Iyov 8:11, which reads: “Can reeds (*gome*) grow tall without a marshland (*bitzah*), or a marsh (*achu*) without water?” That said, Nachmanides (to Gen. 41:2) takes issue with Rashi's commentary and argues that *achu* does not mean “marsh,” but rather refers to a certain type of grass or vegetation that tends to grow on the river banks. Nachmanides then suggests that the etymology of *achu* relates to the Hebrew word *ach* (“brother”), in allusion to the camaraderie between the various types of flora that grow in tandem along the river's edge. (Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch makes the same point. Rabbi Pappenheim writes that *achu* refers to the “brotherhood” between the different animals which join up together in the fertile land to feast on its produce, or that it refers to the fact that the *achu*'s location alongside the river makes it appear as the river's “brother.”)

Rabbi Moshe ben Shem Tov Gabbai (1340-1420) defends Rashi's position by explaining that *achu* refers to a “marsh” in which the type of vegetation mentioned by Nachmanides often sprouts. Because such vegetation tends to materialize in swampy areas, the word for this sort of vegetation became synonymous with “marshes” themselves, such that in practice *achu* means the same thing as *agam*. (See also Ibn Janach and Radak's *Sefer HaShorashim*, which already propose that *achu* refers to both a certain type of grass, possibly papyrus, and the place in which that grass typically grows.)

To make things a bit more complicated, Rashi (to Ex. 7:19) also defines *agam* as a stagnant body of water and translates the Hebrew word into the Old French *estanc* (*etang* in Modern French), which means “pond.” A pond is not quite the same thing as a marsh or swamp.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) traces the word *agam* to the biliteral root GIMMEL-MEM, which refers to “spongy or absorbent material.” In that sense, *agam* refers to a tract of water-soaked land inundated or partially flooded with water. Such a place must be sponge-like if it is to soak up so much water and always remain wet. Another word derived from this root is *gome*, which is a sort of “spongy reed” that grows in marshy wetlands. (Rabbi Wertheimer even writes that a marsh is called *agam* because of the *gome* that grows therein.)

The word *bitzah* appears three times in the Bible (Iyov 8:11, 40:21, Yechezkel 47:11), and also denotes a muddy, swampy place. It derives from the Biblical Hebrew *botz* (“mud,” Jer. 38:22). Rabbi Pappenheim argues that these two words derive from the biliteral root BET-TZADI, which refers to “a fluid with mucus-like consistency.” The most obvious and common derivative of this root is

*beitzah* (“egg”), whose contents are typically gooey, like mucus. (Parenthetically, the word *beitzah* in the singular form never appears in the Bible, only the word *beitzim*, in plural, does (e.g. Deut. 22:6, Yechezkel 30:9). The viscosity of *botz* similarly resembles mucus because it is not quite as pourable as water, nor can it be described as wholly solid. *Bitzah*, in the sense of “marsh,” also fits this core meaning because under swamp conditions the ground tends to remain muddy and thus viscous. Interestingly, Rabbi Pappenheim also asserts that the word *butz* (Esther 1:6, 8:15, Yechezkel 27:16) refers specifically to a type of “flax/linen” that grows in watery soil like that of a *bitzah*.

Rashi (to Gen. 41:2) writes that *achu* translates into Old French as *maresc* (a cognate of the English word *marsh*). Elsewhere (to Taanit 22a, Yevamot 121a, Sanhedrn 5b), Rashi writes the same about the word *agam* and its Aramaic cognate *agama*, and yet again (to Yechezkel 47:11, Iyov 8:11, Bava Metzia 74a), he uses that Old French word as a translation for *bitzah*. Rashi (to Shevuot 16a, Sanhedrin 96a) also translates the Talmudic term *bitzaim/bitzaei mayim* (with an AYIN) into Old French as *maresc*.

But wait! There is one more word that did not make it to our list: *suf*. Rashi (to Ex. 2:3, 13:18) writes that *suf* is related to *agam*. However, Rabbi Avraham Meir HaKohen Glanzer of Antwerp infers in *Maayanei Agam* that Rashi does not write that *suf* means the same thing as *agam*. Rather, Rashi implies that *suf* is somehow associated with the *agam*, but is not coterminous with *agam*. This is borne out by the continuation of Rashi’s comments, in which he translates the Hebrew *suf* into the Old French *roisel*, which means in English “roseau cane” – also known as the “common reed.” Thus, *suf* refers to the reeds that tend to grow in a swamp or marsh, but does not actually refer to the swamp itself. Hence, *Yam Suf* means the Reed Sea (not the Red Sea), not the Swamp Sea.

(In this essay, we used the English terms *marsh* and *swamp* interchangeably. Interestingly, according to Google Books' Ngram Viewer, the word *marsh* was more popular in English literature published between 1800-1850, while *swamp* was more popular from 1850-1970. Then *marsh* became more popular from 1970-2000. Since the year 2000, the word *swamp* has again been more popular.)

For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at [rcklein@ohr.edu](mailto:rcklein@ohr.edu)

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## A BLESSING ON YOUR HEAD – INTRODUCTION

Directly after reciting the blessings over the Torah, we immediately follow them by reading verses from the Torah. Tosafot in Tractate Berachot 11b explain that this custom originated in France and it is extremely old. What is the rationale behind the custom? Normally, on making a blessing over something, we straightaway do whatever it was that prompted the blessing. For example, before eating an apple we make a blessing and then, without pausing, we bite into the apple right away so that there is no break between the recitation of the blessing and the action that goes together with it. So, too, here, directly after reciting the blessings over the Torah, we read selected portions of the Torah. Our recitation of the verses and the Talmudic teachings are an act of learning, and eliminate concern that we might have recited the blessings over the Torah in vain.

What exactly is said to constitute our Torah learning after saying these blessings? First, three verses are recited from Numbers, 6:24-26. Following that, the very first Mishna in Tractate Peah – a Tractate that deals with agricultural issues – is said. The third piece that is said is a lesson from the Talmud that is taken from Tractate Shabbat 127a. The theme of “number three” is clearly prevalent here: the first section is comprised of *three* verses, and, all together there are *three* different segments from the Written Torah and the Oral Torah that are recited.

The Mishna in Tractate Middot 2:6 describes that in the Holy Temple there were three steps between the Israelites’ Courtyard and the Priestly Courtyard, and it was on these three steps that the Priestly Blessing was recited. Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579-1654), in his formative and indispensable commentary on the Mishna called *Tosafot Yom Tov*,

explains that the Priestly Blessing was comprised of three verses – exactly the same three verses that we recite each morning after the Morning Blessings – and that is why there were three steps: one for each verse. Subsequently, it is extremely fitting that we recite three different sections of the Torah, corresponding to the three steps between the two courtyards.

But there is another dimension as well. The Torah is comprised of both a Written Torah and an Oral Torah. The dominant part of the Oral Torah is the Mishna and the Talmud. Hence, we recite verses from the Written Torah as well as sections from the Mishna and from the Talmud. And, by doing so, we are ensuring that we say something from each facet of the inestimable and priceless triple-twined treasure that is the Torah.

Rabbi David Avudraham, in his foundational *Sefer Avudraham* on the prayers and blessings, adds another detail. The first of three verses that we read is comprised of three words, the second verse has five words, and the third verse has seven. The universally accepted custom is that when the Torah is read during the week, three people are called up to recite blessings over the Torah. On a Festival, five people are called up. And on Shabbat, seven people are honored with being called up. The Avudraham explains that the reason that our Sages instituted such a system was to mirror the number of words in each of the three verses of the Priestly Blessing – three, five and seven.

*To be continued...*

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# LETTER AND SPIRIT

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*Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman*

## Vaera

### Human, Prenatal Greatness

The story of the Exodus is interrupted with a genealogical interlude, which recites the lineage of Moshe and Aharon, concluding with “these are Moshe and Aharon” – and from there, the narration resumes. The roster does not begin with Moshe and Aharon’s ancestor Levi, but rather outlines the tribes of Reuven and Shimon, and then continues to list the children of Levi – Gershon and his children - before getting to Kehat’s line, from which Moshe and Aharon descend. What is the purpose of this genealogical roster?

First, it was meant to show that Moshe and Aharon were human beings. Just as the story is about to turn into one of triumph, with Moshe and Aharon performing miraculous feats, we are reminded that they were mortals. We are shown the relationship of their tribe with preceding ones, and the relationship of their family and house with the families and houses of relatives. They had aunts and uncles and cousins.

Here, the Torah emphasizes that Moshe was an ordinary human. He will go on now to perform mighty miracles, lead the Jewish People out of Egypt, split the sea for them, sustain them in the desert, and bring the Torah down from Heaven. From the inception of his greatness, we are told that he was a man whose parents and grandparents everyone knew. At the same time, this removed the possibility of erroneous deification while demonstrating the heights to which a mortal can rise.

Second, the lineage is meant to dispel another illusion. While this “certificate of origin” verified Moshe and Aharon as humans, it may have also led

to the belief that everyone, without exception, can be a prophet. But, if that were the case, then the “first-comer,” a descendant of Reuven, would have been chosen. Instead, the lineage of Reuven and Shimon, followed by all of the children of Levi, are recited – to demonstrate that the tribe of Levi was chosen, and in particular, Levi’s grandson Amram was chosen among them. G-d chose the most worthy and most exemplary to be His emissaries.

An examination of the names of Reuven, Shimon and Levi reveal the thoughts and feelings of our mother Leah when these children were conceived and born. If the mother-to-be can affect the soul of the child, then from the names, which reflect her innermost feelings, we can surmise why Levi was chosen. The name “Reuven” reflected the sentiment that “the L-rd has seen my affliction [as the less beloved wife]; my husband will love me.” (Ber. 29:32); The name “Shimon” reflected the feeling that “the L-rd has heard that I am the hated one; therefore he has given me this one too!” (Ber. 29:33). Finally, Leah names her third son Levi – “Now my husband will become attached to me!” (Ber. 29:34). In her feelings of disadvantage, she was saturated with love for her husband, and yearning for his reciprocal love – a love that reached its fruition with the birth of Levi.

Within the house of Levi, only one courageous couple, inspired by faith and love, reunited in a time of terror, expressing their great trust in the Almighty. Through faith and faithfulness, love and loyalty, was Moshe, the leader of the Jewish People, conceived.

- Sources: *Commentary Shemot 6:14-30*

# THE RARE CALENDAR PHENOMENA OF 5781

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

(Part 11 of a new mini-series)

5781 is a year that is chock-full of rare calendar phenomena that we will *iyH* be witnessing, or, more accurately, taking an active part in. Let us continue exploring what is in store for us.

## No Parshat Vayelech

In what may seem odd to readers, in 5781 the Torah portion of Vayelech will not be read during the public Torah reading service. No, this does not mean that we will skip it entirely. It just means that Vayelech will be next year's Shabbat Shuva. Therefore, by the time we get to its reading, it will already be the next year, 5782. The reason for this is interesting. Rosh Hashana for 5782 will occur on a Tuesday-Wednesday. The Tur, when codifying the calendar halacha, sets several necessary sign-posts in relation to Torah portions, time of year, and various *Yamim Tovim*. One of these is the dictum (seemingly a play on the words of a verse in the beginning of the Book of Daniel): “Ba”G Hamelech Pas Vayelech.”

This is referring to when the Rosh Hashana (*Hamelech*) comes in on a Monday or Tuesday (*Ba”G* ב”ג). In this case, Vayelech gets split up, or crumbled (*Pas Vayelech*), and read separately. This maxim is letting us know the rule of when Nitzavim and Vayelech will be read as a double Torah portion or be read as separate stand-alone Torah portions.

This adage goes hand-in-hand with another rule, “*Kumu V’Tik’u*,” that Nitzavim always has to be right before Rosh Hashana. (*Kumu*, ‘stand,’ refers to *Parshat Nitzavim*, literally ‘standing.’ And *Tik’u*, ‘blow’ refers to Rosh Hashana, when the “mitzvah of the day” is to blow the Shofar.)

As the *Gemara* in Megilla explains, this is due to Ezra HaSofer’s decree that the curses in the Book of Devarim (meaning Ki Tavo), need to be read prior to Rosh Hashana in order that “*Tichleh Shana U’Kilaloteha* – the year and its curses may end” (and ostensibly, its addendum, “*Tachel Shana*

*U’Birchoteha* – the New Year and its blessings be ushered in”), to rapidly come true.

Tosafot, and seconded by the Abudraham, and then the Levush, explain why this is so. Since Ki Tavo contains *tochachah* (rebuke), there must be a noticeable “buffer week” (practically, Nitzavim) between its reading and Rosh Hashana. Therefore, Nitzavim must be the stand-alone “buffer week” before Rosh Hashana, in order to emphasize that we are getting Ki Tavo and its *tochacha* in *just before* Rosh Hashana, to enable a misfortune-free New Year. These rules, or, more accurately, necessary points of *parsha* alignment (or realignment) during the year, are accepted as the clear halacha by all later authorities.

So, synchronizing these instructions, if Rosh Hashana falls out on a Monday or Tuesday, then Nitzavim will be the stand-alone *parsha* right before Rosh Hashana, and Vayelech gets pushed off a week to (next year’s) Shabbat Shuva. Yet, when Rosh Hashana falls out on a Thursday or on Shabbat, then Nitzavim and Vayelech are combined on the last Shabbat of the year. Because during the past year (5780), Rosh Hashana fell out on a Monday, Nitzavim and Vayelech were combined on the last Shabbat prior to Rosh Hashana. Yet, this year, 5781, Rosh Hashana fell out on Shabbat. Hence, Vayelech will end up being 5782’s Shabbat Shuva, and will not get to be a public Torah reading at all this year.

This actually occurs fairly often, as does the opposite. Sometimes we get to read Vayelech twice in a year (as will happen in 5783), once in the beginning of the year as the stand-alone reading for Shabbat Shuva, and once again at the end, as a *double-parsha*, along with Nitzavim.



## Full Selichot

Another aspect of 5782's Rosh Hashana falling out on Tuesday is that, for Ashkenazim, all of pre-Rosh Hashana days of *Selichot* will be recited. As the Ashkenazic *minhag* is to always commence *Selichot* on a Motzei Shabbat/Sunday that is at least four days before Rosh Hashana, it is only when the next year's Rosh Hashana falls out on a Tuesday, that it is possible for the "full count" of all of the 100 *Selichot* to be recited. This is just one more noteworthy feature that brings our calendar year to a close.

## White-Garbed

There is actually one more interesting convergence with the secular (US) calendar: Erev Rosh Hashana will fall out on Labor Day. However, as at that point we will be entering the *Yamim Noraim*, I am sure that this detail will not be too relevant to us. Since the only "observance" (that I am familiar with) is not to wear white past Labor Day, I am

confident that all Ashkenazim will disregard this unspoken maxim, and instead follow the great Rema's directive to specifically wear white on the *Yamim Noraim* (and certainly on Yom Kippur) to be akin to angels on the holiest day(s) of the year.

In conclusion, since during this year Vayelech, the *parsha* that discusses the topic of *Hester Panim* (G-d "hiding His Face" from us, so to speak) will not be publicly read, perhaps this incredible year will be a year of *nissim geluyim* – clear miracles – as was intimated by the *Chasam Sofer*, and may this exceptional year's initials indeed stand for *Tehei Shmas Pdyon Acharon* – May it be the year of the final redemption!

*Postscript:* One last fascinating fact about our remarkable year is that, of all possibilities in the *Tur's* 247-year cycle, due to its calendar makeup, a ZaCH"A year, which is actually the shortest possible Jewish year at only 353 days, also has the least amount of prayers recited within it: 1143 (in the Diaspora).

*Written l'zechus Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam v'chol yotzei chalatzecha l'yeshua sheleimah teikif u'miyad.*

*This author wishes to acknowledge Rabbi Shea Linder's excellent article on this topic.*

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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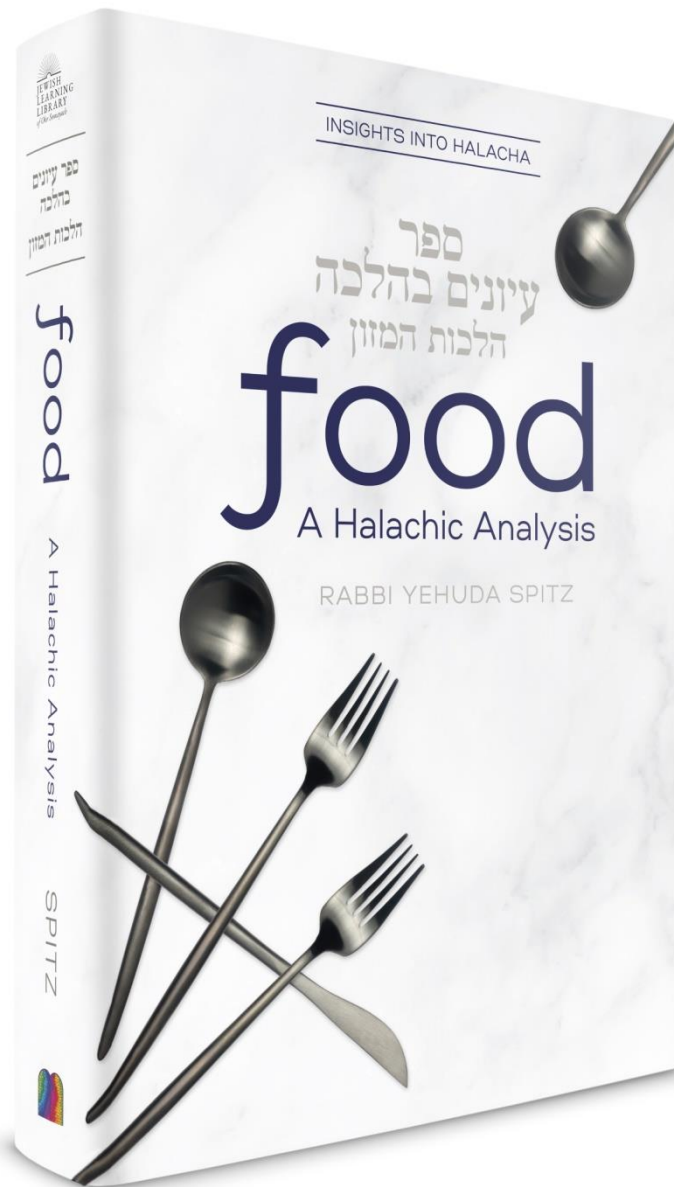
**G**-d tells Moshe to inform the Jewish People that He is going to take them out of Egypt. However, the Jewish People do not listen. G-d commands Moshe to go to Pharaoh and ask him to free the Jewish People. Although Aharon shows Pharaoh a sign by turning a staff into a snake, Pharaoh's magicians copy the sign, emboldening Pharaoh to refuse the request. G-d punishes the Egyptians and sends plagues of blood and frogs, but the magicians copy these miracles on a smaller scale, again encouraging Pharaoh to be obstinate. After the plague of lice, Pharaoh's magicians concede that only G-d could be performing these miracles.

Only the Egyptians, and not the Jews in Goshen, suffer during the plagues. The onslaught continues with wild animals, pestilence, boils and fiery hail. However, despite Moshe's offers to end the plagues if Pharaoh will let the Jewish People leave, Pharaoh continues to harden his heart and refuses.

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