BS"D
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Potomac Torah Study Center
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Rosh Hodesh Shevat is Monday, January 23

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 more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Special program last Sunday: The Torah and Legacy of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel and his Ongoing Impact on the Orthodox Community on the 50th Anniversary of His Passing.
The video is available at: https://www.facebook.com/YCTorah/videos/721919542892497/
Note: sound starts after first 20 seconds, but captions are available from the beginning.

Vaera in many ways continues the story that the Torah started in Shemot. Everyone from Yosef's generation has died. A new Paro claims not to know Yosef and gradually enslaves the Jewish people. Twelve separate tribes have explosive population growth, and there is no obvious leader to represent the Jews before Paro. The Egyptians fear the potential for Jews to become a danger to Egypt, primarily because of their explosive population growth. Paro is the first person to identify B'Nai Yisrael as a nation (1:9), and the Torah indicates that the Egyptians view the Jews as vermin (1:7). Paro imposes increasingly heavy work on the Jews (trying to keep them too tired to reproduce and hoping to work them to death). Once the Jews start complaining to God, He selects a Jew – Moshe – to represent the Jews before Paro and redeem them from slavery and oppression.

Rabbi Eitan Mayer observes that the Torah uses deliberate links in the story of Moshe back to the creation story and the story of Noah. A woman from the tribe of Levi gives birth to a son, and "she sees that he is good" (2:2). She hides him for three months, then places him in a "teva," and places it at the edge of the river (2:3). The language of saying that something is "good" is a judgment that God makes. (Rabbi David Fohrman argues that only a Creator may decide what is good or bad, and when a human tries making a Creator's judgment, that is the beginning of sin. For extended discussion, see material on the early chapters of the Torah at alephbeta.org.) By calling the baby boy "good," the Torah is linking the material about the baby back to creation and making the point that to understand what is going on with Moshe's early life, we must look for insights to the creation story.

When the woman places her baby in a teva and places it in a large river, the Torah is indicating that the story of the baby has something to do with Noah and the flood. ("Teva" only appears in the Torah with respect to Noah's ark and Moshe's box in the Nile.)

The Torah indicates that the birth of Moshe connects with the creation of the world. Moshe's primary role is to take the new nation of B'Nai Yisrael out of slavery to revelation at Har Sinai and to its destiny in the land that Hashem has promised to our Avot. As Rabbi Mayer states, we are to understand that this process is a spiritual recreation of the world, not physically but morally. God's original plan of a connection with all humanity did not work. Plan B is to undo the original creation by flood, start with the only decent man then alive, and wait for someone who could start a nation able to bring proper religious and moral values to the world (Avraham).

In Gan Eden, one of God's special trees is Etz Chaim, the Tree of Life (immortality). Once man sins and must leave the garden, humans lose the connection to immortality. After the Revelation, we learn that the Torah is an Etz Chaim, a tree of life for those who cling to the Torah and mitzvot. Rabbi Fohrman later makes the connection that the Mishkan is essentially a mirror image of the teva. Rather than a box covered with pitch, the Mishkan is a box covered with gold. (We shall see this connection in a few months.) With this insight, we learn that the connections involving creation, Noah, and Moshe extend to the Mishkan and Torah. These insights, which I can only mention briefly here, introduce many of the dozens of interconnections across the Torah.

As we move further into Sefer Shemot, anti-Semitism arises regularly. The United Nations established January 27, the secular date of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps in 1945, as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The liberation date on the Jewish calendar is 13 Shevat 5705, which this year coincides with Shabbat Beshalach (Shabbat Shira) (ironic timing). Because of the importance of anti-Semitism coming up in the next two weeks, I am opening the Devrei Torah below with two outstanding and timely messages. Rabbi Marc Angel addresses the question of the impact of Israel on anti-Semitism and the question without an answer, "why does anti-Semitism never go away?" Rabbi Herzl Hefter, Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem, addresses the commandments in the Torah to destroy and kill several other nations, destroy their idols, and asks how we are to object when other nations today follow similar policies (based on their religions) when they seek to kill us and destroy our religious items. As we approach the anniversary of the destruction of the Nazi killing centers, we should ponder the questions that Rabbis Angel and Hefter raise.

This coming Monday, Rosh Hodesh Shevat, is the fifth yahrzeit of my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l. In the early years that I knew Rabbi Cahan, I did not experience anti-Semitism. Our congregants were shocked some thirty or so years ago, when some high school thugs threw raw eggs at Rabbi Cahan as he walked to services on Yom Kippur. As the years continued, anti-Semitism became so much more common and obvious that no intelligent person could ignore it any more. Reports of violence against obviously Orthodox Jews all over the world, including in the neighborhoods where I lived in Los Angeles and where my relatives live in Chicago, are very common now. The safe world where and when I grew up no longer exists for our children and grandchildren. Let us work for a reversal of this trend and for better days in the future.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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. 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.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Focus on Anti-Semitism and Violence in the Name of Religion: Important insights from two outstanding Rabbis: Rabbi Marc Angel and Rabbi Herzl Hefter:

Surprised by Anti-Semitism? Yes and No.

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Although Jews have faced anti-Semitism from time immemorial, it always comes upon us as something new. It surprises us. We don't understand it.

We strive to be good people, good citizens; we are kind hearted and generous. We devote ourselves to the education of our children, to the betterment of society, to justice and compassion. We have our share of faults along with all other human beings; but by and large, we are a good, responsible, hard-working community.

And yet, no matter what we do, people hate us! They don't see us as individual human beings but as a vast stereotype. They don't care if we are religious or not religious; if we are liberals or conservatives. If we are Jewish, they are against us and want to hurt us.

It was once thought that the establishment of the State of Israel would bring anti-Semitism to an end. After all, Jews would then have a feeling of security in the world, a safe haven where no one would bother us.

But the Jewish State has simply become a new target for the anti-Semites. They now couch Jew-hatred for hatred of "the Zionists." Anti-Semites don't have a problem with Hamas firing thousands of missiles at civilian centers in Israel; but when Israel responds by bombing the enemy, Israel is immediately condemned and vilified by the haters. For the anti-Semites, Israel is always wrong regardless of what it does or doesn't do.

Happily, there are many millions of people who feel warmly toward Jews and the Jewish State. Happily, many millions of people admire the accomplishments of the State of Israel in the face of so many obstacles; they respect Israel's right — and obligation — to defend its citizens.

But when we see outbreaks of blatant anti-Jewish violence, anti-Jewish rhetoric, anti-Israel demonization — it surprises and pains us! In spite of thousands of years dealing with anti-Jewish hatred and persecution, we still are not used to it. We somehow think that humanity will improve, will judge us fairly. We grow optimistic at any sign of peace and understanding, mutual cooperation and solidarity.

We keep telling ourselves that most people are good and that reason will ultimately prevail. The haters will eventually overcome malice and violence; they will realize the value of peaceful and respectful cooperation. In a world of over seven billion human beings, surely there must be room for the infinitesimal presence of 15 million Jews. In a world with so many countries, surely there must be room for one tiny Jewish State that wants nothing more than to be able to live in peace and security.

But the anti-Semites and anti-Zionists don't really care. They don't want to be reasoned with; they don't want to listen. They have their agenda of hate.

Saul Bellow, the American novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, wrote in his book *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account:*

> *"…There is one fact of Jewish life unchanged by the creation of a Jewish state: you cannot take your right to live for granted. Others can; you cannot. This is not to say that everyone else is living pleasantly and well under a decent regime. No, it means only that the Jews, because they are Jews, have never been able to take the right to live as a natural right….This right is still clearly not granted them, not even in the liberal West."*

Bellow's complaint is not new. Jews throughout the generations have had to face the same stark reality: Jews, because

they are Jews, cannot take the right to live as a natural right.

That's the sad part of the story.

But that's not the end of the story. Even if there has long been hatred and violence directed against Jews…we are still here! We continue to live, to thrive, to hope.

The late Jewish thinker, Simon Rawidowicz, wrote an essay about "Israel: the Ever-Dying People." He noted that Jews have often felt that theirs was the last Jewish generation. Jewish survival seemed hopeless. But although we were "ever-dying," we were in fact ever-living! We often felt despair; but hope and persistence prevailed. Jews found ways to overcome all who would decimate us.

Although current manifestations of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are ugly and painful, we must take the long view of things. This isn't the first period of Jewish history where Jews faced viciousness and violence. It likely won't be the last period either. But long experience has taught us to stay strong, stay confident, stay positive. The challenge to our generation is to stand tall as Jews, to stand strong on behalf of Israel.

And we do look forward to a time when humanity will overcome the disease of anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, we recall the words of Rav Nahman of Bratslav: All the world is a narrow bridge; the essential thing is not to be afraid, not to be afraid at all.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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 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.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/surprised-anti-semitism-yes-and-no

Vaera – In the Name of God: The Possibility of Passion and Tolerance

By Rabbi Herzl Hefter *

> *And God spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by My name LORD (YHVH) I was not known to them.* (Exodus 6:2-3)
>
> *"My name is Alice, but — "*
> *"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. "What does it mean?"*
> *"Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.*

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, 1871)

The meaning of the divine name *El Shaddai* holds the key to the possibility of religious passion and commitment alongside tolerance.

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama penned his essay, "The End of History?" in which he argued that the end of the Cold War, with the victory of liberal Western democracy over other forms of government, heralded "the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

More than thirty years later, we are left scratching our heads, astonished at Fukuyama's naïveté. Old ideological rivalries are indeed dead, but ferocious religious conflicts have replaced them with a vengeance, becoming a major source of global instability and providing horrific examples of cruelty for all to see.

In 2001, a few months before 9/11, before most of us could imagine what was coming, the Taliban destroyed the ancient Buddhas of Bamyan in Afghanistan. The civilized world was taken aback at the barbarity of the destruction.

I too thought the act to be a display of barbarism and savagery. Yet I was troubled by an uncomfortable thought. Doesn't the Torah which I hold dear call for similar violence against idols? (Deuteronomy 7:5 is a good example: *"But thus shall ye deal with them: ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their Asherah poles, and burn their graven images with fire.")* And aren't all traditional religious systems closed structures that allow for very little tolerance of the infidel or the heretic?

I began to ask myself honestly: how was I, an Orthodox Jew, essentially different ideologically from the Taliban? Was it only that westernized Jews (and Christians, for that matter) no longer possessed authentic religious enthusiasm? Was it only that in modern religion, concern for public relations has displaced passion? I also found myself wondering about the question Peter Berger asks in his book, *The Heretical Imperative*: how is it possible to maintain sincere and passionate fidelity to one's particular religious tradition while being genuinely tolerant of other people's choices?

Berger speaks of what he calls "soft certainty." This means that the basis of religious faith lies not in metaphysical assertions but in the recesses of the human heart. It is in the heart where God is revealed and experienced. The reality of this experience is the foundation of "soft certainty." Certainty is not available through contemplation of the reality "out there." "Out there," there is doubt and uncertainty which carves out the topography necessary for tolerance.

The proper place for institutionalized orthodoxies (Jewish or otherwise) that preach exclusivity and obedience to external authority, in a landscape of intensely personal divine revelation in and of the heart, is beyond our scope here. But for those of us committed to a tradition which is alive for us, it is crucial to encounter this spiritual landscape *within* our tradition.

A Hasidic interpretation of the divine name, *El-Shaddai*, that appears in this week's Torah portion helped me do so. *Shaddai* has a number of possible meanings. R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha (1765–1827), one of the great Hasidic masters in Poland, explained it by breaking it into two parts. The letter *shin* is a prefix meaning "that," and *"dai"* means "enough." *She dai* would mean, "that [which] is sufficient." He goes on to explain that this means that there is just enough revelation of God in the world in order for humans recognize His existence. In the revelation of the name *Shaddai*, God says of Himself that *"there is just enough of Me in the world to know Me."*

R. Simcha Bunim's reading of God's name provides the necessary space for tolerance of others and their choices. God has delimited Himself, in order to make human activity meaningful and free; the tolerance we exhibit toward others is a necessary consequence of God's ongoing choice to reveal "just enough" of the divine self. The significance of this teaching, however, extends beyond facilitating a space of uncertainty that allows for religious tolerance. It actually promotes deeper and more engaging religious possibilities.

R. Simcha Bunim's teaching discloses the precarious nature of creation. Too much Divine revelation and we lose our independent identity. An example of this is the reaction of the children of Israel at Sinai to the intense revelatory experience; they beseeched Moses to protect them from the all-consuming Presence of God. On the other hand, too little divine revelation and we have a world which is devoid of meaning or the possibility of redemption.

Creation, as reflected in the divine name Shaddai, teeters perilously between faith and skepticism, hope and despair, existence and annihilation, God's at once comforting and disquieting Presence and His terrifying absence. Only in the world of *El Shaddai*, where belief in God cannot be taken for granted and atheism is possible, can faith be meaningful. And only in the world of *El Shaddai,* where certainty about God is elusive, can we have religious passion alongside religious tolerance.

* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see www.har-el.org. To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666

Dvar Torah: Vaera: That's My Eliahu

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5768

> *And Moshe spoke before HASHEM saying, "They, the Children of Israel will not listen to me and how will Pharaoh listen to me and I am of uncircumcised lips."* (Shemos 6:12)

Why does Moshe go backwards to the old excuse of the speech impediment? His argument seems strong enough that he feels that the Children of Israel won't listen and how much more so Pharaoh.

The Sefas Emes offers the following amazing insight on the verse, *"Because the Children of Israel will not listen, therefore he was of uncircumcised lips…Speech is in exile as long as the recipients are not ready to hear the word of HASHEM…"* He goes on to explain that to the extent that the listener is unavailable, the words are hidden and the more ready the recipients are, the more open and revealed is the message as we find by the giving of the Torah when HASHEM declared, *"I am HASHEM…"* it's no mistake that the Jewish Nation was at the most pure and ready state to receive that highest and holiest of communications.

Pardon me for mentioning it but there's a Zen saying, *"When the student is ready, the teacher appears."* If it's true in the universe, it must have a source in Torah. This may be the address for that notion which I believe has broad implications

Many years ago, I had my first few glorious encounters with Shabbos and I had just started to wear a slim silk Yarmulka precariously upon my curly crop of hair. A relative from the west coast I had never heard about had contacted my uncle because she was living in Brooklyn and was about to get engaged. She wanted to invite east coast relatives to her wedding. I was given the contact info. I went to Brooklyn for Shabbos, and she got engaged. I met her brother Eliahu, who was learning in Lakewood. He was a quiet fellow and almost subliminally suggested multiple times, "Why don't you go to Ohr Somayach?!" I didn't know what in the world he was talking about. I thought a fly was buzzing about my head.

Within a short period of time the government job I had been working at fell through, because the comptroller ran to Venezuela with the money he should have been paying to vendors. I retired to my family's house in the quiet suburbs of New York while trying to figure out what the next great thing should be.

One day I was wearing my Tefillin, davening, and writing into the late morning when a knock came to the door. I asked from inside who was there. A young voice answered, "We'd like to talk to you about reading the Bible." I told them that I'm sort of reading the Bible right now but I didn't think this was the appropriate time. They got more excited and insistent and then I just opened the door and there posing before me were two clean cut looking guys with broad smiles and black books.

When they saw me with my Tefillin, their jaws dropped. No one said a word. They looked at each other, a classic double-take, and they just started to run. They scampered up the block at top speed and disappeared around the corner. I stepped out to witness this queer phenomenon and when they were out of sight I said to myself, "Why don't I go to Ohr Somayach!?" That day I made the trek to Yeshiva where I would stay and learn for many years, now.

I am reminded of what Rabbi Eliahu Dessler ztl. writes, that when Eliahu comes to announce Moshiach's arrival at the end of times, he will not make grand pronouncements but rather he will speak into the ears of individuals, one from a city or a family and suggest they do Teshuva. The person will think it's his own thoughts, but it's really the voice of Eliahu.

When we made a Bris for our youngest son five years ago I forgot to include one of the honors on my list. I was asked, who's your honoree for Kise' Shel Eliahu (Seat of Elijah). At that moment my cousin Eliahu had just arrived from Lakewood. I said, "That's my Eliahu!"

Good Shabbos!

https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-vaera/

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 *"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 *"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 Pharoah 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. [emphasis added]

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 *“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!

https://library.yctorah.org/2021/01/speech-in-exile/

Diminished Spirit: Thoughts for Parashat Va'era

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

> *"And Moshe spoke so to the children of Israel; but they hearkened not to Moshe for anguish of spirit and for cruel bondage."* (Shemot 4:9)

Moses had a great message: ending slavery, beginning freedom, leaving for a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. But no matter how great the message, it has to reach the intended audience successfully. Many great ideas and plans have cropped up throughout history; but they simply faded into oblivion because they didn’t convince the public.

Moses had a great message, but the Israelites themselves were not receptive due to *kotser ruach va-avoda kasha,* anguish of spirit and cruel bondage. As slaves, they were physically so strained and exhausted, Moses’ words did not resonate; the message struck them as being impossibly unrealistic. Commentators explain kotser ruach in different ways. The Israelites were short of breath, gasping under the pressures of their labor. The Israelites’ spirit was anguished i.e. they were psychologically unprepared to listen to Moses’ pipe dream.

Dr. Nahum Sarna in his Torah Commentary on Sefer Shemot translates kotser ruach to mean *"the Israelites' spirits were crushed."* Sarna writes that, *"ruach is the spiritual and psychic energy that motivates action. Its absence or attenuation signifies atrophy of the will"* (The *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, page 32).The Israelites could not absorb Moses's message because the physical and mental toll of slavery plunged them into a state of hopelessness.

A fascinating interpretation was suggested by the Ralbag (Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, 1288-1344, Provence). He applies the term kotser ruach not to the people of Israel — but to Moses! Moses did not get his message across because he did not prepare properly, he did not relate meaningfully to the people. He was a loner, a prophet, a spiritual personality who did not grasp how best to win over the public. He was not eloquent enough, not engaging enough. In his own words, he was aral sefatayim, of uncircumcised lips i.e. unable to formulate his words clearly enough.

The Torah is pointing out the vital conditions for a great message to be successful: the messenger must be effective, the audience must be receptive, external obstacles must be overcome. In the case at hand, Moses had to relate effectively with the people; the Israelites had to be open to the message in spite of their slave conditions; and Pharaoh's opposition had to be overcome. These are the themes that pervade the Torah's narratives of the Exodus.

The transition from slavery to freedom was not a simple process. It took ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go — and even then he decided to pursue them with his troops. It took Moses much patience to hone his own effectiveness in reaching the hearts of his people. And it took the Israelites a full generation to internalize freedom and ready themselves to enter the Promised Land.

Turning to our situation today, we have a great message — a Torah way of life that promotes spirituality, morality, idealism…the ways of peace and pleasantness. Yet, the message doesn't always get through to the large masses of the Jewish community. Sometimes, the problem is external obstacles — the pressures of work, the secularization of society in general, the challenges of an entertainment-based society. Sometimes, the problem is lack of receptivity of the Jewish public to a religious message. Many Jews grow up with little or no deep Jewish education; they are too preoccupied with their businesses and social lives to give much attention to a challenging religious message. And sometimes the messengers — rabbis and teachers — do not relate to the genuine spiritual and intellectual needs of the public.

Kotser ruach in our times may be referring to a diminished spiritual sense. Vibrant religious life needs a vibrant religious spirit. It needs us to be open to the challenges of religion at its best. It needs us to hear the message, to overcome obstacles, and to have leaders who can articulate a sophisticated spiritual framework for our lives.

But kotser ruach might be an accurate description of why many people fail to achieve their maximum potentialities. Their spirits are stunted; they don't dream big enough; they are satisfied with their day to day lives without imagining they can do better, achieve more, reach beyond. They settle for the status quo without envisioning a grander framework for their lives.

If we are to be our best selves, we need to overcome the kotser ruach that curtails our dreams, imagination and creativity.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/diminished-spirit-thoughts-parashat-vaera

I Enjoyed Your Sermon, Rabbi — Ouch!

Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Several years ago, I gave a talk in which I commented on the dilemma of rabbis and their sermons. I know the problem first hand, having served a large and wonderful congregation for many years.

A rabbi wants the sermon to reach everyone…even when the congregation is composed of people with different ranges of religious knowledge, different spiritual levels, different interest in listening to sermons. So rabbis generally work very hard to come up with sermons that will somehow reach everyone…even the one who is delivering the sermon!

I could generally tell if my sermons were reaching people or if I was not connecting at all. After services, some kind souls would offer what they thought was a compliment: "I enjoyed your sermon, Rabbi." Ouch! My goal wasn't to offer entertainment. I wanted people to say: "Thanks for inspiring me," or "I learned a lot from your sermon," or "You gave me something to think about more carefully." If people simply enjoyed my sermon, I knew my sermon had failed in its essential mission.

Rabbi Haskel Lookstein commented that there is one phrase that is even more troubling to a rabbi than "I enjoyed your sermon." A rabbi winces when a congregant says: "Now THAT was a good sermon!"… implying that all the other sermons were not really too good.

There's an old quip about the difference between a "rabbi" and a "rebbe": When the "rabbi" speaks, you think his words apply to everyone else. When the "rebbe" speaks, you feel he is speaking directly to you. In this sense, every good rabbi also needs to be a "rebbe." The goal of a sermon is not to impress listeners with how smart you are…but to actually reach congregants with a message that touches them directly.

The first obligation of a good rabbi is to really know his congregation. What's on their minds? What's bothering them? Why do they come to synagogue? What do they expect from their rabbi? The source of a good sermon rarely begins with a text: it begins with serious consideration of the spiritual needs of the congregation. It then proceeds to a search for sources in our religious tradition — including the Torah/haftarah readings of the day — that can open new channels of insight to congregants. If a rabbi doesn't learn from his own sermons, the sermons are probably flawed.

In some circles, the rabbi is expected to give a "devar halakha." Congregants are all yeshiva trained and halakhically oriented. They aren't searching for inspiration or spirituality…just information on halakhic practice. A rabbi in such a community obviously needs to address the interests of his listeners. But the rabbi should also go beyond the do's and don't's of halakha. People need to be reminded about God, the human spiritual quest, the values that underlay the halakhic practices.

Many/most pulpit rabbis speak to congregations that are composed of a wide variety of members, some religiously observant, others less so, some barely religious at all. A rabbi needs to invest time and effort to know his congregants and their concerns. A rabbi needs to focus on how to address the spiritual needs of his community.

What should a rabbi NOT be? He should not be an entertainer. He should not profane the pulpit with frivolous jokes, odd anecdotes, or historical curiosities. He should not pretend to be a political commentator on current events. He should not try to impress the congregation with the "important" people he knows. The sermon is not about how much the rabbi knows on this or that topic — since many of the congregants are themselves highly educated and know as much or more than the rabbi on many topics. The rabbi is supposed to be a "spiritual leader." Then let him focus on the spiritual dimensions of life and how the Jewish tradition offers insights to help us become wiser and deeper human beings.

Congregations generally have the rabbi they deserve. Spiritually alive communities have rabbis who are spiritually alive. Spiritually stagnant communities have rabbis who are entertainers or political commentators.

If it's possible to sit in synagogue all morning and not feel God's presence, then something is wrong. If the rabbi's demeanor and sermon don't evoke God's presence, then something is desperately wrong.

When I was a rabbinical student, our class was addressed one day by Rabbi Israel Miller, of blessed memory. He told us: "The most important aspect of a sermon isn't what the rabbi says…but who the rabbi is." If a rabbi is a loving, concerned and dedicated public servant, the congregation will learn from him and his sermons. If a rabbi is a less than ideal human being, the sermons he delivers will lack authenticity.

The next time you listen to your rabbi's sermon, consider whether his words are directed to you, touch you, make you think more carefully and more deeply. If you merely "enjoy" the sermon (or sleep through it!), something is very wrong.

And if you "enjoyed" this essay, then I guess I've failed again.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/i-enjoyed-your-sermon-rabbi%E2%80%94ouch-blog-rabbi-marc-d-angel

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Abraham Joshua Heschel: An Appreciation

By Dr. Susannah Heschel *

Human identities are like categories: Invented from the outside, they rarely capture the essence of our personalities, commitments, and sparks that animate us. My father is definitely someone who doesn't fit the categories; indeed, he often writes that we too often apply the wrong categories, especially in our religious lives. Just as we wouldn't speak of a "pound of Beethoven," surely, we should not try to measure the spiritual grandeur of the Sabbath. My father never called himself a Conservative Jew, nor labeled himself in any way. He grew up in Warsaw, stemming from one of the most distinguished Hassidic families, with a royal lineage, and already as a small child, he was expected to become a rebbe. Yet he wanted to study, and in the 1920s, it was not as unusual for a pious young man to attend university. My father had already received semikha from Rabbi Menachem Zemba in Warsaw before he left for Berlin, which he viewed as a city at the center of the intellectual universe. In addition to his doctorate at the university, he took classes at the two rabbinical seminaries, Orthodox and Reform, because he wanted to understand the outlook of each school.

My father appreciated what he learned, but he was also terribly disappointed with the kind of approach his professors were taking, and he felt that none of his teachers, experts in Jewish topics, understood the nature of religious life. For his doctoral dissertation, he wrote about the Hebrew prophets. For decades, German biblical scholars, mostly Protestants, had denigrated the prophets as "ecstatics," or described them as rural country bumpkins whose messages of peace and an end to war were naïve and ridiculous when presented to urban centers, kings, and priests. No, my father wrote: The prophets were not ecstatics; they were people of extraordinary inner lives who resonated with God's own pathos and compassion. Their message was not at all naïve, but a demand for justice and a hope for ultimate peace that should guide our own lives.

My father was rescued "as a brand plucked from the fire" from Nazi Europe, and he arrived in the United States in March of 1940. After five years at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, he moved to the Upper West Side of New York City and taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary until his death in 1972.

There was always something extraordinarily moving and also terribly ephemeral about the Hassidic rebbes my father took me to visit when I was growing up in New York. These rebbes were relatives, refugees from Europe, elderly men of tremendous gentleness and exquisite refinement. The air in the room felt alive when we entered their small studies; there was an intensity in those encounters because they were a small taste, for my father, of what he had lost in Europe: family, friends, a special Jewish world that he describes in his book, *The Earth is the Lord's.*

My father wanted the whole world to know Judaism, to know the Jewish spirit that he had experienced in Poland, and he wanted American Jews to understand what they were missing with what he called the "vicarious davening" of the cold formality of the suburban Conservative and Reform synagogues. He railed against the "religious behaviorism" of Orthodox Jews who focused on the punctilious observance of the Shulhan Arukh, as if that law guide was a substitute for Torah. Judaism was in decline, he wrote, not because of the challenges of science or philosophy, but because its message had become insipid. It was time to recapture the greatness of the Torah and the Talmud, but we can only do that, he wrote, if we know what questions to ask. Jews, he said, had become messengers who forgot the message. Studying Torah and Talmud superficially brought the exile of the Shekhinah. How can we recapture the questions, the insights, and the greatness of the Torah? That was the goal of his three-volume Hebrew book, *Torah min HaShamayim.*

My father was a person who always brought people together. He was full of warmth, enthusiasm, great humor, and he filled a room with his personality. He was also the most gentle and compassionate and loving person I have ever known. I had the feeling I could tell him anything, discuss any problem. He was always open to ideas, but critically: He was never satisfied, but always wanted to know more, and move to the next step in addressing a problem. He was passionate, studying all the time, and had no interest in entertainment, relaxation, or anything that was superficial. Conversations were also intense, and so was his concern with the world.

When my father returned from the Civil Rights march in Selma, Alabama, he said, "I felt my legs were praying," a very Hassidic statement. He added that marching with Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded him of walking with Hassidic rebbes in Europe. Before he agreed to meet with Pope Paul VI and Vatican officials in Rome concerning the formulation of Nostra - Aetate, the Church's statement regarding its relations with the Jews, he talked with his brother-in-law, the Kopycznitzer rebbe. His concern about Jews who were stranded in the Soviet Union, unable to leave and unable to practice Judaism, led my father to deliver strongly worded lectures and encourage his friend, Elie Wiesel, to visit Moscow, which led to *The Jews of Silence,* Wiesel's book about the Soviet Jews. Dr. King and my father lectured to Jewish groups together, speaking about racism, Zionism, and freedom for Soviet Jews.

In his last years, my father was brokenhearted over the war in Vietnam, which had become a political stranglehold on the presidency, and seemed to be deteriorating into a series of atrocities without clear military objectives. Dropping napalm on children, destroying villages, killing civilians: This left my father sleepless with horror. He spoke out because, he wrote, "in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." It was impossible, he said, to be a religious Jew and not protest the atrocities committed by our government and in our name.

My father cannot be categorized. His heart was Hassidic; his life was that of a scholar and teacher. What is clear, though, is that he preserved the heart and soul of Judaism, both in his writings and in the life that he led.

My father's voice was one of "moral grandeur and spiritual audacity." He spoke out in the prophetic tradition, and we are proud that he represented the Jewish people to the world. After the devastation of Europe, he gave us back our souls, reminding us of the greatness of Judaism and urging us to study more deeply, pray with greater intensity, and always remember what we stand for.

* Daughter of Rabbi A. J. Heschel and Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College. Reprinted from issue 31 of *Convesations,* the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. [Because of the importance of this subject, I am running the article again this week.]

Special program last Sunday: The Torah and Legacy of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel and his Ongoing Impact on the Orthodox Community on the 50th Anniversary of His Passing. The video is available at: https://www.facebook.com/YCTorah/videos/721919542892497/
Note: sound starts after first 20 seconds, but captions are available from the beginning.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/abraham-joshua-heschel-appreciation.

Habits: Good and Bad

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

The Makos (plagues) had begun! Moshe had warned Paroh in Hashem's name that he must send out the Jews; if not, he would suffer the consequences. Makoh after Makoh the Mitzriyim were struck, just as Moshe said. There was blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts, epidemic on the livestock, and boils.

Now Moshe came before Paroh and declared, *"I will rain a heavy hail, the likes of which has never been seen. Gather your animals from the field; any animals that will be left in the field will be hit by the hail and will die."*

The warning was explicit. Moshe had been right about every warning. When he warned of a plague, it came. Yet, the Torah records that, *"Those who feared Hashem"* brought their animals indoors to avoid them being killed. That there were some Mitzriyim who left their animals outside, at their own peril, is understandable. Paroh and some of his people were stubborn to a fault. What is astounding is that those who took their animals in were classified as fearing Hashem. Why are they awarded such a lofty title? Considering the fact that Moshe was right about his warnings time and again, wasn't the fact that they heeded his warning just plain practical? Why is it called Yiras Shomayim -- fear of heaven?

One of the fascinating facts about humans is that we favor routine. This can be very good. If we set ourselves up with good habits and routine, then we can literally go from one mitzva to another. For example, a person who links a good deed to follow his or her daily davening will find that it comes naturally to do so. We can train ourselves to study Torah, recite Tehillim, greet people pleasantly, or make a meaningful phone call, immediately after davening. Likewise, we can train ourselves to respond to stress or criticism in the manner that we choose. In fact, the Peleh Yoeitz (Rigilus) declares, *"All of Judaism depends on good habits."* When a person becomes accustomed to doing something good, it becomes his nature, and it is easy to do. Interestingly, modern psychology has identified how, in the brain, the neural passageways are aligned in ways to provide predictable responses and sequences for our behavior. Behaviors that we do repeatedly one after another become ingrained in us as good habits. If we were to alter our routine it would seem awkward. Our brains and bodies anticipate the processes that we establish.

The same, unfortunately, is true about bad habits. If a person gets into a routine of a certain behavior or reaction, then the brain and body become trained to act in that way and are set up for that reaction and the next step. That anticipation is predictable and is very hard to break. This is what a human being experiences in the case of bad habits or an addiction. The body is so habituated to act in a certain way that it requires great effort to break that trend or process.

Thus, we find that a person with an anger problem might display anger in the most unhelpful of situations, such as to a boss or spouse, even to their own detriment. It is as if they just can't help themselves. Their brains and bodies are so habituated to react in a certain way, that they have trouble implementing any self-control, even when the benefit to them is obvious. It is like being on a train that has a certain set of tracks guiding the person to a certain predictable (destructive) result. To get "off the track" and achieve a different response to a situation requires great effort and is in fact deserving of recognition as an act of Yiras Shomayim.

While we might look at the Mitzriyim's behavior to take in their animals upon Moshe's warning as simplistic and self-serving, the Torah recognizes that behavior as remarkable, and heralds it as an act of Yiras Shomayim. Yiras Shomayim is not limited to great saintly acts. Yiras Shomayim is also when a person goes against a bad habit — even for self-preservation. The Torah recognizes how hard it was for the Mitzriyim to take in their animals. It was against all they stood for; it was against their routine. There is a positive energy here and the Torah acknowledges it.

When we discuss mitzvah observance, establishing good routine is critical. Doing mitzvos in a particular sequence, at a particular time, helps ingrain the good behavior. Likewise, if we detect a bad routine, it is critical to step out of it. We may need to work hard on breaking a bad habit, often by providing alternative responses and a healthier routine. Breaking a bad habit is monumental. In the case of the Mitzriyim, the Torah recognizes that critical act of change by dubbing it as a taste of Yiras Shomayim.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Va'eira -- Blinded by Bias

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer*

In last week's parsha, we learned of Moshe Rabbeinu and his acceptance of the mission to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt to become G-d's nation. However, the slavery in Egypt only got worse and the Exodus did not truly begin until the plagues start in this week's parsha. Before discussing the Exodus itself, the Torah takes the time to delineate for us Moshe's family history and where he is in the broader context of the Jewish people.

As with all of Torah, there are many other lessons within this brief family history. We learn of proper respect within a family, the importance of balancing criticism with respect, the length of our sojourn in Egypt, what to be aware of when seeking a spouse and more. (See Rash"i Shemos 6:14-25) One of these lessons is found in Parshas Korach. Rash"i tells us that this genealogy teaches us the reason why Korach began his rebellion against Moshe. The Torah here teaches that Moshe's father, Amram, was the oldest of four brothers, and that Korach was the oldest son of the second brother, Yitzhar. Korach saw that Amram's sons were given royalty (Moshe) and priesthood (Aharon). He, therefore, presumed that as the oldest son of the next brother, the next position of honor would be granted to him. When the time came to appoint a leader for the tribe of Levi, Korach expected the position. He was disappointed when the position was given to Eltzafan, who was a son of the youngest brother, Uziel. It was this drive for honor and his subsequent jealousy which led Korach to challenge Moshe's leadership and try to claim the leadership for himself. (See Rash"i Bamidbar 16:1)

Our rabbis teach us that Korach was a wise man and a noble person of great character, who merited to be chosen as one of those who carried the Holy Ark containing the Ten Commandments when they travelled. (Bamidbar Rabbah 18) Nonetheless, despite Korach's greatness, he was still human and still had a desire for honor and a capacity for base jealousy. Korach somehow overlooked that seed of jealousy within him and sparked a massive rebellion, which led to his own death and the death of hundreds of leaders from the nation.

This Rash"i teaches us the true danger of the potential blindness of our passions and desires, if we let them fester and don't continually make efforts to develop our character. Korach focused on his father's generation and noted that the oldest brother's family became a king and a priest. Yet, he ignored everything else which is noted in the genealogy in our parsha. The genealogy begins with the generation of Korach's great-grandfather, Levi. He had two older brothers, Reuven and Shimon, who were not chosen. Levi, the third brother was chosen over them. The Torah then tells us that Levi had three children, Gershon, Kehas and Merari. Here, too, the oldest son was skipped, and it was Kehas's family which was chosen. Even Yaakov, the forebearer of all twelve tribes, was himself the younger brother. It was only in the generation of Korach's father that the oldest brother, Amram, was chosen.

Even when we consider Amram's own children, Moshe and Aharon, Korach's presumption does not bear true. Moshe, the younger son, was given the greater honor of being king. In fact, Rash"i teaches us that Aharon had been the leader while Moshe was in Midyan, and the position was taken from Aharon and given to Moshe, his younger brother. (See Rash"i Shemos 4:13)

Korach had a minor passion for honor which was somehow left unchecked. This passion blinded him by focusing on what he wanted to see and ignoring all other facts. He saw that in his father's generation the oldest brother was chosen. Without further consideration, he assumed that meant all positions go in age order and he would be next. Yet, anyone who would stop and look at the whole picture would see that this simply isn't true.

The Talmud teaches (Sukkah 52b) that G-d protects us from the dangers of passions. However, we must first do our part. If we don't continually seek to improve ourselves, then one small flaw could destroy us.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

VaEra: Frog or Frogs? Messianic Wars in Midrash

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *****

In Exodus 8:2 we read of the second plague of Egypt, frogs. The literal translation of these words is: "*The frog]singular[came up and covered the land of Egypt."* The use of the singular form to describe many objects, animals, or people is quite common on the bible)see for example: Gen. 1:21; 3:1; 12:5; 32:6(, but its application here has intrigued the commentators, perhaps because the Torah emphasizes the great number of frogs which will invade Egypt. The word frogs, in the plural, appears ten times, the frogs are described as swarming Egypt, and after they die, they are piled in huge heaps.

It is possible that the singular use in verse 8:2 was meant to poke fun at the Egyptian pantheon. To the Egyptians, the frog was an ancient symbol of fertility, related to the annual flooding of the Nile. They also believed that the queen of heaven, the goddess Nunut, stretched her body over the land of Egypt to protect the land and carry the heavenly bodies. The biblical text draws an image of a frog, instead of the queen of heaven, covering the land, and instead of the flooding of the Nile, the land is flooded by frogs.

Rashi, in his commentary, mentions that the singular is sometimes used to describe the plural in the bible, but prefaces this comment with a Midrashic quote:

> *There was only one frog, and when the Egyptians would beat it with sticks, swarms of frogs would ricochet from it.*

The Midrash could have been influenced by the Greek story of the mythological Hydra of Lernae, which had many heads and every time someone would cut off one of them, two more heads would grow out of the stump. The sages of the Midrash borrowed freely from Greek literature and mythology, though they adapted them for their audience. There is, however, another interesting element in this Midrashic interpretation. Rashi quotes only half the Midrash, and here is the full text:

> *R. Akiva says, there was one frog which gave birth to swarms of frogs which covered the land of Egypt. R. Elazar ben Azariah told him: Akiva! Why are you teaching Midrash? Keep quiet and go to the laws of impurity! There was one frog, who whistled to the rest and brought them up from the Nile.*

Why was R. Elazar upset with R. Akiva, and why did he suggest that R. Akiva should engage in teaching the laws of impurity?

The answer is in another, seemingly unrelated, Midrashic exchange. This time, the debate between the rabbis was over Daniel 7:9, where Daniel describes a vision he had, in which two thrones are set up for God to sit on.

> *Why are there two thrones? R. Akiva said, one for God and one for King David. R. Yose the Galilean told him: Akiva, until when will you continue to turn the sacred into mundane? Rather say that the two thrones represent judgment and mercy. R. Akiva repeated the comment he heard from R. Yose to R. Elazar ben Azariah, who rebuked him and said: Akiva! Why are you teaching Midrash? Keep quiet and go to the laws of impurity! One of the thrones is a chair and the other is a stool. God sits on the chair and places His feet on the stool.*

This discussion is even more baffling than the one about the frogs. There, the explanation suggested by R. Akiva is somewhat fantastic, and we can understand why it is rejected by R. Elazar. Here, R. Akiva repeats an interpretation which is not his, and which sees the two thrones as representing two attributes of God, an approach which later on became a central one in Jewish theology. R. Elazar rejects it without offering any arguments, and proceeds to present an anthropomorphic interpretation. It seems that R. Elazar was determined to prevent R. Akiva from lecturing in the Midrash department of the Mishnaic university. Why is that?

The answer is that R. Akiva was a charismatic leader in both the spiritual and political world, and while the rabbis had tremendous respect for his intellectual abilities, most of them disagreed with his political path. R. Akiva supported Shimon bar Kokhva and his rebellion against the Roman Empire, but most rabbis believed that the rebellion would fail and that it will breed disaster, and unfortunately, they were right. The Roman Empire crushed the rebellion with unprecedented cruelty and decimated the Jewish population of Israel. The Jews, who were starting to recover from the great rebellion and the destruction of the Second Temple sixty years earlier, lost everything as a result of Bar Kokhva's rebellion, and the community never recovered again. We can never know what would have happened had R. Akiva not supported the rebellion, but we know that his approach was contested. R. Akiva's support of the rebellion was not limited to words. He traveled the Jewish world, raised funds, and recruited people, many of whom were converts, to fight against the Romans.

We can now understand R. Yose's and R. Elazar antagonism. They were afraid of the ability of R. Akiva, with his charisma, to persuade young people to join the war, and were especially concerned when he expounded upon biblical verses, since that gave his words greater authority. When R. Akiva explains that there is one throne for God and one for King David, R. Yose sees it as indicating messianic aspirations, since the Messiah is from the Davidic dynasty, and since R. Akiva declared that Bar Kokhva is the Messiah. When R. Yose tells R. Akiva that his words and actions are turning the sacred into mundane, he refers to the labelling of the rebellion as a Holy War. Later, when R. Akiva presents R. Yose's words to R. Elazar, the latter does not care much for the content, and offers another, less plausible, explanation. His main goal is to prevent R. Akiva from expounding on the Torah to deliver moral or political messages. He tells R. Akiva to study or teach the most complicated laws, those of impurity, but also sends a subliminal message: you should study the laws of the impurity of the dead, because your actions cause violence and death.

This is also the reason that R. Elazar recoils from R. Akiva's understanding of the plague of the frogs. He feels that R. Akiva is trying to use it as a justification for his actions in supporting the rebellion. The one frog is the leader, whether R. Akiva or Bar Kokhva, and when he is beaten by the Roman soldiers, more people come forth. The hope of R. Akiva and Bar Kokhva was to keep producing, through propaganda campaigns and the most lenient rules of conversion, an indefatigable army, and R. Elazar was weary of the possible results.

In summary, we have seen that an apparently innocent Midrashic interpretation, cited by Rashi, opens a door to a world of historical debates and political conflicts. We are left with the knowledge that we must research well the sources before jumping to conclusion, and with a question: who was right, in the long term, R. Akiva or R. Elazar?

Shabbat Shalom.

* Torah VeAhava. Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets** . The Sefaria articles include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

How Many Expressions of Divine Redemption?

By Rabbi Dan Margulies *

The beginning of Va'era includes a passage familiar to many, which includes the four leshonot of geulah, four expressions of divine redemptive power. This is the source for the idea that we should have four cups of wine or grape juice at the

Pesach seder, corresponding to each of the four steps of the progression of God's taking us out of slavery in Egypt)Yerushalmi Pesachim 10:1(. According to a fascinating comment quoted by Rashi from Rabbi Moshe haDarshan, it is also the reason why the mitzvah of tzitzit, in a sense a commemoration of yetziat Mitzrayim, has four corners, corresponding again to the four words used here to express divine redemption of Bnei Yisrael from slavery)Rashi Numbers 15:41(.

However, I would like to problematize this idea. If we pay close attention to the text, we see that there are not only four future tense verbs characterizing God's redemption of Beni Yisrael from slavery and Egypt, there are in fact seven, a much more characteristic typologic number in biblical studies.

> *Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am Hashem. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgment. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, Hashem, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I am Hashem"*)Shemot 6:6-8(.

These seven verbs are broken up into three verses and open with the bracket "Ani Hashem – I am the Lord." The first three verbs occupy the first verse, about leaving slavery in Egypt. The next two are in the second verse, describing building a relationship with God. The final two are about achieving a national destiny as Bnei Yisrael emerge from slavery, enter the land of Israel, and put into practice the laws of the Torah in the society that God expects us to build. The passage then concludes with the bracket again "Ani Hashem."

This is pointing us to consider a progression of Jewish history and Jewish destiny from emerging from slavery, through receiving the Torah and building the relationship and covenant with God at Har Sinai, to entering into the land of Israel and putting those laws into practice.

We could consider these three stages as corresponding to the three pilgrimage holidays of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot: emerging from slavery, receiving the Torah and building a brit with God, and entering into the land of Israel, enjoying its bounty, and celebrating our presence in the land.

Another thing to reflect on is why then would Chazal tell us that the Pesach holiday is only about four expressions of geulah? Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann suggests that perhaps after the Temple was destroyed, there was a push in certain rabbinic circles to create a truncated version of the Exodus narrative minimizing the aspect of the story about entering the land, where the promise to our ancestors would be fulfilled and mitzvot could be expressed fully there. It is possible that due to political circumstances with the Romans, the destruction of the Temple, and the diaspora of Jewish community, people were no longer comfortable with that idea. People felt challenged invoking that part of the story around Pesach time, instead focusing on the fact that we left slavery and emerged victorious in that moment, but focused less on the parts of our history where our hopes were not yet fulfilled)Melamed Leho'il Part III 65:1-2(.

Shabbat Shalom.

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https://library.yctorah.org/2023/01/how-many-expressions-of-divine-redemption/

Shavuon Va'eira

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

For summer vacation I figured I'd go to hell.

Once or twice in my life people have suggested I go there so I took the leap and went.

Fortunately I saw an advertisement for a gate to hell only about 3 hours away in Rotorua. There was an all inclusive package where you can walk around and see steam spurting out and water bubbling over from the depths of the earth. Unfortunately they didn't allow me to go into the crevices and actually see from where the hellish heat arose. But they did allow me to submerge in the mud and sulfur excavated from the Devil's backyard. After doing that, I can only conclude that Satan must have smooth skin. Thank God though the water wasn't crazy hot, so I didn't get a burn in hell.

Pharoah got some serious hell in our Torah portion but more from the sky than the ground -- especially with the plague of hail. He and all of Egypt ignored the hell bubbling in their society that came from their horrifying traditions and routines of slavery. And when we ignore something, it doesn't go away; it just roars back with a vengeance overturning everything you held dear.

That's why we take vacations. Because in our modern world we get stuck in the mud. Every day we go through the motions playing out the same old routines whether at our job, at home and with our families. While there's nothing wrong with a routine, we know that there is something wrong with being stuck in a feeling that we cannot live any differently than the way we live now, and that if something were to change we'd be done for. So we get out for a week, two weeks, or a month to a new environment. It doesn't matter whether that new place is heaven or hell. It only matters that it be different. We show ourselves a new situation and adapt to whatever is there. Those sticky psychic hellish bubbles get popped as we recognize our true adaptable nature. We can go to a place we've never been and survive. We can walk for 20 kilometers through mountains. We can go to hell and live to tell the tale.

And then we come back to our regular routines. But something is different. Something has changed. Maybe it's us. Maybe it's the routines. But whatever it is, something has become unstuck. It took frogs, blood and hell-hail to unstuck the Jews from Egypt. So let's put ourselves into the vacations and new situations we need before it comes to that.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Aukland, New Zealand.

Rav Kook Torah
Va'eira: Order in Miracles

Presenting his 'credentials' before Pharaoh, Moses threw down his staff before the Egyptian king, and it transformed into a viper. When the magicians of Egypt did the same with their magic, *"the staff of Aaron swallowed up their staffs"*)Ex. 7:12(.

The Sages in Shabbat 97a noted that the Torah does not say that Aaron's snake swallowed up the magicians' staffs. It says Aaron's staff did the swallowing. A double miracle, a "miracle within a miracle" occurred. The viper became a staff once again, and only then — as a staff — did it swallow up the other staffs. What is the significance of this double miracle?

Levels of Miracles

Just as there is an underlying order in the world of nature, so too there is order and structure in the realm of miracles. We may distinguish between two types of laws of the natural world: those of a fundamental nature, and those that have a detailed and specific function. The extent to which a miracle defies natural law depends on the purpose of that divine intervention.

Sometimes it is sufficient to have a minor disruption and still remain within the overall system of natural law. For example, when the prophet Elisha advised the widow in debt how to miraculously produce oil)II Kings 4:1-7(, the oil was not created ex nihilo. Rather, the miracle was based on an existing jar of oil. There occurred no blatant abrogation of the laws of nature; they were merely 'extended,' as the small cruse of oil sufficed to fill up many large pots. But the basic framework of natural law was left undisturbed.

The purpose of Elisha's miracle was to help out a poor woman in need. The goal of Moses' miraculous signs in Egypt, on the other hand, was far more grandiose. These wonders were meant to demonstrate the power and greatness of the Creator, *"so that you will know that I am God here on earth"*)Ex. 8:18(.

In Egypt, God willed to demonstrate His ability to overrule any law and limitation of the natural world. Therefore, it was necessary to have a "miracle within a miracle." This exhibited independence and autonomy at all levels of natural law, both specific and fundamental. The miracle of the staff occurred not only as a minor disruption of nature — a level at which the Egyptian magicians could also function — but also at the level of total disregard for the most basic laws of nature, so that one staff could "swallow up" other staffs.

)Gold from the Land of Israel pp. 108-109. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, pp. 243-244.(

https://www.ravkooktorah.org/VAERA61.htm

Overcoming Setbacks)Vaera 5774, 5781(

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

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 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 siyata 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.

FOOTNOTES:

]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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What kind of responses to failure does Rabbi Sacks encourage?

2. "God never loses faith in us" – could this idea help you to believe in yourself?

3. Does it inspire you to think about how even the people who have achieved great success have also suffered great disappointments, rejections and defeats?

https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/overcoming-setbacks/ 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.

Staff, Serpent and Scattered Sparks

By Aharon Loschak* © Chabad 2023

More than a century has passed since the RMS Titanic sank in the Atlantic Ocean, but the public is as captivated by the ill-fated ship's history as ever. Why? It's hardly the only such occurrence!

There are a number of theories, but a popular one explains there's so much narrative, metaphor, and irony in this particular ship's tragic end. It was famously deemed "unsinkable," yet despite all of its bells and whistles, it proved no match for an iceberg, and 1,500 passengers and crew members lost their lives.

The hubris of humanity met its tragic end in the face of nature.

Humans, after all, don't run everything.

You know who does? You know who runs nature, too?

G d.

The Serpent Miracle

When Aaron and Moses first storm into Pharaoh's palace, demanding the Israelites' release in the name of G d, Pharaoh brazenly demands a sign of Divine power. Aaron responds by throwing his staff to the ground. It instantly turns into a serpent. The Egyptian sorcerers are able to do the same, and a battle of serpents ensues: Aaron's serpent turns back into a staff and swallows all the others:

Each one of them cast down his staff, and they became serpents; but Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs.1

What is the meaning of this miracle? What's the significance of the staff turning into a serpent, then back to a staff, and swallowing all the others in the process?

And why was this unique act chosen to be the first miracle to open the floodgates of miracles about to transpire in Egypt?

A Cosmic Project

To get to the bottom of this, let's go back to the very beginning of Creation.

Kabbalah explains that G d implanted Divine energy in every corner of this freshly created world. The Kabbalists called these bursts of G dly energy "sparks."
Of course, these sparks were, and continue to be, invisible to the naked eye. That's because the coarse and overly materialistic veneer of a base and depraved world covers them and doesn't let them "out."

The Kabbalists compared this material veneer to a "shell," akin to the peel that covers a delicious and desirable fruit.

It's a broad and far-reaching concept, but in a nutshell)pun intended!(, this reality creates our very purpose on earth: To access these sparks and "redeem" them. Or, in other words, to expose the G dly energy that exists in every interaction and corner of the world.

The Egyptian Project

Interestingly enough, the Kabbalists tell us, Egypt received an abundance of these sparks, making the job of "spark redemption" all the more important. At the same time, its "shell" was one of extreme depravity and moral degeneration.

Indeed, Egypt is seen as the prototype of evil that denies its creator. The prophet Ezekiel said, *"O Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great crocodile2 that lies down in the midst of its rivers, who said, 'My river is my own, and I made myself.'"*3

This is the secret to the great plagues visited upon the Egyptians, to crush the thick shell of Egyptian defiance, and finally release those sparks to bring them closer to G d. When it was all done, the *"Egyptians shall know that I am G d."*

Back to the Serpent

As a prelude to the cosmic shift that was about to happen, Aaron cast a staff in the Egyptian palace and got things going.

You see, the visual of a staff is representative of that G dly energy that descended from on High to be implanted in this world. The long, slender stick connotes a downward flow of energy, symbolic of the spark's journey through the cosmos into the Egyptian landscape. Though they've been cast far, they are directly attached to G d; a straight line can be drawn right back to Him.

The serpent, of course, is the exact opposite: Hearkening back to the days in Eden, it is the prototype of evil and negativity in this world.

So, first Aaron transforms the staff into a serpent, representative of the sparks' sad journey from being before G d to being trapped in a depraved Egyptian cage. From staff to serpent.

But then, the serpent turns back into a staff, symbolizing what thankfully happens next: Eventually, even Egypt will be

broken and the G dly energy will revert back to her source. “Ten wondrous plagues are coming, my Egyptian friends,” Aaron broadcast. “And when G d is through with you, there won’t be a corner of this country that doesn’t know Him. Every last vestige of Divine energy in this land will be exposed.”

From serpent back to staff—swallowing all the negative serpents along the way.

Stop Being a Serpent

We sometimes get carried away with the Egyptian mentality. We delude ourselves into thinking we made ourselves. Not literally, of course, but Titanic-esque.

What does that look like?

You keep Shabbat, of course. But you’re very worried about shutting off for too long, so you work until the last minute, inappropriately rushing into Shabbat like a madman.

Yes, you’re honest in your business dealings, but when Amazon accidentally delivers an extra package, you don’t bother letting them know.
Your friend wasn’t nice to you, or somehow never has money when you request the hundred dollars you lent her last week, so you get upset at her, vowing never to be nice again, and start scheming her downfall.

Do you get the idea?

If you really, really believed that G d runs the show, that there is G dly energy behind everything, you wouldn’t do any of the above. Shabbat is more important than that last email, Amazon may not need your money, but G d is still watching, and your friend? Eh, she’s just a tool.

Instead, you’ve fallen into the Egyptian trap of “I made myself,” getting carried away with how much you can manipulate your own destiny. You’re effectively declaring the Pharaoh-like statement of, “I am in control, it’s all up to me, and so now that X is or isn’t happening, I’m upset and afraid.”

But you don’t. G d does. Lean back and let the holiness and Divinity around you come forward while you watch the show. You’re a staff connected to G d, not an Egyptian serpent with a hubris problem. And when you internalize that, you will have experienced your own personal Exodus.4

FOOTNOTES:

1. Exodus 7:12.

2. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for crocodile, tannin, is used in the Torah to refer to Aaron’s serpent.

3. Ezekiel 29:3.

4. This essay is based on Torah Ohr, Vaera 56d-57b.

* Writer, editor, Rabbi, and Editor of JLI's popular Torah Studies program.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5351271/jewish/Staff-Serpent-and-Scattered-Sparks.htm

Va'eira: Is It A Snake Or A Stick?

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

The Staff and the Serpent

When Pharaoh speaks to you]Moses[and says, "Produce a marvel for yourselves," say to Aaron, "Take your staff and throw it down in front of Pharaoh. It will become a serpent.")Ex. 7:9(

Allegorically, a staff signifies the direct, orderly descent of G-d's beneficence into reality, creating and sustaining the many levels of creation as it proceeds further "down" the hierarchy of reality. A serpent, in contrast, signifies the evil of Egypt, which is simply a reincarnation of the primordial snake of the Garden of Eden.

By changing Aaron's staff into a serpent, G-d demonstrated to Pharaoh that even evil owes its existence to G-d's creative energy. By reverting the serpent back to a staff and having Aaron's staff swallow the Egyptian serpents, G-d demonstrated that at any moment, He can change the serpent back to a staff, annihilating evil and making it disappear without a trace.

By realizing that evil exists solely so that we overcome it, illuminating the darkness of exile with Divine light, we personally relive the Exodus from Egypt on a daily basis, as well as hasten the final Redemption.

– From Kehot's Daily Wisdom #3

Gut Shabbos,
Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

* A Chasidic insight that Rabbi Wisnefsky selected for the parsha.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Volume 29, Issue 14 **Shabbat Parashat Vaera** **5783 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

The Weighing of the Heart

In this week's parsha, before even the first plague has struck Egypt, God tells Moses: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt." (Exodus 7:3) The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is referred to no less than twenty times in the course of the story of the Exodus. Sometimes it is Pharaoh who is said to harden his heart. At other times, God is said to have done so. The Torah uses three different verbs in this context: ch-z-k, to strengthen, k-sh-h, to harden, and k-b-d, to make heavy.

Throughout the ages, the commentators have been concerned with one problem. If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, how could he have been to blame for not letting the Israelites go? He had no choice in the matter. It was God's doing, not his. That he and his people should be punished seems to flout the fundamental principle of justice, that we are guilty only for what we have freely chosen to do.

However, the commentators noted that for the first five plagues, Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart. The obstinacy, the refusal, the intransigence are his. Only with the sixth plague is God said to have done so. This led to several explanations.

Rashi says that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the last five plagues was a punishment for the first five, when it was Pharaoh's own obstinacy that led him to refuse to let the people go.[1] Maimonides interprets God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as meaning that "repentance was withheld from him, and the liberty to turn from his wickedness was not accorded to him."[2] Albo and Sforno offer the opposite interpretation. God hardened Pharaoh's heart precisely to restore his free will. After the succession of plagues that had devastated the land, Pharaoh was under overwhelming pressure to let the Israelites go. Had he done so, it would not have been out of free choice, but rather under force majeure. God therefore strengthened Pharaoh's heart so that even after the first five plagues he was genuinely free to say Yes or No.[3]

It may be that all three are right and are simply responding to the different verbs. K-sh-h, "hardening," supports Rashi's reading. Pharaoh was hard on the Israelites, so God was hard on him. K-b-d, "making heavy," supports Maimonides. Pharaoh lacked the energy, the strength, to repent. Ch-z-k, "to strengthen," supports Albo and Sforno. The text allows for all three possibilities.

However, part of the truth may lie in a completely different direction.[4] The Egyptians – Pharaohs especially – were preoccupied by death. Their funerary practices were astonishingly elaborate and were meant to prepare the person for life after death. The tombs of the Pharaohs were among their most lavish creations. Tutankhamun's, discovered in 1922, is a dazzling example. One of the greatest literary works of ancient Egypt was The Book of the Dead.

The Torah notes the attention the Egyptians gave to death. At the end of Bereishit, we read of how the Egyptians accompanied Joseph and his family in the funeral procession to bury Jacob. The Canaanites witnessed this and said, "The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning." They named the place, Abel Mizraim (Gen. 50:11). Note: they called it "the place of Egyptian mourning," not Israelite mourning, despite the fact that it was for Jacob, a non-Egyptian. Then we read of how Joseph himself was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. In the Torah, only Joseph, and Jacob at Joseph's request, are embalmed. So we have already been forewarned about the significance of death to the Egyptian mind.

However, there is one specific aspect of Egyptian belief that opens up an entirely new perspective on the references to Pharaoh's heart. According to Egyptian myth, the deceased underwent a trial to establish their worthiness or otherwise to enjoy life after death in Aaru, the Field of Reeds, where souls live on in pleasure for eternity. They believed that the soul resides in the heart, and the trial consisted of the ceremony of The Weighing of the Heart. Other organs were removed after death, but the heart was left because it was needed for the trial.

On one side of the scales was a feather. On the other, was placed the heart. If the heart was as light as the feather, the dead could continue to Aaru, but if it was heavier, it was devoured by the goddess Ammit (a combination of lion, hippopotamus and crocodile), and its owner was condemned to live in Duat, the underworld. An illustration, on papyrus, in The Book of the Dead shows the ceremony, undertaken in the Hall of Two Truths, overseen by Anubis, the Egyptian God of the dead.

It follows that the root k-v-d, "to make heavy," would have had a highly specific meaning for the Egyptians of that time. It would imply that Pharaoh's heart had become heavier than a feather. He would fail the heart weighing ceremony and therefore be denied what was most important to him – the prospect of joining the gods in the afterlife.

No one would have been in any doubt as to why this was so. The feather represented Ma'at, the central Egyptian value that included the concepts of truth, balance, order, harmony, justice, morality, and law. Not only was this fundamental to Egyptian culture. It was the task of the Pharaoh to ensure that it prevailed. This had been an Egyptian principle since a thousand years before the Exodus, found in Pyramid texts dating from the third millennium BCE. Ma'at meant cosmic order. Its absence invited chaos. A Pharaoh whose heart had become heavier than the Ma'at feather was not only endangering his own afterlife, but threatening the entire people over whom he ruled with turmoil and disarray.

One of the things the deceased were supposed to do as part of the trial was to make a series of negative confessions, 42 in all, declaring themselves innocent of the kind of sin that would exclude them from paradise. These are some of them:

I have not done injury to men.
I have not oppressed those beneath me.
I have not murdered.
I have not commanded murder.
I have not caused suffering to men.[5]

If the "heavying" of Pharaoh's heart is an allusion to the Weighing of the Heart ceremony, it allows us to read the story in a completely new way.

First, it suggests that it is directed to Egyptians as well as Israelites; to humanity as a whole. The Torah tells us three times that the purpose of the signs and wonders was "so that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord" (Ex. 7:5; 14:4; 14:18). This is the core of monotheism. It is not that the Israelites have their God, and the Egyptians their pantheon, but rather that there is one sovereign power in the universe.

That is the point of at least three of the plagues: the first, directed against Hapfi, the god of the Nile; the second, frogs, directed against Heqet, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and childbirth, represented in the form of a frog; and the ninth, the plague of darkness,

directed against Ra, the sun god. The message of these plagues would have been clear to the Egyptians: there is a power greater than those they have worshipped until now. The God of Israel is the God of the world and of all humanity.

The religion of Israel is not intended to be the religion of all humanity. Nowhere in the narrative does God imply that He wants the Egyptians to adopt Israelite religious practices. The point is quite different. Religion is particular. Morality is universal. If the story of the "heavying" of Pharaoh's heart does allude to the Book of the Dead, then the story of the Exodus is not simply a partisan account from an Israelite point of view. It is telling us that certain things are wrong, whoever does them and whoever they are done against. They are wrong by Egyptian standards too. That was true of Pharaoh's decision to kill all male Israelite children. That was an unforgivable sin against Ma'at.

Justice is universal. That is the point made plainly by the Torah's three stories of Moses' early life. He sees an Egyptian hitting an Israelite and intervenes. He sees Israelites hitting one another and intervenes. He sees Gentile shepherds behaving roughly to Jethro's daughters and intervenes. The first was a case of non-Israelite against Israelite, the second was Israelite against Israelite, the third was non-Israelite against non-Israelite. This is the simplest way of telling us that Moses' sense of justice was impartial and universal.

Finally, and most deeply, the Torah is hinting at a self-contradiction at the heart of the Egyptian concept of Ma'at. The most generous interpretation of Pharaoh's refusal to let the people go is that he was charged with maintaining order in the Empire. A successful minority like the Israelites could be seen as a threat to such order. If they stayed and thrived, they might take over the country as the Hyksos had done several centuries earlier. If they were allowed to leave, other enslaved groups might be tempted to do likewise. Emigration is a bad sign when the place people are trying to leave is a superpower. That is why, for many years, the Soviet Union forbade Jews to leave the country.

Pharaoh, in his repeated refusal to let the people go, doubtless justified his decision in each case on the grounds that he was securing Ma'at, order. Meanwhile however, with each plague the country was reduced to ever greater chaos. That is because oppressing people, which is what Pharaoh was doing, was a fundamental offence against Ma'at.

On this reading, the whole issue of Pharaoh hardening his heart was not so much psychological as political. In his position as semi-divine head of state of an empire that practised forced labour on a massive scale, Pharaoh could not let the Israelites go free without creating the risk that other groups would also challenge the Corvée, the unpaid, conscripted semi-slave labour that was part of Egyptian society from the building of the pyramids and abolished only in 1882.

For the first five plagues, Pharaoh could tell himself that he was enduring minor inconvenience to protect a major principle. But as the plagues became more serious, reducing Egypt to chaos, Pharaoh's room for manoeuvre grew ever less. Having five times said "No" to the Israelites, he could not now back down without making himself look ridiculous, forfeiting his authority and damaging his standing. Pharaoh was a prisoner of his own system, held captive by his own decisions.

Seeking to protect order, he created chaos. That is because the order he was seeking to protect was built on a foundation of injustice: the enslavement of the many for the benefit of the few. The more he tried to defend it, the heavier his heart grew.

I believe that justice is universal. The Exodus story of how the supreme Power entered history to liberate the supremely powerless, is not just for Jews. It is the world's greatest metanarrative of hope.

[1] Rashi to Exodus 7:3.
[2] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 6:3
[3] Albo, Ikkarim, 4:25; Sforno to Exodus 7:3.
[4] My thanks to Rabbi Dr Rafi Zarum for suggesting this line of thought.
[5] Negative confessions are rare in Judaism, but one exists: Vidui Bikkurim, the confession to be made over first-fruits: "I have not turned aside from Your commands nor have I forgotten any of them …I have obeyed the Lord my God; I have done everything You commanded me" (Deut. 26:13-14).

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"And I will bring you into the land that I promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you as a morasha [heritage]: I am the LORD." (Exodus 6:8).

It is only natural for parents to desire to leave their children and grandchildren with a legacy. For those fortunate enough to be able to do so, this wish expresses itself in the form of an inheritance. But for most people, this is simply not realistic. How might they transmit a legacy to the next generation? I believe that the answer can be found in an important distinction in the Torah between the words yerusha (inheritance) and morasha (heritage).

We are all more familiar with the concept of yerusha, used throughout the Torah to describe the passing down of material possessions from parents to children. Far less common is the concept of morasha, mentioned in the Torah in reference to only two things: Torah ["Moses prescribed the Torah to us, an eternal heritage (morasha) for the congregation of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 33:4) and Land of Israel (the verse cited above at the outset).

The different contexts in which these words appear is quite revealing about the different kinds of relationships between parents and children, and different priorities handed down from generation to generation, that these bequests engender. I would like to explore three different examples in which the differences between yerusha and morasha will clarify the significance of each.

The first point of distinction is in the realm of effort. The Jerusalem Talmud (Bava Batra 8:2) speaks of yerusha as something that comes easily. When a person dies, leaving a yerusha, the heir need not do anything other than receive the gift. Morasha, however, requires much more.

The added letter mem in morasha, suggests the Jerusalem Talmud, is a grammatical sign of intensity, the pi'el form in Hebrew grammar. In order for an individual to come into possession of a morasha, they must work for it.

While an inheritance is what you receive from the previous generation—without your particular input—a heritage requires your active involvement and participation. A yerusha is a check your father left you; a morasha is a business that your parents may have started, but into which you must put much sweat, blood and tears.

This certainly explains why morasha is used only with regard to Torah and the Land of Israel. Our sages (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 5a) remark that there are three gifts that God gave the Jewish people that can be acquired only through commitment and suffering: "Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come." And we understand very well that neither Torah nor the Land of Israel can be easily acquired.

Pirkei Avot 2:10 specifically teaches, "Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you."

All achievement in Torah depends on an individual's own efforts. A student of Torah must be willing to suffer privation.

Similarly, the Land of Israel cannot be acquired without sacrifice and suffering. One of the tests in the life of Abraham – and the source of the Jewish claim to Jerusalem – is the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. The message conveyed by the Torah is that we can only acquire our Holy Land if we are willing to place the lives of our children on the line. Every parent in Israel who sends his/her child to the army understands this message very well. A heritage comes hard, not easily, and our national heritage is Torah and Israel.

The second distinction between the terms is not how the gift is acquired, but rather how it may be dispersed. Even the largest amount of money inherited (yerusha) can be squandered or legitimately lost. In contrast, a morasha must be given over intact to the next generation. Morasha literally means "to hand

over to someone else." Silver is an inheritance, and can be used in whatever way the heir desires; silver Shabbat candlesticks are a heritage, meant to be passed down from parent to child and used from generation to generation.

Finally, in the case of an inheritance, one must have the object of yerusha in one's possession. This need not be the case with regard to a morasha. Jewish parents bequeathed the ideals of Torah and the Land of Israel to their children for countless generations, even while living in exile far from the Promised Land, and even when poverty and oppression made it near impossible for them to become Torah scholars. Values can be passed down regardless of one's physical or material station in life.

For this reason, an inheritance, regardless of its size, pales in comparison to a heritage. We all want to be able to bequeath a yerusha to our children and grandchildren, and we should do what we can to make that possible. Nevertheless, the most important legacy that we can leave them is a morasha, the eternal heritage, of Torah and the Land of Israel.

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Hopeless

I remember the conversation very well. It was a discussion among a group of assorted friends, from a variety of backgrounds. One or two were true scholars. The others were not scholars by any stretch of the imagination but were familiar with those Jewish texts frequently read in the synagogue.

The discussion revolved around the question, "What is the saddest verse in the entire Bible?" The opening candidate for the saddest verse was the passage in the weekly portion of Vayetzei, which reads, "The Lord saw that Leah was unloved." But that phrase was soon rejected in favor of the second half of that same verse, "but Rachel was barren." No question about it. Both the lack of love and infertility are very sad human conditions.

Others quoted various verses from the curses in the weekly portions of Bechukotai and Ki Tavo. There is no paucity of horribly sad verses in those two parshiyot. Here are just a few: "I will set my face against you…your foes shall dominate you;" "I will heap your carcasses upon your lifeless fetishes;" "You shall eat your own issue, the flesh of your sons and daughters." For these phrases, the adjectives "frightening" or "terrible" seem more appropriate than "sad."

For most of the discussion, I remained silent. For, you see, I had long before concluded which Torah verse was the saddest for me. The verse appears in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vaera (Exodus6:2-9:35). It reads, "But they would not listen to Moses because of their crushed spirit and difficult toil." (ibid. 6:9)

Let's understand the context of this verse. In last week's parsha, we read of the first time Moses delivered the message that the redemption was near. The "people were convinced." They believed. They trusted Moses. They "bowed low in homage." They had hope.

This week's parsha, however, begins after the Jews knew bitter disappointment. Moses had intervened with Pharaoh, but his intervention backfired. Pharaoh reacted by increasing the burden he placed upon the Jews. He said, "Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them not pay attention to deceitful promises." After such disillusionment, the eloquent promises with which this week's parsha begins evoked a very different reaction. Moses' words were met with disbelief, with a despair that is the result of kotzer ruach, a crushed spirit, and avodah kashah, painfully difficult toil.

For me, hopelessness is the saddest of human emotions, especially when it follows upon the excitement of hopefulness. The moment when hopes are dashed and dreams abandoned is, for me, the saddest moment of all.

Ironically, this saddest of all verses gives us the opportunity to learn important lessons about hope and its opposite, despair. To learn these lessons we must scrutinize these two phrases, kotzer ruach andavodah kashah, which I have thus far translated as "crushed spirit" and "difficult toil". Our great commentators give these phrases different "spins".

For example, Rashi understands kotzer ruach to mean "shortness of breath", the result of strenuous physical labor. Can a man who is gasping for air be expected to hope? Of course not. He is so panicked that hope for a better future is totally beyond his capacity.

Whereas Rashi translates ruach as "breath," Rabbi Obadiah Sforno, the great Jewish commentator who lived in Italy during its Renaissance, prefers to translate it as "spirit." For him, it is not "shortness of breath" that deprives a person of hope. Rather, it is the "shortness of spirit," the absence of a "spirit of faith," which makes hope so difficult. The Jews lost faith in Moses. He had let them down by failing to provide them with an instant solution to their plight. Thereby they lost their faith in the God of Moses. Without faith, argues Sforno, hope is impossible.

The eighteenth century mystic and ethicist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, understands our verse differently. For him, Pharaoh was the expert par excellence about the processes of despair and discouragement. He knew how to squash hope. He knew why genuine hope is so rare. To keep man from hope, Pharaoh knew, you must keep him so busy with all sorts of tasks and chores that he is too distracted to take the few moments necessary to begin to think of hopeful possibilities.

This is how Luzzato puts it in his masterpiece, The Path of the Upright (Mesillat Yesharim):

"This is, in fact, one of the cunning artifices of the evil yetzer (inclination), who always imposes upon men such strenuous tasks that they have no time left to note whither they are drifting…This ingenuity is somewhat like that of Pharaoh, who commanded, 'Let heavier work be laid upon the men…' For Pharaoh's purpose was not only to prevent the Israelites from having any leisure to make plans against him, but by subjecting them to unceasing toil, to deprive them also of the opportunity to reflect."

Without this opportunity — with kotzer ruach¸ "shortness of time to reflect"— hopefulness is out of the question. One would be too busy to hope.

Another insight into the possible meaning of kotzer ruach is found in a most unusual source. There exists a collection of brief homilies, authored by Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapira, the Chassidic Rebbe of Piacezna in pre-Holocaust Poland. He recorded these homilies, delivered in the early years of the Warsaw Ghetto, in a little notebook, which miraculously survived those fateful years.

He writes that under conditions of avodah kashah, of very difficult toil, one loses the "spirit of life." Rabbi Shapira knew all too well the meaning of difficult toil, enslaved as he and his "congregation" were in that horrible ghetto. And he knew how he and they struggled to do God's will despite their dire straits. He witnessed their attempts to help each other, to maintain faith in God, and to perform whatever ritual mitzvot they could. But furthermore, he observed that their tortured souls could not muster the "spirit of life" necessary for religious action. Kotzer ruach for him meant the absence of a "spirit of vitality." For him, religious actions performed without enthusiasm were defective.

Like the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, the Jews of ancient Egypt suffered from kotzer ruach. They could not respond to Moses with a "spirit of vitality." No vitality, no life, no hope.

These commentators lived centuries apart from each other and in very diverse circumstances. But they all teach us this: there are many factors in life that render hope impossible. Some of these factors are cruel and unusual, as exemplified by the slaveries of Egypt and Nazi Germany.

But some of these factors are common today. They relate to our busy lifestyles, to our work routines, even to the ways we play. We are consumed by "busyness." There may be little that slaves can do to free themselves for the possibility of hope. But there is much that we can do to avoid our own "slavery," to at least

limit the avodah kashah that leads to kotzer ruach.

Reflect upon it. Where there is time for reflection, there are opportunities for hope.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Symbolism of Covering Our Eyes During Shema

At the end last week's parsha, Moshe complained to Hashem in strong language: "… Why did you do evil to this nation, why have you sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, the situation of this nation deteriorated… " [Shemos 5:22-23]. This week's parsha begins with the Almighty's response to Moshe's complaint: "And Elokim spoke to Moshe and said: I am Hashem." [Shemos 6:2]

This is a strange pasuk because the Name of G-d, "Elokim" and the Name of G-d, "Yud-Kay-Vov-Kay" (Hashem) have two very specific and distinct meanings in Lashon haKodesh. Elokim carries with it a connotation of the Name of Hashem when the Attribute of Midas HaDin (Strict Justice) is employed. On the other hand, Yud-Kay-Vov-Kay is the Name of Hashem which connotes Midas HaRachamim (the Attribute of Mercy). The pasuk begins with the phrase "Vayedaber Elokim el Moshe," upon which Rashi comments, "He spoke Mishpat (Judgement) with him, for his harsh manner of speech questioning 'Why did You do evil to this nation.'" Thus, the Ribono shel Olam is speaking sternly to Moshe. And yet what Hashem tells him is 'Ani Hashem'.

Rashi also comments on the meaning of the expression 'Ani Hashem." Rashi's interpretation notwithstanding, perhaps the following interpretation can also be suggested:

The Ribono shel Olam is telling Moshe Rabbeinu something here that every Jew, and every person in fact, needs to realize. (This of course is something which is much easier said than done.) Invariably, in the course of a lifetime, things occur which are extremely painful. There are situations where we think the Almighty is punishing us, angry with us, or has abandoned us. The faith of a Jew, however, requires a person to realize what Rabbi Akiva taught us, and what Nachum Ish Gam-Zu taught us.

Namely, "Kol mah d'Avid Rachmana l'Tav Avid" (All that the All-Merciful One does, He does for good). Ultimately, what happens is for the good. The pain and the suffering that a person endures during the course of his lifetime is ultimately what is best for him. This applies on an individual level and it applies on a national level as well. It is a very difficult concept of Emunah, but a person needs to believe this.

Vayedaber Elokim el Moshe: Moshe, you think I am torturing the people? Am I bad to the people? Am I causing ill to the people? Moshe Rabbeinu, you should know that Ani Hashem. It all comes from the same source. It is all ultimately a manifestation of My Midas HaRachamim. Sometimes the Attribute of Mercy requires these types of things to happen as well.

I say that this is one of the fundamentals of the Jewish faith because when we say the pasuk, which we recite twice a day as a Biblical command, SHEMA YISRAEL HASHEM ELOKEINU HASHEM ECHAD, that statement (which is perhaps the Pledge of Allegiance of every single Jew) not only conveys the concept that the Ribono shel Olam is One (which is part of the Mitzvah) and not only testifies to my accepting Him as my G-d (Kabbalas Ol Malchus Shamayim), but also, implicit in that statement is the unification of the Name HASHEM (Midas HaRachamim or the Attribute of Mercy) with the Name ELOKEINU (Midas HaDin or the Attribute of Justice).

Everything is from the same source. Even when a person must endure terrible troubles like they did in Mitzrayim, that was part of the Ribono shel Olam's Grand Plan of how to create His Nation. Chazal refer to the experience of the Jewish people in Egypt as the crucible (Kur haBarzel), the vessel used to refine silver or gold through intense heat that removes the dross and impurities of those metals. That was the Egyptian experience.

It was certainly horrible to endure that experience. It must have been extremely difficult for the people who saw their children being thrown into the Nile to view the experience as a manifestation of G-d's Attribute of Mercy. However, this is part of the Jewish mandate to believe: Hear of Israel, Hashem (Midas HaRachamim) Elokeinu (Midas HaDin) Hashem (Midas HaRachamim) is all One.

The Sanzer Rebbe, zt"l, once said that this is the meaning of a universally practiced custom. The Gemara in Brochos says that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi put his hands over his eyes when he read Krias Shema. That is the way everyone reads Shema Yisrael. Why do we do it that way? The Sanzer Rebbe explains it is for this very reason. It symbolizes our inability to perceive the fact that the Midas HaDin and the Midas HaRachamim all come from the same source. We can't see the Attribute of Mercy being the ultimate source of bad things that happen to us. Therefore, we cover our eyes: I can't see how this could possibly be good. I can't see it – but I believe it!

If we look back at Jewish history, this is even harder to believe than personal life experiences which may trouble us. On the national scale, the things that Klal Yisrael have endured are mind-boggling. They are hard for the human mind to understand. Therefore, when we recite Krias Shema, we need to cover our eyes, because many times in this world, we simply cannot see the unification to which we are testifying – that Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad, that it all stems from the same Midas HaRachamim.

There is a sefer Kol Aryeh written by a disciple of the Chasam Sofer. He writes a beautiful interpretation of the pasukim which describe Hashem's words to Yaakov before his descent to Egypt: "…Have no fear of descending to Egypt, for I shall establish you as a great nation there. I shall descend with you to Egypt and I shall also surely bring you up; and Yosef shall place his hand on your eyes." [Bereshis 46:3-4]

Yaakov Avinu was afraid to leave Eretz Canaan and go down to Mitzrayim. He knew through Ruach HaKodesh what they were getting themselves into. He foresaw the suffering and persecution that his children would face there. He feared the outcome of his descent to Egypt. Hashem told him not to be afraid because "In the end, I am going to take them out and, in the end, this is a necessary experience for the formation of Klal Yisrael. Just like you saw by Yosef HaTzadik – he was sold as a slave and experienced a tumultuous life, but in the end, his descent to Egypt turned out to be good for the family. Yosef is the living example of things that for many years appear to be horrible, but in the end turn out to be a salvation."

That, says the Kol Aryeh, is what the Ribono shel Olam hinted to Yaakov with the words "and Yosef will place his hand over your eyes." At the level of simple pshat, this means that when Yaakov died, Yosef would be there and would close Yaakov's eyes. But at the level of remez, this alludes to the fact that Yosef represented the concept that interim suffering can ultimately work out for the best. Just like by Krias Shema, we cover our eyes to symbolize that while we are suffering we cannot yet see the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, so too, the paradigm of Yosef symbolizes that in the end, this too will be for the best.

No Break Between Kos #3 and Kos #4

In this week's parsha, the Torah uses the four verbs associated with Redemption (Daled Leshonos shel Geulah). "Therefore, say to the Children of Israel, I am Hashem and I shall TAKE you out (v'Hotzaisee) from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will RESCUE you (v'Hitzalti) from their service, and I will REDEEM you (v'Ga'alti) with an outstretched arm and with great judgments, and I shall TAKE you (v'Lakachti) to Me for a people…" [Shemos 6:7-8]. These are the four expressions of redemption: v'Hotzaisee, v'Hitzalti, v'Ga'alti, v'Lakachti.

According to one opinion in the Gemara, the four Kosos we drink at the Pesach Seder are based on these four Biblical expressions of redemption. Rav Asher Weiss points out an

interesting Hashkafa, based on a Halacha. The halacha is that a person is allowed to drink additional wine at the Seder between the first and second Kos as well as between the second and the third Kos. However, between the third and the fourth Kos, a person is not allowed to drink anything. There are halachic rationales for these distinctions, but Rav Asher Weiss suggests a homiletic reason, which teaches an important philosophic idea.

The allusion that Chazal are trying to convey is that the first three expressions of redemption (v'Hotzaisee, v'Hitzalti, and v'Ga'alti) are all about freedom. Freedom is a great thing. Everybody is for freedom. Everyone talks about "Freedom, freedom, freedom!" Emancipation, salvation, and redemption are like motherhood and apple-pie. Everybody is in favor.

However, what is the fourth expression of redemption? "And I will TAKE you to Me as a nation and I will be for you an Elokim." There are strings attached to being G-d's People. It is not so simple. A person might say, "Okay, I can handle v'Hotzaisee, v'Hitzalti, and v'Ga'alti. I can buy into that part of the redemption experience. There is no problem with pausing or not pausing between each of those expressions of Geulah. However, we cannot separate between the three expressions of freedom and the fourth Kos, which represents becoming G-d's People, with all that that implies.

Freedom without commitment to Divine Law can lead to anarchy. Unfortunately, too much freedom is not a good thing. Freedom without restrictions is not what the Ribono shel Olam had in mind when He spoke of Freedom. Therefore, the first three expressions of Geulah need to go together with the fourth expression, without any interruption.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

We should never tolerate an intolerable situation. In Parshat Va'era (Shemot 6:6) Hashem promises the suffering Israelites in Egypt, "Vehotseiti etchem mitachet sivlot Mitzrayim," – "I will deliver you from under the burdens of Egypt."

The Chidushei HaRim brilliantly explains that the term 'sivlot' meaning the burdens, the suffering of the people comes from the same root as two other words: 'savlanut' meaning patience and 'sovlanut' meaning tolerance. He explains that sometimes one can be enduring a totally unacceptable situation, however one gets used to it; one succumbs and one starts to tolerate it.

In other circumstances one might exercise patience, believing that actually one should fight against a particular circumstance, that it's totally unacceptable; but one waits for the right moment which never comes and as a result the savlanut, the patience, leads to sovlanut, which is tolerance.

This, explains the Chidushei HaRim, is what happened to the Israelites in Egypt. They suffered many years of slavery. They got used to it. They never believed that the situation could change. As a result they tolerated what the Egyptians made them go through. Hashem therefore declared,

"Vehotseiti etchem mitachat sivlot Mitzrayim," – I will deliver you from the 'sivlot' – from your patience, your tolerance. First of all you need to be delivered from your negativity, your acceptance of an unacceptable situation. Hashem says you need to deliver yourselves from your defeatist attitude and only after that will I be able to deliver you physically from the slavery in Egypt.

Of course when it comes to unacceptable circumstances one needs to pick the right time and method, but we should never get used to an intolerable situation to the extent that we just allow it to happen. This applies to ourselves, to the situations that we are going through, and equally to situations that we see others going through; we need to do what we can in order to help them in their time of trouble.

So from Parshat Va'era we learn an important lesson: that we should never tolerate an intolerable situation.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel
Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*

Jewish Gratitude

Gratitude is defined as "strong feeling of appreciation to someone or something for what the person has done to help you." Logically, being thankful should be the most natural thing in the world, and basic to human nature. Yet, especially in the twenty-first century, it is particularly difficult for people to feel gratitude to others. In previous centuries, all people knew that they were not self-sufficient and had to rely on others, as people were dominated by natural events and other factors and could not control their own destiny. But most people today feel that they are fully in charge of their own lives and totally self-sufficient. Thus, acknowledging that someone else helped him or her become difficult and challenges the feeling that "I can do everything alone, by myself." And in an age where fewer believe in an active God in their lives, gratitude to God is even rarer still. Gratitude requires admitting that not everything is in my hands, and sometimes other people have to help me in order to get through situations and to achieve a better life. How does Judaism teach the Jew to have the proper sensitivity and be thankful?

Two incidents in this week's Parsha teach us a sensitivity to gratitude by Moses, which is far beyond the ability of most people to be appreciative: For the first plague, God asked Moses to speak to Aaron and, and for Aaron take his own staff to strike the Nile River, which would turn into to blood, and, in the following plague, to strike the Nile from which would emerge the frogs. Why didn't God ask Moses to take his own staff, and from Moses, not Aaron, to strike the water? Rashi explain (Exodus 7:7 with Rashi explanation Exodus 7:7 with Rashi explanation) that since it was the Nile that saved Moses from death as an infant, he would not be an ingrate to this river, and cause it damage. That would be ingratitude. A Midrash tells (Midrash Tanchuma, Va-era 14), that Aaron and not Moses, was again commanded to strike the land before the Plague of Lice. This was because it was the land in which Moses buried the Egyptian that Moses had killed for beating a Jew, that (temporarily) saved him from the wrath and anger of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The verse and Rashi commentary (Exodus 8:12, with Rashi commentary) spell this out in detail: God asks Moses, once again, to take his Aaron's staff and smite the ground to bring the plague. Rashi explains that it would show "ingratitude" by Moses to smite the ground that saved him (which buried the dead Egyptian). Thus, God, once again, commands Aaron, and not Moses, to strike the land, to prevent Moses from showing ingratitude. But why this super sensitivity? Does Moses actually think the land or the river have feelings and would have been "insulted" if he had smitten them? These are unfeeling non-living parts of nature, who do not "need" to be appreciated. The answer to this important question will be discussed below, as we explore the Jewish concept of gratitude.

All of a Jew's Life Is About Gratitude - From the very first moment of the day, when a traditional Jew wakes up, he or she are required to recite a prayer thanking God for life itself for this day (Modeh Ani prayer recited each morning when waking up). It is interesting to note that the first word of this prayer, "Modeh" can either be translated as "I thank" or "I admit." For those who have trouble acknowledging the help of others, "I admit" might be a more appropriate translation. One would have thought that after Covid- 19, people would not assume that life itself each day is an automatic "given". But that appreciation for life itself quickly dissipated after the vaccine was developed, as is human nature. Rabbi Pesach Falk (1979) commenting on King David's Psalm "A Psalm of Gratitude" (Psalm 100), explains (Responsa Machaze Eliyahu, section 2, Introduction) that all of Jewish prayer is essentially expressing gratitude to God. Thanking God for His kindness in giving each human the ability to function daily, for health, for providing a person with enough to sustain oneself, etc., are all part of the original service in the Temple and its present-day evolution, the three times a day prayer services.

Nachmanides states (Nachmanides commentary on Exodus 17:13) that the entire purpose of Mitzvah observance and that of

Creation itself was to bring Jews to show appreciation to God. Specifically, one of the 19 blessings in the Silent Prayer, the essence of the Jewish prayer service, is the Blessing of Gratitude, "Modim." In this prayer (Blessing number 18 in the daily Amidah,), Jews thank God for their lives which are in His hands, and for the daily miracles God performs for them. It ends by blessing God whose Name and actions of goodness are worthy of gratitude. It is noteworthy that in repeating the Amidah, the Cantor recites the identical blessings which were recited first by the congregation silently, and the congregation answers Amen to each blessing. With one exception - this blessing of gratitude. While the Cantor repeats every other blessing from the Silent Amidah, when it comes to the "gratitude" blessing of Modim, each Jew is instructed to recite another similar blessing demonstrating gratitude to God, and not rely on the cantor's repetition. Why is this the Jewish law? Why shouldn't the Jews be able to similarly answer Amen to this "Gratitude" blessing, after the Cantor recites it? Some Rabbis explain that gratitude specifically designates to be recited or even shown by someone's representative or an agent a person sends (like the Cantor). Gratitude can only be demonstrated by the specific person who received the kindness, and not through anyone else (Eliyahu Rabba on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 116). Thus, each Jew must recite another, personal, blessing of gratitude to God in the middle of the repetition of the Amidah.

The Gratitude Owed by Jews to Egyptians - The importance and significance of the concept of gratitude can be seen dramatically in the details of one the 613 commandments in the Torah. If a survey were to be taken today by Jews (and non-Jews), by those knowledgeable and less knowledgeable, asking them to select those people who were the worst enemies of the Jewish people in history (in terms of their actions to Jews), worthy of hate, while there many candidates (Amalekites, Spanish Christians in the Spanish Inquisition, the Czars, Nazi Germany), most people would probably answer "the Egyptians", because they not only enslaved an entire people arbitrarily for many years, but they also killed Jewish babies in order to wipe out the population. Nevertheless, the Torah commands Jews (Deuteronomy 23:9) that it is forbidden hate Egyptians at all for what they did to the Jewish people by enslaving them. Why not? The verse specifies the reason: because the Jews were originally invited into the country as strangers in the land of Egypt before the slavery. Thus, although slavery lasted approximately 120 years, because the Egyptians took in the Jews during the famine, and not only fed them, but also treated them as royals as part of the "ruler" Joseph's family (at first), there is a Torah obligation to be grateful to the Egyptians that supersedes any feelings of revulsion for what happened after. Rashi specifically says (Rashi commentary on Deuteronomy 23:8) that gratitude for taking in the Jews during a famine overrides the later killing of Jewish babies. What a demonstration by the Torah about the importance of and the obligation to show gratitude!

Rabi Moshe Sofer (Torat Moshe, Beshalach) goes further. He brings the verse that the Jews left Egypt "Chamushim". The simple meaning of the word is that the Jews possessed weapons, as Rashi and many others explain. Why, then, Rabbi Sofer asks, instead of Splitting of the Sea, did not God arrange a war between the Egyptians and the Jews (both armed), with the Jews emerging victorious? God certainly could have done this as an alternate means to save the Jews, and, as a result of this battle, it would have given the Jews a much greater sense of freedom and independence, rather than relying on God for the supernatural miracle of splitting the sea to gain true freedom. Rabbi Sofer's answer is amazing. Even though Egypt was now clearly the enemy bent on destroying the Jews near the sea, since originally the Jews had been invited in as an act of friendship by the Egyptians demonstrating great hospitality, it would have been an act of ingratitude to kill the Egyptians (120 years later!) now (even though the Jews were about to be attacked and killed by the Egyptians right now, and even though self-defense is justified in any war), this still would have demonstrated a lack of appreciation for treating the Jews nicely at first. Thus, God could not allow the Jews themselves to fight and defeat the Egyptians. Once again, this shows how important this emotion and obligation of gratitude is in Judaism.

Why Aren't People Grateful When It Should be Obvious to Them? - As discussed above, it is very difficult for a human being to acknowledge any good act done for him or her. While this is more logical in the 21st century, as pointed out above, already in the desert God knew the people would be ungrateful, even as He fed them daily. Why is this so? The Rabbis explain on the verse "man is evil from this his birth (Genesis 8:21)," that there are certain immoral and unethical characteristics that exist in every person at birth, and his or her "evil inclination" that, left unchecked and uncorrected, will lead every person to an immoral adulthood. One purpose of the Torah, the commandments and leading an ethical life, is to fight and counteract these natural instincts that infants are born with. If people are not trained to go against their nature through performance of Torah commandments and to follow the ways of God, most people will continue to do evil throughout their lives. One example showing this behavior is refusing to appreciate what others have done for them. Chovot Halevavot writes (Chovot Halevavot, Shaar Bechina 5, Shaar Elokim, Introduction) that if man simply concentrated on and thought deeply about the logic of events in his or her life, each person would realize that we each human being needs to rely on God for so many things (air to breathe, water, other basic needs, etc.), and this will bring acknowledgement and gratitude. Thus, humans are "wired" not to express their gratitude to others for daily actions taken on behalf of the person, whether it is God (for those who believe), friends or parents, even though logic overwhelmingly tells an individual to be appreciative (it is also in his or her interest to thank others, to enhance relationships). However, gratitude in one's heart is not sufficient. Man must not only feel appreciative, but also must also express that feeling, verbally (or in writing). This notion is based on the verses in Psalms, where King David writess that he verbally acknowledges all the greatness is nature (Psalms 139:14). Therefore, to fulfill this command, a Jew must verbally express thankfulness daily to once's spouse, to God in prayer, to friends, etc.

Rabbeinu Bechaye gives a more detailed explanation why it is hard in man's nature to express feelings of appreciation (Chovot Halevavot, Shaar Bechina, Introduction). Man is always looking "upward," to attain more than he or she currently has. What a person already has is already considered a "given" and "expected." What is unknown, still needed, and not yet attained is all that matters. Thus, what a person already has is never appreciated. Rabbi Zev Leff, Rabbi of Matityahu, gives a third reason. He says that in most situations, people believe anything they get is "coming to them." Therefore, unless it is so patently obvious that the help is undeserved, and that another person (or God) did a great favor, few people will acknowledge it. He gives the example of a person receiving a paycheck that he or she naturally feels was earned and deserved, but an extra unexpected large bonus that is a total surprise, will always bring gratitude. Unfortunately, today, even "undeserved" end of year bonuses or even a large tip to a waiter is already "expected," and not truly appreciated. People today think "everything is coming to them," and thus, are not sufficiently thankful when they attain anything. There is a story about a traditional Jew driving in Manhattan for 10 minutes and cannot find any parking space, or even a garage for pay with spaces, and will be late for a very important appointment. He stops the car, turns to God, and says "God, if you give me a parking space in the next two minutes, I will attend every daily prayer service for a year, give double to Tzedaka-charity, and learn more Torah daily." Thirty seconds later, a perfect space opens up right in front of the appointment's building. The smiling man then turns to God and says "Never mind. I found the space by myself."

Rabbeinu Bechaye implies a similar understanding in describing another reason why people are not grateful. He describes (Chovot Halevavot, Shaar Bechina, Introduction) the man who takes in an orphan and lavishes him with every comfort, education, and has a great life for many years. Then, the same man hears that his enemy was taken captive and is suffering greatly. So, this

special man pays for the ransom and nurses him back to health. The freed prisoner is so grateful to them man and expresses his appreciation, but the orphan never expresses gratitude to the man for everything in his life. "Why not?" he asks his friend: I did so much more for the orphan, and he does not acknowledge anything. Why not? The friend answers that for the orphan this was his "regular life," something he has come to expect. So, no "thanks" is forthcoming. But his former enemy could not have expected such kindness, and is, therefore, much more grateful.

Why, Then, Show Appreciation to Inanimate Objects - like Land or Animals? - One may be able to understand the importance of being thankful to people who have helped him or her, or even God. But why be thankful to inanimate objects like water and land, as Moses was? Surely, they cannot understand or "feel" gratitude. It is clear that if gratitude was at all about the giver of the goodness to the person, this concept would make no sense at all. But the doer of something good has no connection to the gratitude. However, it is all about the recipient of goodness, not the giver. Thus, as one modern Rabbi ruled (Piskei Din Rabbaniyim, 5764, Pesak Din 116), if it about the receiver of kindness, then it makes no difference if the "giver" of goodness was human, animal, or a river. Gratitude must be felt by the "receiver." Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler adds (Michtav Mai-Eliyahu, Section 3, Darchei Avoda, Chesed VeHakorat Hatov) that every recipient of something undeserved, unexpected, or just a simple kindness performed for a person on his or her behalf, must be recognized as a fundamental aspect of human behavior, and also acknowledged orally, not merely in thought. And even if it is a non-human giver, like an animal or a river, gratitude still must be shown and felt. A person is influenced by emotions well as intellect, and the emotion of gratitude by the receiver is an obligatory expression of thanks, no matter the source. A Talmudic and Jewish law "proof" of this concept is that a Jew who is blessed by the Kohen-Priest daily (in Israel) is obligated to thank the Kohen for receiving the blessing (and give him encouragement of a "Yeyasher Koach") (Teshuvot Vehanhagot, Tochen Inyanim, chapter 5). But why "thank" the kohen for doing his job? After all, the Kohen is obligated to bless the people. Why thank him for doing what he supposed to do? However, if the gratitude is all about the receiver, rather than about the giver, thanking the Kohen makes perfect sense. Even though it is compulsory for the Kohen to bless each Jew, every person who received an undeserved blessing should be grateful to the individual who gave that blessing. Thus, it matters not if the Kohen was obligated or not obligated to do so – he deserves thanks from each Jew for that undeserved kindness. So, too, Moses must acknowledge symbolically, and thank the river that saved his life and the land that also saved his life – even if the river and land do not "understand" that acknowledgement. It is all about the receiver, not the giver.

*** This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "*The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com**

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Harav Yehuda Amital, z"l
Portrait of a Leader

At the end of last week's *parasha*, Moshe experienced a severe setback: his mission to Pharaoh had failed, resulting in a worsening of conditions for Bnei Yisrael. They respond bitterly: "May God look upon you [Moshe and Aharon] and judge, for you have made us odious in the eyes of Pharaoh…" (*Shemot* 5:21). They claim that Moshe and Aharon are false prophets, or that they misunderstood what God had told them, and that they will be punished for the new suffering which they have caused.

At the beginning of our *parasha*, God reassures Moshe and promises him redemption – but when Moshe seeks to pass this on to the people, they are deaf to his message, "for impatience of spirit and for hard labor" (*Shemot* 6:9).

This is immediately followed by a verse which looks like a re-appointment of Moshe, and – once again – a replay of the argument about his suitability for this role: God spoke to Moshe, saying: Come, speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, that he might let the children of Israel out of his land. And Moshe spoke before God, saying: Behold, Bnei Yisrael did not listen to me; how then will Pharaoh listen to me, when I am heavy of speech? (*Shemot* 6:10-12)

This is followed by a genealogical tree of Moshe's family, as though we are encountering him for the first time.

Our impression is therefore that this is a new mission, not a continuation of the previous one. Indeed, Ramban writes (5:22) that perhaps some time elapsed between Moshe's failure in his first encounter with Pharaoh, and his return to Egypt. He cites the possibility, raised in the midrash, that in the interim Moshe returned with his family to Midian, and remained there for six months, until God appeared to him and commanded him to go again to Egypt.

In the verses describing his new mission, we read: God spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and He commanded them (*va-yetzavem*) to Bnei Yisrael and to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. (*Shemot* 6:13) Rashi gives a mild hint at the intention here: "He commanded them to Bnei Yisrael" – He commanded them to lead them peaceably and tolerantly.

But the midrash formulates the situation in much more forthright terms: God said to him: "My children are recalcitrant, they are hot-headed, they are troublesome. Therefore, accept in advance that they will curse you and stone you." (*Shemot Rabba* 7:3) A difficult job awaits the leader of Bnei Yisrael. He is going to have to deal with troublesome, recalcitrant people who will constantly be arriving at his doorstep with complaints – and, moreover, will even act violently towards him.

Further on, the midrash shows how the leader might deal with this challenge: "Who is the King of glory?" (*Tehillim* 24:10) – Why is God referred to here as the "King of glory"? Because He shares glory with those who fear Him. How is this so? In the case of a human king, no one else rides his horse, and no one is permitted to sit on his throne. But God seated Shlomo upon His throne… and led Eliyahu upon His horse… In the case of a human king, no one may use his sceptre. But God gave over His staff to Moshe… In the case of a human king, no one else wears his crown. But in the future, God will place His crown upon [the head of] King Mashiach. (*Shemot Rabba* 8:1)

God is called the "King of glory" not because glory is shown to Him, but rather because He gives glory to those who fear Him. A leader must know that his job is to give to his subjects, not to receive from them. Only in this way will he achieve the desired attitude on their part, and be able to influence them. A leader who believes that the people must give him honor, rather than the other way around, will find himself in conflict with the people and on the receiving end of their abuse.
[Translated by Kaeren Fish]

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Plague of Boils (Shechin), the Book of Job, and an Ironic Allusion
Rabbi Shmuel Klitsner

The plague of Boils (Shechin) appears thirteen times in the Tanach, in various passages. Five of those times are the "boils of Egypt", and once in the Book of Job, Chapter 2, verse 2, Job is afflicted with boils as part of a test agreed upon by Hashem and the Satan. When the Satan receives permission from Hashem to afflict and torture Job, he chooses the plague of "harsh boils, from his feet to the top of his head". When three of Job's friends come to console him, they see him from afar, and don't recognize him. The same simple, righteous and God-fearing individual who was once very wealthy, and had a large and harmonious family, was now sitting alone "amidst the ashes", using "a shard of pottery to scratch himself".

The verses at the end of chapter 2 of the Book of Job contain an expansive description of the things that Job's friends do to console Job and identify with his grief. This description contains a number of acts that later become part of the Jewish laws concerning grief and mourning that have been in practice for

generations, including: the rending of garments, sitting on the floor for seven days, placing ash on the mourner's head, refraining from addressing the mourner until the mourner starts a conversation, and, of course, weeping. The apparent empathy Job's friends feel for him seem to make them role-models for anyone interested in consoling mourners. This idea, however, is subject to revised interpretation once we delve into their actions through a careful reading of the text.

By comparing this episode of comforting the bereaved with other passages of consolation we find this instance with Job and his so-called friends to be an extreme departure from the Biblical literary convention.

It is glaringly hyperbolic and thus rather suspicious that there are many more expressions of mourning in these verses than in any other episode recounted anywhere in the biblical text (except for the description in the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 27, where an entire nation is engaged in mourning over its fate at the end of days). Moreover, most of the acts of empathy performed by Job's friends are things that mourners tend to do, not those consoling them, Thus, their demonstrative identification with his suffering actually constitutes the equivalent of emotional trespassing. All this is hardly indicative of great sensitivity.

Most surprisingly, the verses in Job Chapter 2 relate the idea of "dust on the head" with an unexpected and exaggerated description: "and [the friends] threw dust into the air heavenward onto their heads." Everywhere else mourning is described, the text uses the verb "to raise" (leha'alot), and not "to throw" (lizrok), and it certainly doesn't involve throwing ashes into the air or toward the heavens. Without a doubt, this verse, "and [the friends] threw dust into the air heavenward onto their heads", refers the readers back to the portion of the week, Parashat Va'era, and the verses concerning the plague of boils that Moses was commanded to bring down upon the entire land of Egypt, through the ritual described in the text: "Each of you take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw it toward heaven in the sight of Pharaoh. And it shall be upon them boils…" (Exodus 9:8-10).

What's intriguing about this allusion is that the same act that leads to the plague of boils in the Book of Exodus appears as an act of condolence over the plague of boils mentioned in the Book of Job!

A possible solution to this enigma has been proposed by the late Professor Meir Weiss. Weiss suggests that in homeopathic medicine and in the magical rituals of primitive cultures, just as a particular phenomenon can be caused by a particular action, by repeating that action, the opposite effect can be achieved. Today, we understand how, by injecting a pathogenic virus, we can cause the body to produce antibodies that will help the treated individual acquire immunity to the disease, or become cured of it. Yet without completely understanding how all of this works, very early on, the Talmudic text specifies a cure for rabies, which calls for feeding a person bitten by a rabid dog the diaphragm of that dog. In his article on the beginning of the Book of Job (in his book, Mikra'ot ke-Havanatam), Professor Weiss explains the conduct of Job's friends, throwing ashes into the air, referring to the above theory known as sympathetic magic. They had hoped to cure him of his boils by repeating the formulaic magical act that had been used to produce boils.

Suggesting a different approach to this inter-textual allusion, I feel that if we read carefully and see this initial introduction to the relationship between Job and his friends as predictive or foreshadowing of the rest of the book, we will come to a different conclusion.

As it would seem, Job's friends console him in almost each of the chapters of the book, when they "solve" the problem of theodicy, (i.e. why righteous people suffer). In their misguided attempts to free Job of his existential pain, they generally choose between two egregious approaches. In some chapters they tell him that there is no such thing as a righteous person who suffers, because he (Job) is not a righteous person. In other rounds of their philosophical symposia, they tell Job that what he suffers from isn't truly bad – and he would know this if he could only attain the proper perspective. Anyone who has ever been on the receiving end of this type of consolation can confirm that it only makes the pain even worse. Indeed, at the end of the Book of Job (chapter 42), Hashem censures Job's friends twice, "for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job". Job's friends thus become the archetype for insensitivity, and they become the literary source of the sin of "verbal mistreatment (ona'at devarim)" discussed in Tractate Bava Metzi'ah, 58a.

Outwardly, Job's friends seem to be "consoling" him, but through their insensitivity they only make matters worse. Ironically, it is precisely the very behaviors that were intended to alleviate Job's pain, that exacerbate his suffering.

Consequently, no allusion could be more ironic nor more accurate and stinging than invoking by subtle associative wording the very act that inflicted boils in a description of their attempt to comfort the boil – stricken Job.

By cleverly deploying an illusion to the plague of boils in our Torah portion, the author of the Book of Job creates an ironic subtext to this scene of "consolation that causes unintended further pain", while simultaneously creating the perfect foreshadowing of the complex and fraught relationship between Job and his friends throughout the book.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Remember the Shabbos: Take it Personally

Our Rabbis (Talmud Yuma 29a) teach us that the night is darkest right before dawn. Similarly, right before the actualization of the four l'shonos ha'geula, the Egyptian servitude was at its most oppressive point. The Torah teaches that "v'lo shomu el Moshe", they could not listen to Moshe and his optimistic promise of deliverance, m'kotzer ruach, and avodah kasha - due to their shortness of breath and hard work.

Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky zt"l (in his Emes L'Yaakov) has an additional explanation. The Medresh Shemos Rabba (5:22) teaches that Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim had megillos - texts that they studied every Shabbos that helped them maintain their emunah/bitachon in their being redeemed, but we are not told what the contents of these megillos was. Rav Kaminetsky opines that they contained those pirkrei Tehillim that were composed by Moshe, as we are taught in Bava Basra (14b) that Moshe composed Teffilah L'Moshe (Tehilim 90) and the next eleven perakim, including Mizmor Shir L'Yom Ha'Shabbos. It is most intriguing to note that perek 92, a song for the Shabbos day, has no reference to Shabbos nor to the mitzvos or character of the day. However, it does contain the important answer to the question of tzadik v'ra lo - namely, why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? We are assured that while evildoers enjoy temporary success, it is only that they may be eventually destroyed forever. The psalm ends with the assurance that the righteous will flourish as a palm tree, and that Hashem is my rock, in Whom there is no wrong. It is this psalm and others that maintained Bnei Yisroel's faith.

Initially, "Yismach Moshe b'matnat chelko" - Moshe convinced Pharoah to give the Hebrew slaves a day of rest and Moshe chose Shabbos, which gave them not only physical rest but also a weekly spiritual injection of faith. However, as taught at the end of Parshas Shemos (5:9), when Moshe asked for the liberation of the slaves, Pharoah intensified their servitude, which included their loss of Shabbos and thus, explains Rav Yaakov, they were losing faith and could not listen to Moshe.

Shabbos, since time immemorial, has been the bastion of our faith. Every Friday night we fulfill the biblical mitzva of kiddush, and in it there are two remembrances: a remembrance of the work of creation, and of the exodus from Egypt. The Ramban (Devarim 5:15) teaches that these are not two independent themes, but rather the Exodus proves Creation. The fact that Hashem demonstrated complete and total control over nature, providing water for the Hebrews and blood for the Egyptians, sending wild animals that could distinguish between Egyptian and Jew, etc., all showed that "Ani Hashem b'kerev ha'aretz" (Shemos 8:18), that

He is not only the Creator-Boreh, but the Ruler-Manhig over all creatures.

Regarding Yeztiyas Mitzrayim, the Seforno (Shemos 12:26-27) teaches a most exciting concept. He understands the question of the ben ha'rasha of "ma ha'avoda ha'zos lachem?" to be asking why is the korban Pesach a korban yachid, an individual's korban, as opposed to a communal one? His answer is that each individual has to bring their own sacrifice since the miracle of the Exodus happened to each individual, not only to the nation as a whole. It is one thing to say, for example, that the Egyptians had blood as a result of the first plague and the Jewish people had water. That would be understood as a miracle for the nation. However, we are taught that if an Egyptian and a Jew were drinking from one glass, at the very moment that the former drank blood, the Jew drank water - thus demonstrating a personal miracle for that individual. Moreover, Chazal teach (on the verse Shemos (14:30) that not only did the Jewish nation see the Egyptians dead on the seashore, but that Hashem washed onto the shore in front of each Jew the very cruel taskmaster who had tortured him. Again, a personalized miracle for each individual.

Just as Yetziyas Mitzrayim has these two components of personal and communal, so too does Shabbos. On the verse (Shemos 31:16) "V'shomru Bnei Yisrael es ha'Shabbos la'asos", the Or HaChaim teaches that the first half of the verse refers to the obligations of each individual to honor and guard the Shabbos, while the second part, "la'asos", imposes the obligation to see that the community as a whole keeps the Shabbos.

Regarding the individual obligation to observe Shabbos, I'd like to suggest that as Shabbos uplifted and strengthened the emuna of the Jews even before the Exodus, Shabbos forever adds to our religious growth and connection to Hashem. This is done by zachor, the positive actions of preparing for and observing the holiness of the day, by dressing properly and eating and studying of Torah, and shamor, i.e. by yielding to His restrictions we consciously imbibe His being the Master of the universe.

In addition, as the Exodus clearly demonstrated His hashgacha pratis, His involvement in the life of each individual, so too on Shabbos we are to pause and reflect on this phenomenon. While we acknowledge and extend thanksgiving to Hashem thrice daily in the bracha of modim in Shemoneh Esrei for the personalized miracles that He performs for us, too often it is said in a hurried and hectic environment. The peacefulness of Shabbos provides the ambiance for a more deliberate focus on the personal relationship that we each are blessed to have with Hashem.

The singing of Shalom Alechem of Friday night is universal. After that, appropriately we sing Eshes Chayil in honor of the Shabbos Queen and the queen of the household who creates the holy atmosphere that envelops the home on Shabbos. I was fortunate that every Shabbos in between these two my father z"l recited the prayer entitled "Ribon kol ha'olamim", a beautiful tefillah admiring the personal relationship we are privileged to have with Hashem. Including therein is, "I thank you, Lord my G-d, and G-d of my ancestors, for all the loving kindness that You have done and will do for me, and all the members of my household and all my fellow creatures". I strongly recommend that as part of the Shabbos meal, aside from the zemiros and divrei Torah, each of the participants in the meal should share an experience or occurrence whereby they saw His Hashgasha Pratis in their day to day living in their past week. This will help them focus and realize His personal involvement in their life.

The Or HaChaim teaches on the verse "va'yivarech Elokim" (Bereishis 2:3) that Shabbos provides blessing and energy throughout the week. May the focus on His personal relationship with us not only enhance our individual Shabbos, but strengthen us to influence others to keep Shabbos as well. Similarly, the Ramban, in his famous commentary at the end of Parshas Bo, teaches that from the open great miracles we learn to appreciate the small daily miracles as well. The Creation and the Exodus are clearly the two greatest and overt miracles which are the bedrock of Shabbos, and hopefully will assist us in appreciating His personal involvement in our lives.

We are living in most extraordinary times. It is hard to absorb but 800,000 Americans have died from Covid. This is clearly a living implementation of "Yoshev b'seser Elyon" (Tehillim 91), where we are taught "a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you." "Thank you, Hashem" is not only the way a Jew begins his day with Modeh ani, but is also the very adrenaline that keeps him going strong throughout the day.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

HASHEM's Law

A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know about Yosef. (Shemos 1:8)
and who did not know: he acted as if he did not know about him. -Rashi

And Pharaoh said, "Who is HASHEM that I should heed His voice to let Israel out? I do not know the Lord, neither will I let Israel out." (Shemos 5:2)

Go to Pharaoh in the morning; behold, he is going forth to the water, and you shall stand opposite him on the bank of the Nile, and the staff that was turned into a serpent you shall take in your hand. (Shemos 7:15)
behold, he is going forth to the water: to relieve himself, for he had deified himself and said that he did not need to relieve himself; so, early in the morning he went out to the Nile and there he would perform his needs. -Rashi

We are witnessing the deterioration of Pharaoh from a vulnerable leader in the times of Yosef, a man that was disturbed by a dream, then becoming a brutal dictator not only lacking in basic gratitude for what Yosef had helped him become but cruelly enslaving his family. Then he is a bold denier of The Almighty, and eventually he degenerates into a delusional self-declared deity.

The old adage is as true as ever. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Himmler (may his name be erased) said about Hitler, (may his name be erased), "In the 1930's he was a mentch (a man). In the early 1940's he was an uber-mentch (a superman), and by the mid 1940's he was OIS Mentch (he wasn't even human – inhuman)."

The comes Moshe and the Makos and everything is reversed. He is brought low and humble and the Children of Israel are born onto the stage of history. It looks to the untutored eye like an aggressive intervention. This was something totally unusual and never to be repeated. However, Dovid HaMelech reminds us over and over again in Tehillim and states clearly in the very first chapter of Tehillim.

"Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked, or taken the path of sinners, or joined the company of the insolent; rather, the Torah of HASHEM is his delight, and he studies it day and night. He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives. Not so the wicked; rather, they are like chaff that wind blows away. Therefore, the wicked will not survive judgment, nor will sinners, in the assembly of the righteous. For HASHEM cherishes the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed."

The Talmud affirms this comforting principle that wickedness cannot ultimately succeed, "Kushta Kai, Shikra Lo Kai", "Truth endures while falsehood is unsustainable."

So, what looks like a one-time event in history is really a predictable long-term pattern. In Egypt however, the mechanisms and processes of both exile and redemption are revealed. We are given a window – a box seat at the operating theater and we are witness to how things work. After that and since, however, we are relegated to the waiting room with our tear drenched Tehillim to anticipate the good news and the grander finale.

Murphy's Law states, "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong." That's the world

Murphy lives in. HASHEM's law says, "Anything that can go right will eventually be made right." If there's anything we learn from the episode of Yosef and his brothers, the Exodus from Egypt, the Purim story, and all of Jewish history, it is that: in the end, everything is understood and turns out right.

I once heard in the name of a great Rebbe, who remarked, "If I was HASHEM, I would be doing everything exactly the way HASHEM is doing things right now. I may not understand how or why things work the way they do, but HASHEM has a precise plan." In the short run, it may look like Murphy's law is dominating, but in the end, it will be the reign of HASHEM's Law!

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perz

Torah and Israel – Twin Values

There are certain values that can never be taken away from us. We see in the Torah, there are only two things, two values, called a 'morasha' – an inheritance for each and every Jew, that all of us have a unique, personal, intimate connection to them.

Torah, and the Land of Israel. It says at the end of the Torah that the Torah is a 'morasha', an inheritance, that we receive and bequeath to future generations.

But so too, we see in the beginning of this week's parasha, is the Land of Israel. Moshe is promised by G-d that the redemption is going to come, that the suffering is not forever. There are the famous four expressions of redemption, which are followed by a fifth expression – "I will bring you to the Land", the Land that I promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and I will give it to you as a 'morasha', as an inheritance.

These are the only two things our Sages say we each have our own unique connection with – our connection with Torah, and with the Land of Israel.

Incredibly, these are the great challenges that we face today.

The challenge of Torah – of deep, Jewish, spiritual and religious values. We live in a world of, unfortunately, so much assimilation, with so many Jews leaving the fold, a lack of deep-rooted Torah values. There is such a need to deepen our Jewish identity.

At the same time, the centrality of Israel. There are many today who speak in a post-modern language – we don't need nationalism, we don't need countries, we don't need anything particular, we should erase these markers of identity.

The Torah says: no. Part of our very essence and identity is both the Torah and our value system, and our mystical connection to Israel which has survived millennia, generations of suffering and distance – nothing could keep the Jewish people away from their desire to return because there is something about our connection to Torah and Israel which go to the core of who we are.

May each one of us deepen that identity and destiny of furthering the values of our connection to Torah, and our connection to the incredible Land and State of Israel.

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet
VAEIRA 5783

Weekly Parsha VAEIRA
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

As the narrative of the redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage unfolds, I am continually struck by the apparently gradual process that is described for us in the Torah. What does all of the detail associated with each of the plagues visited upon Egypt come to teach us? And would not one great plague alone have sufficed? After all, in the past century we witnessed how two bombs, alone, forced the powerful and fanatical Japanese Empire to surrender unconditionally. So, what is the message of the ten plagues and the elapse of time from the onset of the mission of Moshe to its final successful conclusion?

These issues are raised and discussed by all of the great rabbinic commentators over the ages. As is usual in Jewish biblical commentary, there is no one definitive answer, for the Torah itself is said to have seventy different "faces." Yet, there is much ground for a general understanding of the matter in their writings and opinions.

The main thrust of rabbinic opinion is that all of this was necessary to give the Egyptians an opportunity to repent and save themselves and, just as importantly, to give the Jews an opportunity to begin to think of themselves as a free and independent people and no longer as slaves and pagans. It takes time and a series of many events to turn around the mentality and preconceived ideas of human beings.

The Egyptians had to somehow become accustomed to the fact that they had no right to rule over others and be cruel to their fellow human beings. The Jews had to become accustomed to the responsibilities of freedom and an independent life and to realize that they were destined to be a special people dedicated to the service of God and humankind.

These things cannot happen suddenly and if they do, then they are not of a long-lasting nature. Judaism is not built upon sudden epiphanies but rather upon the long, grinding routine. Only after ten plagues have visited Egypt, the Egyptians and the Jews as well begin to understand what God wants from them.

We see from many incidents recorded for us throughout the Bible that one-shot miracles, no matter how impressive and meaningful they are at the moment they occur, do not really change the mindset of people in the long run. The miracle performed through Elijah, when all of Israel proclaimed that Hashem is the God of the universe, was not of a long-lasting nature and/or influence.

The people soon sank back into the swamp of idolatry and immorality. Regularity, consistency and repeated instruction and education are necessary to make miracles truly influential and long-lasting. If the Jews had been delivered from Egyptian bondage by one great miracle, they would have had a much harder time grasping the unique role that God intended them to play in world history.

They would have been much more reticent to accept that role at Sinai had it not been for the fact that they witnessed so many miracles. Those miracles were repeated regularly and explained to them by Moshe in the light of the godly Torah, which they now willingly accepted.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vaera

The Power of Holiness Needs To Be Balanced by the Power of Impurity

The pasuk says, "And the magicians of Egypt did the same with their magic…" (Shemos 7:22). The Ribono shel Olam told Moshe Rabbeinu to go before Pharaoh and to impress upon him the fact that he was the Agent of Hashem. "Take you staff and throw it onto the ground and it will turn into a serpent." (Shemos 4:3) When Pharaoh challenged his sorcerers to match that "trick," they were able to match it, just like that. The Zohar adds that not only were the Egyptian sorcerers able to do this "trick," but Pharaoh even called their wives, and the sorcerers' wives were also able to do this same "trick." He then called in their children and the children of the magicians, who performed the same "trick" as well. The point of the Zohar is that this act of turning a staff into a serpent was not a particularly impressive sign that Moshe was an Agent of Hashem. It was something even a kindergarten kid could do.

We see this concept by at least some of the other plagues as well—that the Chartumei Mitzrayim were able to replicate them. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky in his Emes L'Yaakov provides a very important explanation about what happened to this power of magic in the world. In other words, we see that this "kishuf " was a reality in the ancient world, not just "magic" based on sleight of the hand. This was the real thing! Rav Yaakov addresses the issue: How come this stopped? Likewise, in many places the Talmud discusses the power of Shaydim. Closer to our times, there apparently was a reality called a Dybbuk. A Dybbuk was a spirit that entered a body and took it over, controlling the person until he was treated by someone who knew how to exorcise the Dybbuk. What happened to all these things? Why do we not seem to experience (real) magic, Shaydim, or Dybbuks today?

Rav Yaakov says (and this is well known, but the application is very important) that there is a concept in hashkafa that is based on the pasuk in Koheles "…zeh l'umas zeh asa Elokim…" (7:14) (G-d has made the one as well as the other). To put it in layman's terms, HaKadosh Baruch Hu creates a level playing field. If the true prophets

(e.g., Moshe Rabbeinu) were given the power to do these kinds of tricks—to turn a piece of wood into a snake or other types of miracles like that—then it would be nearly impossible to deny the truth of Hashem's message. Everyone would need to be an observant Jew who keeps the Torah. That would require a mass conversion of the entire planet, because no person or nation could deny the reality of the words of the true prophet. This in effect would take away the phenomenon of free choice.

A person receives reward for choosing the right path in this world when he has the ability to choose the wrong path. If the deck is stacked or the playing field is not level, and only the prophets of Hashem can perform supernatural miracles, theological decisions would become meaningless. There would not be freedom of choice, and there could be no reward and punishment.

Therefore, as long as this tremendous koach hakedusha (power of holiness) existed and a tzadik or navi was gifted with the ability to change nature, there had to be, by virtue of the principle of zeh-l'umas-zeh-asa-Elokim, corresponding powers in the nations of the world as well.

Rav Kamenetsky cites in this regard the comment of the Ramban in Parshas Beshalach, that at Krias Yam Suf there was a "Ruach Kadim Aza kol haLaylah" (strong east wind blowing all night). Why was that necessary? The Ramban explains that this enabled Pharaoh to say to himself: "You know why the sea split? It was a natural event, like a tsunami or an earthquake, that caused it to split. Therefore, I can enter the dry land between the parted waters myself." The Ribono shel Olam had to allow him to deceive himself and claim "This was just nature, the result of a strong wind. It was not the Yad Hashem."

For this reason, as long as we had the power of kedusha (holiness) on our side in the personage of Neviim and tzadikim, the nations of the world had to have parallel forces through the koach hatumah (forces of impurity). We all know the teaching of Chazal regarding Moshe's role as the greatest of the prophets. Chazal expound: "There never again arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe…" (Devorim 34:10) – In Israel there never arose such a prophet, but amongst the nations of the world there was such a prophet—Bilaam son of Beor. Bilaam was a degenerate, but he was a prophet. Why? It would not be fair. The nations could claim that if they had a prophet like Moshe, they would have been different. So Hashem gave them such a prophet, but he led them further astray!

This is the point emphasized by the Emes L'Yaakov: As long as there was any power of kedusha in the world, there had to exist a corresponding power of Tumah in order to make it even. Once the era of prophecy ceased in Yisroel, such powers of tumah stopped in the world at large as well.

With this principle, the Emes L'Yaakov attempts to answer a very difficult Rambam. The Rambam writes in his Mishna Commentary on Tractate Avodah Zarah that Shaydim have no power whatsoever and the entire belief in them is false. The Vilna Gaon in Shulchan Aruch uses strong language against this opinion of the Rambam, which on the face of it is contradicted by many Talmudic and Medrashic sources.

Rav Yaakov explains that in the era of the Tanaim and Amoraim mentioned in the Gemara, when there were in the Jewish world many personalities who were miracle workers, there also existed Shaydim which were powers of impurity that existed in the world to counter-act the power of kedusha given to certain righteous miracle workers who existed in Klal Yisrael. When the Rambam said there are no such things as Shaydim and the like, he was referring to his day and age, when conceivably they no longer existed, just as there no longer existed miracle workers amongst Klal Yisrael.

At the end of Rav Yaakov's discussion on this topic, he shares something very interesting. There is a famous story whereby the Chofetz Chaim (1838-1933) exorcised a Dybbuk from a person. The Chofetz Chaim was not associated with bubbe meises (old wives' tales) and apocryphal stories. Rav Yaakov writes that at the time of this incident, Rav Elchanon Wasserman commented that this will most likely be the last Dybbuk to ever enter a human body. He elaborated that when there is someone on the level of the Chofetz Chaim, who possesses within himself at least a remnant of the kedushah that once existed in Klal Yisrael, then there can be a Dybbuk. But once the likes of the Chofetz Chaim left the world, there will probably never again be a story with a Dybbuk—unless there would is also a Jewish community with such pure holiness and emunah that their power of kedusha necessitated the presence of a corresponding power of tumah in their midst.

As a rule, however, our level of sanctity is so low and so weak that there is no need for a corresponding force that grants this level of supernatural abilities to the power of tumah.

The Urgency of Removing the Frogs

The sefer Darash Mordechai asks, why did Moshe need to cry out to Hashem to remove the frogs (Shemos 8:8)? Pharaoh deserved every plague he received. He deserved the full duration of Hashem's intended punishment. It seems that here Moshe intervened. He left the palace and cried out to Hashem to remove the frogs that He had placed upon Pharaoh. Why not let Pharaoh suffer a little longer? Why did Moshe seemingly preemptively stop this plague?

The Darash Mordechai offers several answers to this question.

First, he cites an answer in the name of the Imrei Emes (Rav Avraham Mordechai Alter, the fourth Gerer Rebbe). We see that Hashem was very particular about kavod malchus (preserving the honor of the monarchy). Despite the fact that Pharaoh was wicked, he was a king. There is a concept that a king must be given honor. In order to display

kavod malchus, Moshe Rabbeinu acquiesced to Pharaoh's request that the frogs be removed.

The Darash Mordechai then quotes an answer from the Rebbe, Rav Bunim of P'Shische. He says the purpose of the plagues was to establish Emunah (Belief in G-d) in the world. The Ramban speaks about this. After the Exodus, no one could doubt that there was a Ribono shel Olam who controls the world. Part of Emunah is that there is a thing called koach hatefillah. A person needs to believe in the power of prayer. Moshe wanted to demonstrate that prayer has the power even – as it were – to override a decree of the Almighty. Therefore, that is why Moshe prayed for the maka to cease, and that is why the plague of frogs was truncated, so to speak.

Finally, the Darash Mordechai cites an answer from the Chiddushei HaRim (Rav Yitzchak Meir Alter, the first Gerer Rebbe). Moshe Rabbeinu did not merely daven over here. The Torah has many words to express prayer. Here the Torah uses the words "VaYitz'ak Moshe el Hashem" (Moshe cried out to Hashem), which indicates one of the highest and most intense forms of Tefilla. In fact, the pasuk in Parshas Shemos says "Behold the tzeaka (crying out) of Bnei Yisrael has reached Me…" (Shemos 3:9). The Zohar says that tzeaka goes straight to the Ribono shel Olam, bypassing any intermediaries. Sometimes someone needs a malach to boost his prayers and to take them in to the Ribono shel Olam, so to speak. Tzeaka literally is a primal scream. That scream is so powerful that it goes straight to the Ribono shel Olam.

This really intensifies the question. It does not say "Vayispalel Moshe el Hashem" (which would indicate a more conventional word for prayer) but "Va'Yitzak". Moshe was so concerned that the frogs should cease that he resorted to the most powerful form of Tefilla that exists – namely, Tze'aka! Why?In Tefilas Geshem (recited on Shemini Atzeres to pray for rain of blessing for the coming winter season) we invoke the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and then Moshe. The paragraph regarding Moshe mentions how he provided water for the people. We conclude with the words "Upon the Rock he struck and waters came forth." Many commentaries ask, this would seem like an inappropriate time to bring up "Al ha'Selah hach, va'yetzoo mayim"? The hitting of the Rock is what caused Moshe Rabbeinu to not be able to go into Eretz Yisrael. So why bring that up? We talk about the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It would seem that we should mention Moshe's merits as well, and steer clear of his actions that may have been problematic.

The Chiddushei HaRim makes a magnificent observation. Moshe Rabbeinu knew what he was doing when he hit the rock. It was not a mistake. Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to save Klal Yisrael from Divine criticism. He reasoned: Here I talk to them repeatedly and still they do not do the right thing. If I go to a stone and say to the stone "Give forth your water" and just like that, it gives forth its water, how would that reflect on the Jewish people? Moshe could talk until he was blue in the face to the Jewish people, who benefited from G-d's kindness, and they might not listen. And yet the stone obeys instantly! What a poor reflection that would be on Klal Yisrael!

Therefore, Moshe decided he would not speak to the rock. He would instead hit the rock, thereby lessening the implicit criticism of Klal Yisrael. It is for such self-sacrifice and concern for the welfare of the Jewish people that Moshe is praised in Tefilas Geshem.

The Chiddushei HaRim applies the same line of reasoning with regard to the frogs:

Moshe Rabbeinu had commanded the frogs to ascend from the Nile. The frogs obeyed the command of Hashem. They ascended from their comfortable home in the Nile. They went into the ovens of the Egyptians and died there. They were killed Al Kiddush Hashem. The frogs reflected poorly on the Jewish people. Hashem gave them an order and they followed it to martyrdom, while the Jews had sunk spiritually to the 49th level of spiritual impurity. "These are idolaters and these are also idolaters."

As long as the frogs were present and jumping into the Egyptian ovens, every minute was another indictment of Klal Yisrael. Therefore, when Moshe had the opportunity to get rid of the frogs, he did so with intensity: Va'Yitzak! "I want to stop them in their tracks and immediately halt this embarrassing comparison between their actions and that of the Jewish people." He therefore used the highest form of Tefilla.

The HaKaras HaTov of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach

For the first three plagues – Blood, Frogs, and Lice – it was Aharon who hit the water and hit the sand with the Staff of Hashem, thereby bringing on these plagues. Chazal say that Moshe Rabbeinu owed Hakaras HaTov (gratitude) to the water which saved him as an infant, when the basket his mother hid him in floated in the Nile River. Likewise, it was the sand that saved Moshe when he buried therein the Egyptian whom he killed. Moshe "owed" so to speak to the water and the sand and therefore did not want to be the initiator of a plague which came from these entities.

We are all aware that water and sand are inanimate objects who don't appreciate a 'Thank-you' and don't even know what a 'Thank-you' is. And yet, we see that a person needs to have Hakaras HaTov even to inanimate objects. So clearly, Hakaras HaTov is not for the benefit of the person (or object) receiving the Hakaras HaTov. It is for the benefit of the person who gives the Hakaras HaTov. If a person learns to show gratitude even to something like a rock or sand or water, then he will certainly show Hakaras HaTov to a human being.

I recently heard the following story: Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach was once in the hospital. He made a point of thanking every doctor and every nurse for the care they provided for him while he was in the hospital. (This is something that someone does not need to be Rav Shlomo

Zalman to do. Many people rightly have this practice under similar circumstances.) But then he asked if he could see the woman who went from room to room to water the plants in the hospital rooms. He said that the plants brightened up the room and therefore the woman who poured the water into the plants to make sure that they would stay fresh also needed to be thanked for her efforts.

Most people may thank a doctor or a nurse who was helpful to them. But thinking about the lowly woman that goes from floor to floor and from room to room watering plants? She also should receive Hakaros HaTov, because if even inanimate objects receive Hakaros HaTov, certainly every human being deserves no less.

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Spirits in a Material World
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Torah sometimes says something of fundamental importance in what seems like a minor and incidental comment. There is a fine example of this near the beginning of this parsha.

In the previous parsha, we read of how Moses was sent by God to lead the Israelites to freedom, and how his initial efforts met with failure. Not only did Pharaoh not agree to let the people go; he made the working conditions of the Israelites even worse. They had to make the same number of bricks as before, but now they had to gather their own straw. The people complained to Pharaoh, then they complained to Moses, and then Moses complained to God.

"Why have You brought trouble to this people? Why did You send me?"

Exodus 5:22

At the beginning of Va'era, God tells Moses that He will indeed bring the Israelites to freedom, and tells him to announce this to the people. Then we read this:

So Moses told this to the Israelites but they did not listen to him, because their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh.

Exodus 6:9

The italicised phrase seems simple enough. The people did not listen to Moses because he had brought them messages from God before which had done nothing to improve their situation. They were busy trying to survive day by day. They had no time for utopian promises that seemed to have no grounding in reality. Moses had failed to deliver in the past. They had no reason to think he would do so in the future. So far, so straightforward.

But there is something more subtle going on beneath the surface. When Moses first met God at the Burning Bush, God told him to lead, and Moses kept refusing on the grounds that the people would not listen to him. He was not a man of words. He was slow of speech and tongue. He was a man of "uncircumcised lips" (Ex. 6:30). He lacked eloquence. He could not sway crowds. He was not an inspirational leader.

It turned out, though, that Moses was both right and wrong, right that they did not listen to him, but wrong about why. It had nothing to do with his failures as a leader or a public speaker. In fact, it had nothing to do with Moses at all. They did not listen "because their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh." In other words: If you want to improve people's spiritual situation, first improve their physical situation. That is one of the most humanising aspects of Judaism.

Maimonides emphasises this in The Guide for the Perplexed. The Torah, he says, has two aims: the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body.[1] The well-being of the soul is something inward and spiritual, but the well-being of the body requires a strong society and economy, where there is the rule of law, division of labour, and the promotion of trade. We have bodily well-being when all our physical needs are supplied, but none of us can do this alone. We specialise and exchange. That is why we need a good, strong, just society.

Spiritual achievement, says Maimonides, is higher than material achievement, but we need to ensure the latter first, because "a person suffering from great hunger, thirst, heat or cold, cannot grasp an idea even if it is communicated by others, much less can he arrive at it by his own reasoning." In other words, if we lack basic physical needs, there is no way we can reach spiritual heights. When people's spirits are broken by harsh labour they cannot listen to a Moses. If you want to improve people's spiritual situation, first improve their physical conditions.

This idea was given classic expression in modern times by two New York Jewish psychologists, Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) and Frederick Herzberg (1923–2000). Maslow was fascinated by the question of why many people never reached their full potential. He also believed – as, later, did Martin Seligman, creator of positive psychology – that psychology should focus not only on the cure of illness but also on the positive promotion of mental health. His most famous contribution to the study of the human mind was his "hierarchy of needs."

We are not a mere bundle of wants and desires. There is a clear order to our concerns. Maslow enumerated five levels. First are our physiological needs: for food and shelter, the basic requirements of survival. Next come safety needs: protection against harm done to us by others. Third is our need for love and belonging. Above that comes our desire for recognition and esteem, and higher still is self-actualisation: fulfilling our potential, becoming the person we feel we could and should be. In his later years Maslow added a yet higher stage: self-transcendence, rising beyond the self through altruism and spirituality.

Herzberg simplified this whole structure by distinguishing between physical and psychological factors. He called the first, Adam needs, and the second Abraham needs. Herzberg was particularly interested in what motivates people at work. What he realised in the late 1950s – an idea revived more recently by American-Israeli economist Dan Ariely – is that money, salary, and financial rewards (stock options and the like) is not the only motivator. People do not necessarily work better, harder, or more creatively, the more you pay them. Money works up to a certain level, but beyond that the real motivator is the challenge to grow, create, find meaning, and to invest your highest talents in a great cause. Money speaks to our Adam needs, but meaning speaks to our Abraham needs.

There is a truth here that Jews and Judaism have tended to note and live by more fully than many other civilisations and faiths. Most religions are cultures of acceptance. There is poverty, hunger, and disease on earth because that is the way the world is; that is how God made it and wants it. Yes, we can find happiness, nirvana, or bliss, but to achieve it you must escape from the world, by meditation, or retreating to a monastery, or by drugs, or trance, or by waiting patiently for the joy that awaits us in the world to come. Religion anaesthetises us to pain.

That isn't Judaism at all. When it comes to the poverty and pain of the world, ours is a religion of protest, not acceptance. God does not want people to be poor, hungry, sick, oppressed, uneducated, deprived of rights, or subject to abuse. He has made us His agents in this cause. He wants us to be His partners in the work of redemption. That is why so many Jews have become doctors fighting disease, lawyers fighting injustice, or educators fighting ignorance. It is surely why they have produced so many pioneering (and Nobel Prize-winning) economists. As Michael Novak (citing Irving Kristol) writes:

Jewish thought has always felt comfortable with a certain well-ordered worldliness, whereas the Christian has always felt a pull to otherworldliness. Jewish thought has had a candid orientation toward private property, whereas Catholic thought – articulated from an early period chiefly among priests and monks – has persistently tried to direct the attention of its adherents beyond the activities and interests of this world to the next. As a result, tutored by the law and the prophets, ordinary Jews have long felt more at home in this world, while ordinary Catholics have regarded this world as a valley of temptation and as a distraction from their proper business, which is preparation for the world to come.[2]

God is to be found in this world, not just the next. But for us to climb to spiritual heights we must first have satisfied our material needs. Abraham was greater than Adam, but Adam came before Abraham. When the physical world is harsh, the human spirit is broken, and people cannot then hear the word of God, even when delivered by a Moses.

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said it well:

"Don't worry about the state of someone else's soul and the needs of your body. Worry about the needs of someone else's body and the state of your own soul."

Alleviating poverty, curing disease, ensuring the rule of law, and respect for human rights: these are spiritual tasks no less than prayer and Torah study. To be sure, the latter are higher, but the former are prior. People cannot hear God's message if their spirit is broken and their labour harsh.

[1] Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed, III:27.

[2] Michael Novak, This Hemisphere of Liberty (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1990), p. 64.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Vaera (Exodus 6:2- 9:35)
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "And I will bring you into the land that I promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you as a morasha [heritage]: I am the LORD." (Exodus 6:8).

It is only natural for parents to desire to leave their children and grandchildren with a legacy. For those fortunate enough to be able to do so, this wish expresses itself in the form of an inheritance. But for most people, this is simply not realistic. How might they transmit a legacy to the next generation? I believe that the answer can be found in an important distinction in the Torah between the words yerusha (inheritance) and morasha (heritage).

We are all more familiar with the concept of yerusha, used throughout the Torah to describe the passing down of material possessions from parents to children. Far less common is the concept of morasha, mentioned in the Torah in reference to only two things: Torah ["Moses prescribed the Torah to us, an eternal heritage (morasha) for the congregation of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 33:4) and Land of Israel (the verse cited above at the outset).

The different contexts in which these words appear is quite revealing about the different kinds of relationships between parents and children, and different priorities handed down from generation to generation, that these bequests engender. I would like to explore three different examples in which the differences between yerusha and morasha will clarify the significance of each.

The first point of distinction is in the realm of effort. The Jerusalem Talmud (Bava Batra 8:2) speaks of yerusha as something that comes easily. When a person dies, leaving a yerusha, the heir need not do anything other than receive the gift. Morasha, however, requires much more.

The added letter mem in morasha, suggests the Jerusalem Talmud, is a grammatical sign of intensity, the pi'el form in Hebrew grammar. In order for an individual to come into possession of a morasha, they must work for it.

While an inheritance is what you receive from the previous generation—without your particular input—a heritage

requires your active involvement and participation. A yerusha is a check your father left you; a morasha is a business that your parents may have started, but into which you must put much sweat, blood and tears.

This certainly explains why morasha is used only with regard to Torah and the Land of Israel. Our sages (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 5a) remark that there are three gifts that God gave the Jewish people that can be acquired only through commitment and suffering: "Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come." And we understand very well that neither Torah nor the Land of Israel can be easily acquired.

Pirkei Avot 2:10 specifically teaches, "Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you."

All achievement in Torah depends on an individual's own efforts. A student of Torah must be willing to suffer privation.

Similarly, the Land of Israel cannot be acquired without sacrifice and suffering. One of the tests in the life of Abraham – and the source of the Jewish claim to Jerusalem – is the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. The message conveyed by the Torah is that we can only acquire our Holy Land if we are willing to place the lives of our children on the line. Every parent in Israel who sends his/her child to the army understands this message very well. A heritage comes hard, not easily, and our national heritage is Torah and Israel.

The second distinction between the terms is not how the gift is acquired, but rather how it may be dispersed. Even the largest amount of money inherited (yerusha) can be squandered or legitimately lost. In contrast, a morasha must be given over intact to the next generation. Morasha literally means "to hand over to someone else." Silver is an inheritance, and can be used in whatever way the heir desires; silver Shabbat candlesticks are a heritage, meant to be passed down from parent to child and used from generation to generation.

Finally, in the case of an inheritance, one must have the object of yerusha in one's possession. This need not be the case with regard to a morasha. Jewish parents bequeathed the ideals of Torah and the Land of Israel to their children for countless generations, even while living in exile far from the Promised Land, and even when poverty and oppression made it near impossible for them to become Torah scholars. Values can be passed down regardless of one's physical or material station in life.

For this reason, an inheritance, regardless of its size, pales in comparison to a heritage. We all want to be able to bequeath a yerusha to our children and grandchildren, and we should do what we can to make that possible. Nevertheless, the most important legacy that we can leave them is a morasha, the eternal heritage, of Torah and the Land of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom!

[Why Do You Need to Control Me?? "Let My People Go!" But Can They Let Themselves Go?

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

Three Boys

Three boys are in the schoolyard bragging of how great their fathers are.

The first one says: "Well, my father runs the fastest. He can fire an arrow, and start to run, I tell you, he gets there before the arrow."

The second one says: "Ha! You think that's fast! My father is a hunter. He can shoot his gun and be there before the bullet."

The third one listens to the other two and shakes his head. He then says: "You two know nothing about fast. My father is a civil servant. He stops working at 4:30 and he is home by 3:45!"

The First Commandment

The Biblical account of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt has been one of the most inspiring stories for the oppressed, enslaved and downtrodden throughout history. From the American Revolution, to the slaves of the American South, to Martin Luther King's Let Freedom Ring, the narrative of the Exodus provided countless people with the courage to hope for a better future, and to act on the dream.

Moses' first visit to Pharaoh demanding liberty for his people only brought more misery to the Hebrew slaves; the Egyptian monarch increased their torture. The Hebrews now would not listen any longer to the promise of redemption. Now let us pay heed to this seemingly strange verse in Exodus, in the Torah portion of Vaeira:

So G-d spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and He commanded them to the children of Israel, and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt, to let the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. [1]

G-d is charging Moses with two directives: Command the people of Israel and then command Pharaoh the king. However, the verse is ambiguous: What did G-d command Moses to instruct the people? The message for Pharaoh is clear: Let the children of Israel out of Egypt. But what is it that Moses is supposed to command the people themselves?

The Jerusalem Talmud[2] says something profoundly enigmatic:

G-d instructed Moses to command to the Jewish people the laws of freeing slaves.

The Talmud is referring to a law recorded later in Exodus:[3] If a Jew sells himself as a slave, the owner must let him go after six years. He is forbidden to hold on to the slave for longer. This was the law Moses was to share with the Israelites while they were in Egyptian bondage.

The Basis for the Commentary

The Talmud bases this novel and seemingly unfounded interpretation on a fascinating narrative in the book of Jeremiah: [4]

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: So says the Lord G-d of Israel; I made a covenant with your fathers on the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves, saying: "At the end of seven years you shall let go every man his brother Jew who has been sold to you, and when he has served you for six years you shall let him go free from you."

The question is, where do we find a covenant made by G-d with the Jewish people when they left Egypt to free their slaves? In a brilliant speculation, the Talmud suggests that this is the meaning of the above enigmatic verse, "G-d spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and He commanded them to the children of Israel, and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt, to let the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." The commandment to the children of Israel was to set free their slaves.

Yet this seems like a cruel joke. The Children of Israel at this point were crushed and tormented slave themselves, subjugated by a genocidal despot and a tyrannical regime, enduring horrific torture. Yet at this point in time G-d wants Moses to command them about the laws relevant to the aristocrat, the feudal lord, the slave-owner?![5]

What is more, as the Torah puts it: "G-d commanded them to the children of Israel, and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt to let the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." It seems like the two instructions—the one to the Israelites and the one to the Egyptian king—are linked. And furthermore: the commandment to the Israelites preceded the commandment to Pharaoh. But what does the commandment to the Jewish people that they free their slaves one day in the future have to do with the mission to Pharaoh to set the Hebrews free from bondage?

Who Is Free?

The answer to this question is profoundly simple and moving, and is vital to the understanding of liberty in the biblical imagination.

Before Pharaoh can liberate the Jewish slaves, they must be ready to become free. You can take a man out of slavery, but it may prove more challenging to take slavery out of a man. Externally, you may be free; internally you may still be enslaved.

What is the first and foremost symptom of bring free? That you learn to confer freedom on others.

The dictator, the control freak, or the abusive spouse or parent, does not know how give others freedom. He (or she) feels compelled to force others into the mold that he has created for them. Uncomfortable in his own skin, he is afraid that someone will overshadow him, expose his weaknesses, usurp his position or make him feel extra in this world. Outwardly he attempts to appear powerful, but inwardly his power is a symptom of inner misery and confinement.

Only when one learns to embrace others, not for whom he would like them to be, but for whom they are, then can he begin to embrace himself, not for whom he wishes he was, but for whom he is. When we free those around us, we are freeing ourselves. By accepting them, we learn to accept ourselves.

Who is powerful? He who empowers. Who is free? He who can free others. Who is a leader? He who creates other leaders.

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power," Abraham Lincoln said. Ask yourself, do you know how to celebrate the soaring success of your loved ones and constituents? Do you encourage them to spread their wings and maximize their potentials? Can you allow others to shine?

Pharaoh may set you free physically. But former slaves can become present tyrants. People who were abused often become abusers themselves. It is what they know about life; it is the paradigm they were raised with. They grew up in abuse and slavery, so they continue the cycle with others. The first Mitzvah the Jews had to hear from Moses before even he can go the Pharaoh to let them go free was: One day you will be free. Remember that freedom is a gift; use it to free others.

(Please make even a small and secure contribution to help us continue our work. Click here.)

[1] Exodus 6:13 [2] Rosh Hashanah Chapter 3:5. See the commentary of the Karban Heidah ibid. See at length Torah Shleimah Parshas Vaeira for all the commentary on this Talmudic statement. [3] Exodus 21:2

[4] 34:12-14 [5] See Meshech Chachmah (By Rabbi Meir Simcha Hakohen, the Rabbi of Devink and author of Or Samach) to Parshas Vaeira for his novel explanation, that there were Egyptian Jews at the times who owned Jewish slaves. Moses instructed them to set their slaves free. Cf. Torah Shleimah ibid for additional explanations.]

Parashat Va'aira

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Confusion and Perplexity!

Among the divergent ingredients that HaShem introduced into His "questionable creation" called "Man" was intelligence and logic. "Questionable creation"? The Midrash relates that HaShem concurred with angels if it was wise to create an entity who would be called Adam and would possess the freedom to do evil if he so chose? The angels had diverging opinions.

At the end of the deliberations, HaShem did create Man, who could not refrain from sinning more than an hour or two after creation, and then found himself and all future humanity expelled from Paradise and subject to death. HaShem's rationale for creating Man was that He could

contain the iniquities of humanity for the sake of the mitzvot and Torah way of life that Am Yisrael will accept.
So Man, as a logical entity, seeks order and stability in his surroundings which would permit him to understand from where he came – and more important to predict where he is destined to go. However, HaShem holds the reins of power to limit Man's acquisitiveness and invention through a weapon called "confusion".
In Jewish history, we perceive examples of HaShem's supra-natural intervention in the ongoing history of Am YIsrael when "confusion" reigned among our leaders. Just as the captain of a ship permits a midshipman to handle the wheel, but in rough weather the skipper "takes over".
Examples:
1- Bridging the last two parshiot of Shemot and Va'ai'ra is the scenario where Moshe is dispatched by HaShem to demand Paro free immediately millions of his Jewish slaves. Moshe knew at firsthand that it would be a mission fated to fail, which indeed turned out to be a disaster for the Jews. Moshe is confused and questions the Almighty why he was sent when the outcome would obviously be devastating for the millions of HaShem's own nation? Confusion and perplexity!
But little to Moshe's knowledge was that HaShem was signaling an oncoming unnatural act of salvation.
2- What was our father Avraham experiencing while walking towards Mount Moriah with Yitzchak in order to fulfill HaShem's command to offer up his son as a sacrifice? Confusion! For did not HaShem promise that Yitzchak would be Avraham's heir in establishing the Jewish nation? But Avraham could not have known that at the outcome of the experience HaShem would rescind His command to sacrifice Yitzchak and would bless Avraham's Jewish descendants for all time, as stated (Bereishiet 22,16-18):
Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.
Yitzchak experienced confusion when the wells of water he had dug were repeatedly destroyed. Ya'akov could not understand the path that his life was taking, when the holy man (of the tent) was forced to live for 20 years in galut with the evil Lavan. Followed by the terrifying meeting with Aisav where Ya'akov prepared in three different ways – prayer, gifts and war. And then the 20-year estrangement from his beloved son Yosef. confusion preceding a great salvation of HaShem.
At the Red Sea the newly freed slaves and their leader Moshe were confused and bewildered as to what path to choose, when HaShem commanded them to enter the churning waters of the sea. Again, human bewilderment preceding HaShem's supra-natural salvation.
So was it with Queen Esther as related in the Gemara (Megila 15b). The profound feelings of rejection and confusion expressed by her entering the inner chamber of Achashverosh and called out the pasuk in Tehilim 22,2:
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
And in the last century the Shoah, which is beyond the understanding of our spiritual leaders, followed by the establishment of the Medina marking the beginning of the oncoming great salvation.
In our time the cacophony of opinions among religious leaders on most subjects leaves one with confusion. It is probably the foremost reason for young people leaving a life of Torah and mitzvot asking "where is HaShem?
History teaches that human intelligence cannot provide us with clarity when the forces of confusion band together; and this occurs prior to a period of supra-natural events when HaShem, as it would be, is telling our leaders to curtail their activities and give room for the great miracles which HaShem alone will shortly provide for His chosen people.
The narrative in the Pesach Haggadah makes no mention of Moshe Rabbeinu, to the contrary, it emphasizes that HaShem alone brought the Jewish nation out of Egypt.
There was total confusion and consternation among the people. Eighty percent of the nation was dying because of their refusal to leave, and the surviving 20 percent saw no choice but to depart into the threatening desert wilderness. There was confusion and perplexity; the options of not following Moshe into the desert or following Moshe held little promise for the future.
It was on this background that HaShem alone suspended the "Laws of Nature" which He Himself had mandated for this world.
We can extrapolate from the Exodus experience to our own today. The options which are available for the Jews in galut are becoming fewer: to remain in galut with a questionable future or to leave – but leave to where? And the options for us here in the holy land are drawing further away from peace and tranquility.
This is the perfect background for HaShem to hasten the final redemption of our nation, may it be very soon.
Shabbat Shalom
Nachman Kahana

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig
This week's Insights is dedicated in memory of Yitzchak ben Moshe.
Group Therapy
And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and gave them a charge to Bnei Yisroel […] (6:13).
The Talmud Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashana 3:5) derives from this possuk a fascinating teaching: R' Shmuel son of R'

Yitzchak asked, “With what did he charge Bnei Yisroel? He charged with the mitzvah of shiluach avadim (freeing one’s slaves).” Remarkably, according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, the very first mitzvah that Hashem asked Moshe to command the Jewish people was to free their slaves.

At a glance, this can be difficult to comprehend: Why would the mitzvah of freeing one’s slaves have the importance of being the first mitzvah given to the nation as a whole? One would expect that perhaps the mitzvah of Shabbos or keeping kosher or family purity laws would take precedence.

Furthermore, none of the Jews had any slaves at this point nor could the law even be observed until they settled in their homeland of Eretz Yisroel! Why charge them with a mitzvah that cannot be fulfilled at that time and why give it the importance of being the first mitzvah they are commanded to do?

Psychological studies show that those who were abused as children have a tendency to become abusers themselves. Obviously, not everyone abused as a child becomes an abuser; but studies show that there is a threefold higher risk for abused children to become abusers later in life. Psychologists have offered a few possible reasons for this link. One of the prevailing theories is that children rationalize this abuse by thinking that abuse is normal behavior. So as they mature they don’t fully understand that abusive behavior is wrong, and therefore don’t have the same barriers in place to prevent such behavior.

This is problematic for a few reasons: 1) if someone experienced something difficult or painful he should be more sensitive to it, and thereby take extraordinary measure to ensure that he does not cause the same pain to another, particularly a child and 2) this reasoning doesn’t explain why they would have a stronger tendency toward deviant behavior. At some point in their lives they would certainly learn that society considers such abuse wrong. Why shouldn’t that be enough to stop them?

A much more compelling theory is that an adult who has unresolved issues from being abused as a child acts out as a way of coping with the feelings of helplessness experienced as a child. In other words, those abused become abusers to prove to themselves that they are no longer helpless victims. By becoming abusers, they psychologically reinforce within themselves that they are no longer the ones abused.

We see this in many other instances as well. Smokers who are finally able to quit for good often become crusaders and feel compelled to lecture others to quit smoking; overweight individuals who manage to lose weight are suddenly weight loss experts and have no problem sharing their opinions about how much you should weigh; religious leaders struggling with their own demons become virulent anti-smut and lascivious behavior crusaders, yet nobody is surprised when scandals about them emerge. These “crusades” are merely a coping mechanism for their unresolved issues.

This is exactly what Hashem is telling Bnei Yisroel. He is saying, you have been slaves now in Egypt for close to two hundred years. You need to emotionally deal with the fact that you are now truly free and no longer slaves. One of the ways to emotionally get past one’s own slavery would be to have and hold on to slaves of your own. But this is why you must observe the mitzvah of freeing slaves. The ability to no longer need slaves of your own is the ultimate proof that you have internalized your freedom and are in a healthy emotional place. At that point, you will be truly free.

It's All About Me

These are the heads of their fathers’ houses; The sons of Reuven the firstborn of Yisroel; Hanoch, and Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi; these are the families of Reuven […] (6:14).

Rashi (ad loc) is bothered by why the Torah suddenly finds it necessary to record the genealogy of Yaakov’s family right in the middle of the story of the Exodus. Rashi goes on to explain that the Torah wanted to record the yichus (lineage) of Moshe and Aharon; and once it mentioned Moshe and Aharon, it begins from the firstborn of the family – Reuven.

This is unusual for a few reasons. Generally, when the Torah records the lineage of an individual, the Torah begins with the individual and works its way backwards (e.g. Pinchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aharon the Kohen). So why did the Torah begin with Yaakov? Moreover, why does the Torah mention the families of Reuven and Shimon at all?

Sometimes during the speeches at a simcha, the attendees are subjected to a detailed recollection and description of all the prominent antecedents in the family. While it is true that a family’s yichus does add, at least somewhat, to that individual and family’s prominence – as the possuk says, “the glory of children are their fathers” (Mishlei 17:6) – most people tend to forget the beginning of that very same possuk: “the crown of grandfathers are their grandchildren.”

In other words, the crowning achievement of one’s family isn’t in the past, it’s in the future. We have to develop ourselves into people who our forbearers would be proud of and become their crowning achievement. This means that all they did in their lives, their sacrifices, their own accomplishments, etc. are for naught if we fail to fulfill our own mission in life. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah – Toldos) says that the only reason Avraham was saved from the fiery furnace was because he would have a grandson named Yaakov. In essence, we can and must justify the lives of our ancestors.

This is an awesome responsibility to fulfill. While all of us are descended from a glorious past – that of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov – our personal obligation is to fulfill

their mission. If we, God forbid, fail to live up to that responsibility then all is for naught. As great as our forefathers (and all our forbearers throughout history) were, they need us in order for the world to come to its final culmination and fulfill the destiny of why all of us were created.

That is what the Torah is telling us here. Moshe was supposed to lead Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt and into Eretz Yisroel to the final purpose of why the world was created. Therefore, this is the story of Yaakov's family. That is why the lineage begins with him. Continuing with his first born Reuven and then Shimon, great as they were, they didn't succeed in fulfilling the family's mission. But Levi, through Moshe and Aharon, justified the entire family and their purpose in fulfilling Avraham's vision of bringing Hashem down to this world, and on to the final redemption.

Parashat Va'era - Who Can't?
Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz
23 Tevet 5783 January 16, 2023

This week's parasha, Vaera, tells us about a series of meetings between Moses and his brother Aaron – as G-d's emissaries to take the children of Israel out of Egypt – with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Before one of the first meetings, G-d instructed Moses and Aaron as follows:

"When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Provide a sign for yourselves,' you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff, [and] cast [it] before Pharaoh; it will become a serpent.' " (Exodus 7, 9)

And indeed, when Moses and Aaron came to the meeting with Pharaoh, Aaron cast his staff down and it became a serpent. According to most commentators, it was some kind of snake. The Torah tells us that Pharaoh then called to the Egyptian sorcerers, the professional magicians of Egypt, and instructed them to perform for Moses and Aaron. The sorcerers managed through illusion to make their staffs turn into serpents, but Aaron's staff swallowed theirs.

A careful reading of Pharaoh's words to Moses and Aaron shows an interesting linguistic oddity. Pharaoh told them "Provide a sign for yourselves," when the sign was meant for Pharaoh, not for Moses and Aaron. Had it been for them, it would have made sense for Pharaoh to say "Provide a sign for yourselves." Pharaoh's idolatrous perceptions led him to believe that whoever could do the best magic was right. If he wanted the sign in order to be convinced that Moses and Aaron had actually come to him as part of a divine mission, why did he say "Provide a sign for yourselves"?

Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin (1887 – 1933; president of "Agudat Yisrael" in Poland, the head of the Chachmei Lublin yeshiva, and the initiator of the concept of "daf yomi") offered a profound interpretation of Pharaoh's words. When Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh and demanded he let the Jewish nation leave for the desert to worship G-d, Pharaoh thought their request was surreal since he considered them slaves unable to worship any god. He saw them as tools in the service of the kingdom; slaves devoid of personalities. The demand brought by Moses and Aaron seemed to him completely illogical.

So, Pharaoh said 'Provide a sign for yourselves." Pharaoh did not tell them to perform just any magic, but to prove that their demand was possible, and that the Hebrew slaves could rise to the level of G-d worshippers. The sign was needed to prove that the words of Moses and Aaron were not surreal.

And indeed, the sign was the staff becoming a serpent and then going back to being a staff. Moses and Aaron proved with this sign that when there is "siyata d'shmaya," help from Heaven, there is nothing that isn't possible. If G-d wants to take the Jewish nation out of Egypt and give them the Torah on Mount Sinai, then it is as possible as the staff becoming a serpent and then reverting back to being a staff.

The redemption of the Jewish nation from Egyptian slavery and their becoming a nation who received the Torah involved an extensive and comprehensive change in consciousness. From slaves devoid of choice, they became the nation that stands for free choice; from people whose rights were trampled, they became "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" whose mission is to lead all of humanity toward a life of justice and morality. Could such a change even be possible?

The staff that became a serpent and went back to being a staff came to prove to Moses and Aaron, and to the entire Jewish nation, that this was a possible change. And it came to also teach us, learners of Torah thousands of years later, that we are not expected to do the impossible. What is expected of us is possible, because human effort that goes along with "siyata d'shmaya," help from Heaven, can surprise even the most optimistic person and bring about accomplishments that seem hard to attain.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah
Va'eira : "Who Brings You Forth"
Rabbi Chanan Morrison

HaMotzi — the Blessing for Bread

As a rule, most of the blessings recited over food speak of God as the Creator. For example, we say: בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הָעֵץ ("Creator of fruits of the tree"), בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה("Creator of fruits of the ground"), בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן("Creator of fruits of the vine").

But the blessing for bread does not fit this pattern. Before eating bread, we say HaMotzi — הַמּוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ— "Who brings forth bread from the earth." Why don't we acknowledge God as "the Creator of bread," following the formulation of other blessings?

It is highly significant that the wording of the blessing of HaMotzi mirrors the language used by God in His announcement to Moses:

"You will know that I am the Eternal your God, Who brings you forth (HaMotzi) from under the subjugation of the Egyptians." (Exod. 6:7)

Is there some connection between bread and the Exodus from Egypt?

The Special Role of Bread

The Earth contains an abundance of nutrients and elements, and through various processes, both natural and man-made, these elements are transformed into sustenance suitable for human consumption. However, when it comes to foods that are not essential to human life, it is difficult to know whether the nutrients and elements have attained their ultimate purpose upon becoming food. In fact, their utility began while they were still in the ground, and we cannot confidently state that they are now, in the form of a fruit or vegetable, more vital to the world's functioning.

Bread, on the other hand, is the staff of life. Bread is necessary for our physical and mental development. As the Talmud states, "A child does not know how to call 'Father' and 'Mother' until he tastes grain" (Berachot 40b). This emphasizes the importance of bread in sustaining life, setting it apart from other foods. The elements used to make bread have attained a significant role that they lacked when they were still buried inside the earth.

The words of HaMotzi blessing — "Who brings forth bread from the earth" — reflect this aspect of bread. The act of "bringing out" draws our attention to two stages: the elements' preliminary state in the ground, and their final state as bread, suitable for sustaining humanity. Other blessings focus on the original creation of fruits and vegetables. HaMotzi, on the other hand, stresses the value these elements have acquired by leaving the earth and becoming life-sustaining bread.

What does this have to do with the Exodus from Egypt?

The elements that are used to make bread started as part of the overall environment — the Earth — and were then separated for their special function. So, too, the Jewish people started out as part of humanity. Their unique character and holiness were revealed when God took them out of Egypt. "I am the Eternal your God, Who brings you forth from under the subjugation of the Egyptians."

Like the blessing over bread, God's declaration highlights two contrasting qualities: the interconnectedness of the Jewish people to the rest of the world; and their separation from it, for the sake of their unique mission.

(Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. II, p. 286)

Shema Yisrael Torah Network
Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Vaeira

פרשת וארא תשפ"ג

קח את מטך והשלך לפני פרעה

Take your staff and cast it down before *Pharaoh.* (7:9)

What "merit" did the *mateh*, staff, have that it was used as the medium for carrying out some of the plagues against Pharaoh and the Egyptian people? *Rabbi Go'el Alkarif* suggests a powerful *mussar*, ethical lesson, to be derived from here. Prior to *Horav Yisrael Salanter's* public emergence as the preeminent founder of the *mussar* movement, he lived quietly in Memel, Germany, with an idea, an idea that would transform the Jewish world. His innovation was to focus on *mussar* also. In addition to studying *Gemorah*, Jews should also work on their *middos*, character traits, refining and honing them, so that they would become better people, better Jews.

At that juncture in time, the *mussar* concept was not accepted in the *yeshivah* world. He needed to establish a *yeshivah* whose guiding principles would include the study of *mussar* in its curriculum. Unfortunately, his dream did not coincide with the reality of finding an appropriate venue and supporting such an endeavor. Obtaining a physical structure was at best difficult. One day, a Jewish carpenter in Memel, a simple, unlearned man who had heard of *Rav* Yisrael's plight, made him an offer: "I will give the *Rav* a small room to be used for his *yeshivah*. I will make tables and chairs for the students to study. This room could serve as the cornerstone of his honor's *yeshivah*." Indeed, that little room, provided to him through the good graces of this carpenter, was the foundation of his *yeshivah*, upon which the *mussar* movement was founded.

We are all aware that the *mussar* movement transformed the *yeshivah*/Jewish world. It changed the way we think and the way we act, enhancing our interpersonal relationships and, ultimately, our *avodas hakodesh*, service to the Almighty. *Rav* Yisrael once commented, "What did that carpenter really give?" A small room with some simple furniture. Nonetheless, all of the *Toras ha'mussar* which exists in the world is in his *z'chus*, merit! (This was expressed 170 years ago. The amount has since increased exponentially.) Every *mussar shmuess*, ethical discourse, will be for him a source of spiritual reward for posterity. Every *mussar* thought, innovation, inspiration is built upon his meager foundation: a small room and some furniture. All of this is because he lived in Memel, heard about the need and took action. His simple act of kindness transformed the world!

Returning to the *mateh*, staff, Hashem sought to teach that a simple staff – a wooden stick – can also be used *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven. It can be the medium for eliciting *kiddush Shem Shomayim*. One should never put down even the smallest, most insignificant entity, especially a person. The *mussar* movement taught us the significance of actions which appear to be insignificant.

When astronaut Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, he stepped out of his space capsule and made the first human step on the moon. His quote at the time was immortalized, "That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind." We often go through life thinking, "I am just a cog in a large machine. What contribution can I make? What can I do that will change the world? What can a little guy like me achieve?" The carpenter in Memel made one small step. It altered the lives of countless Jews.

Three aspiring *yeshivah bachurim* in Baltimore, Maryland, wanted to go to Europe to study in *yeshivah*. It was prior to World War II. At the time, they had no reason to believe that learning Torah in Europe would ever be a problem. Their desire to learn was great. One impediment prevented them from realizing their dream: money. They had already been accepted—two had been admitted to Telshe, and one to Slabodka. Money was tight in America. Jews who observed *Shabbos* had an even greater challenge. Yet, some *yechidim*, individuals, were willing to take that "one step" for *Yiddishkeit*. A Jewish grocer in Baltimore, Philip/Uri Gundersheimer, had, despite tremendous financial pressure, refused to remain open on *Shabbos*, even during the depression years. He came forward and undertook the responsibility to pay for all expenses incurred by the three young men. They went to *yeshivah* all because a simple Jew took that first step.

Philip Gundersheimer died in 1943, at the age of ninety-five years old. He never did see his investment achieve complete fruition. Surely now, ensconced in *Gan Eden* receiving his just reward, he is unaware of what his one step accomplished. The three young men were: *Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl,* Telshe *Rosh Yeshivah*, who transformed the lives of thousands of *yeshivah bachurim*; *Horav Aharon Paperman, zl*, who, while serving as an army chaplain, inspired thousands of Jewish soldiers. This was followed by *rabbanus* in Plainfield, New Jersey, a principalship in Scranton, Pennsylvania, being Executive Director of Telshe Yeshivah and Director of Chinuch Atzmai; and *Rav Mendel Poliakoff, zl*, a *Rav* in Baltimore.

It is our task to act. Hashem determines the significance of our actions. One never knows.

אמר אל אהרן נטה את מטך והך את עפר הארץ והיה לכנים

Say to Aharon, "Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the land; it shall become lice. (8:12)

Rashi explains that Moshe *Rabbeinu* could not bring the plague of lice on Egypt, because it meant striking the ground, something Moshe could not bring himself to do. The dust of the earth protected him from being discovered when he used it to conceal the corpse of the Egyptian whom he had killed. For Moshe to have struck the land would have been a blemish on his attribute of *hakoras hatov*, gratitude. *Chazal* teach that whoever denies the favor he benefitted from his fellowman will not stop there. He will also one day deny Hashem's favor as well. One whose character is deficient is blemished across the board. He will not restrict his abysmal behavior to human beings. He will also manifest his ingratitude to Hashem.

Hakoras hatov actually means recognizing the good that one bestows on me. One cannot appreciate what he has not acknowledged as good. He must first concede that he has been a beneficiary, and afterwards he can demonstrate his gratitude. Unfortunately, acknowledging a favor received is probably more difficult and less common than acting gratefully. Sadly, we tend to look for any opportunity to ignore the favor and the benefactor.

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl, relates the following anecdote. One of the cities in eastern Europe held a raffle. People from all over the country purchased raffle tickets. The mere thought that a dollar ticket could win a million dollars was mind boggling. A kind-hearted grocer who was known for his acts of *chesed*, kindness, attempted to reach out to Yosele, a man plagued with abject poverty, who lived on whatever scraps he could gather.

"Yosele, why do you not purchase a raffle ticket? Who knows? You might win and become a millionaire." Yosele thought that his friend, the grocer, had lost his mind, "I am unable to scrape together the few pennies necessary to buy some stale bread, and you expect me to buy a raffle ticket? Have you taken leave of your senses?" The grocer was not deterred, "But look at how much you might win. Your financial problems would be solved." This went back and forth until Yosele finally said, "Good, I will buy a ticket if you tell me where I can get the money for it."

"I will lend you the money," the grocer replied. "This might be the opportunity of a lifetime. I want to help you." Yosele countered, "What if I lose? How will I ever pay you back?" "Do not worry," replied the grocer. "If you lose, you owe me nothing. If you win, you will have more than enough money to pay me back." Yosele would have to be a total fool to pass up such an offer. He agreed to buy a raffle ticket. After all, it was a "win-win" situation. A few days passed, and the lottery occurred. The grocer kept Yosele's ticket for him. One can only begin to imagine the shock and excitement that overtook the grocer when he saw that Yosele's ticket had the winning numbers! There were no phones (and even if there were, Yosele could not have afforded the service). The grocer decided he would notify Yosele of his good fortune. It was a freezing night in the dead of winter. A blizzard was pelting the city with snow that was quickly piling up. Yet, the kind-hearted grocer went out in search of Yosele, who, due to his poverty, lived in a broken-down, ramshackle hovel on the outskirts of town.

It took the man a few hours trudging along in waist-deep high snow to reach Yosele's home. It was pitch dark, not a fire, not a candle to illuminate the house. It was past midnight. Yosele was probably sleeping, but the grocer was sure that he would welcome being woken up to hear the exciting news. He kept on knocking and knocking.

When this did not work, he tried screaming. Finally, Yosele called out, quite upset, "Nu, tell me." "Do you expect me to stay outside in this frigid cold? Let me in, so that I can warm up." "Absolutely not," Yosele said. "It is the middle of the night. I need my sleep. Tell me what you have to say."

The grocer saw that Yosele was a hard sell. His wretched life had affected his character, and he was not about to let anyone into his "home." "Ok, Yosele, I will tell you the great news while I am freezing out here. You won! You won the lottery! You are no longer a poor man. You are a millionaire, probably the richest person in the city."

A few minutes passed, and Yosele came to the door. The grocer thought that he would finally be allowed into the house, maybe even get a hot drink to warm his bones. How shocked he was to hear Yosele berate him, "I cannot understand you," he began. "*Nu*, everyone knows me as Yosele, the poor man, who lives a wretched life. They treat me abysmally because they look at me negatively. That is the way (some) people are. You, however, know (now) that I am a millionaire. How dare you come and wake me up in middle of the night! Where is your respect? You should be ashamed to come banging on my door as if I were still living a life of poverty!"

This is human nature. We pray and pray, and, as soon as we receive a positive response, we stop praying. We forget to Whom we had been praying and for what reason. Husbands forget all they benefitted from their wives during their marriage. They ignore the *hakoras hatov* imperative. If one does not maintain a sense of gratitude to his/her spouse, how can he/she expect to appreciate what Hashem does for him/her?

ולא יכלו החרטמים לעמד לפני משה מפני השחין ... ויחזק ד' את לב פרעה

The necromancers could not stand before Moshe because of the boils … Hashem strengthened the heart of Pharaoh. (9:11,12)

Concerning the previous plagues, the Torah writes that Pharaoh personally strengthened/hardened his heart. Regarding *makkas shechin*, boils, the Torah attests, *Va'yichazek Hashem es lev Pharaoh*, "Hashem strengthened Pharaoh's heart." What had transpired to catalyze this change? *Ramban* explains that as long as he was surrounded by his magicians, Pharaoh was ashamed to concede the truth: he had lost control. Hashem was stronger. The Jewish people should be permitted to leave. Pharaoh the *rasha*, wicked, would never allow anyone to observe him in a moment of weakness. It might denigrate their perception of him as a deity. When Egypt was stricken with boils, however, even the magicians left the palace. They were in pain and emitting a noxious odor from the ugly boils that covered their entire bodies. Pharaoh was now alone, with no one to impress, no peer pressure. He was about to concede defeat, to admit that Hashem was righteous and the Jews should be allowed to leave. Hashem was not yet prepared to allow them to leave. Four more plagues awaited the Egyptians, and then the Jews would leave. In order to prevent Pharaoh from capitulating, Hashem strengthened his heart.

For the first five *makkos*, Pharaoh was compelled to put on a show to demonstrate to his followers that nothing and no one could sway him. He was the strongest. When *makkas shechin* struck, he was alone and could finally confess that he was powerless against Hashem. The Almighty, however, had different plans for the despot.

Horav Nissim Yagen, zl, draws a distinction between the likes of Pharaoh and his ilk and our Torah leaders. Yehudah was confronted with the greatest challenge to his leadership. Tamar had proof of their liaison. The woman that Yehudah (as head of the *Bais Din*) had ruled guilty of an indiscretion and sentenced to death by fire was actually carrying his twin sons. He, too, was involved. When he realized this, he proclaimed, *Tzadkah mimeni*, "She is right. It is from me" (*Bereishis* 138:26). We are called *Yehudim* because of Yehuda's act of confession. He did not cover up his mistakes (as has become so common in today's society). Yehudah could have secretly come to Tamar and said, "Look, I see what you are intimating. You understand, of course, that to admit my involvement publicly may harm my reputation. I will *pasken*, rule, that you are not to be executed, and we will go our separate ways. Nobody gets hurt."

Yehudah, our namesake, was not like that. In the presence of his father, Yaakov *Avinu,* and his brothers, the *Shivtei Kah*, Yehudah admitted that he had made a mistake. This is the symbol of greatness. Accepting one's limitations is every bit as important as embracing one's strengths. Our egos control us; thus, we think that our peers will view us askance, which is, of course, unacceptable to us. We, therefore, look to Yehudah for guidance and inspiration, because, after all, we are *Yehudim*.

Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, writes, "It is the *teva ha'adam*, nature of a person, to justify himself even if he is wrong, because the idea of admitting without being ashamed (*Rashi*, *Vayikra* 10:20) is difficult and intimidating." ('I am sorry' are the most difficult words to express.) The following story demonstrates that *hodaah al ha'emes*, conceding the truth, regardless of how unpleasant the ramifications may be, defines not only *malchus*, monarchy, (as it did Yehudah) but it is also the barometer of *mentchlichkeit*, humaneness.

On June 2, 2010, Armando Gallaraga pitched what seemed a perfect game, an achievement attained by only twenty pitchers in major league baseball's 130-year history. This young man was going into the history books. The entire stadium watched with bated breath as the last play of the game was about to occur. The umpire, 65-year-old Jim Joyce, erroneously called the runner safe at first base. It was obviously a mistake, but rules are rules. After the game, realizing the mistake he made and its

ramifications to the young pitcher, he walked over to Gallaraga and, with tears in his eyes, apologized profusely. He admitted that he had made a terrible mistake. The pitcher graciously accepted his apology saying, "Nobody is perfect. Everybody is human." From a Torah perspective, I would say, "Hashem decides what should happen. We are the players. He decides our roles."

Va'ani Tefillah

ישלח עזרך מקודש ומציון יסעדך– *Yishlach ezricha mi'kodesh u'mi'Tzion yisadeka*. May He dispatch your help from the Sanctuary and support You from *Tzion*.

We supplicate Hashem to dispatch His help from the *Kodesh HaKodoshim*, the center of *kedushah*, holiness, rather than from unholy sources, such as gentile monarchs and their legions. Our greatest ally in battle is our *kedushah*, not the various "saviors" who come to our aid. The *pasuk* in the beginning of *Parashas Kedoshim, Kedoshim tiheyu*; "Holy shall you be," (*Vayikra* 19:2) is explained by the *Midrash*, "This coincides with the *pasuk*, *Yishlach ezrecha mi'kodesh*. What is *Chazal* teaching us? *Horav Shmuel Rozovsky, zl,* quotes the *Malbim* who explains *ezrah*, help, as reference to supernatural, miraculous assistance. How does one merit such extraordinary support? The answer is, *mi'kodesh*, from the holiness which you (man) generate through your actions. When our activities are focused on *kedushah*, when our lifestyle is one whereby we safeguard ourselves from exposure to the physical, base subcultures that will only defile us spiritually, then we can ask for and hope to receive, help from Hashem via supernal agencies.

נפטר כ"ד טבת תשס"ט - *משה יהודה ליב בן אשר אלתר חיים ז'ל*
ר - *לזכר נשמת* ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

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Fact Checking

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Moshe was hand selected to liberate us from Egypt and to introduce Hashem to a human audience which had previously ignored Him. Moshe possessed an impressive blend of personal qualities, each of which would serve him in his long and storied career.As a young baby he was graced with radiant good looks, which drew the interest of an Egyptian princess. Raised by royals, his palace upbringing endowed him with the confidence to challenge Pharo and his intimidating court of magicians. Moshe deeply sensed the pain of human suffering, endangering his own life to rescue a battered Jewish slave. He valiantly defended the weak against injustice, saving unknown shepherd girls from local tormenters. Recognizing the futility of petty squabbling, he challenged two quarrelling Jews to rise above their small-mindedness and spite and behave more gracefully. Loyal to his past, he delayed his grand mission, first securing permission from his father-in-law and only afterwards, relocating the family to Egypt. Moshe's resume is brimming with leadership qualities.Additionally, Moshe was the consummate outsider: a Jewish baby, raised by an Egyptian princess, married to a Midyanite woman, his broad exposure and diverse experiences provided him with fresh perspective, and allowed his unbiased eyes to see the world large and whole. This future leader combined an impressive array of character traits with a wide range of experiences, and he appeared to be the perfect candidate for historical mission.Impaired SpeechThere was only one problem: this multi-talented man possessed a severe speech impediment. Acknowledging his own handicap, Moshe was initially hesitant to accept this complicated mission. How could he stand before Pharo*e* presenting Hashem, when he could not speak clearly and emphatically? How could an inelegant tongue issue divine demands to monarchs, and utter divine commands to Jews.Yet, for some reason, this impediment did not disqualify Moshe from his mission. Evidently, his unusual mix of noble character traits was so rare that, despite his impairment, he was still the best candidate for these great tasks. He may not have been perfect, but he was still the best option.What is odd, is that he wasn't miraculously healed of his condition by Hashem. After all, Hashem pulled out "all stops" and performed epic and dramatic miracles to emancipate us from Egypt. Wouldn't it have made sense for Hashem to repair Moshe's tongue, empowering him to speak more capably? This minor miracle of improving Moshe's speaking abilities would have gone a long way toward advancing his ambitious agenda, yet Hashem preserved Moshe's speech impediment, dispatching him to his duties without impressive rhetorical skills. Evidently, Moshe's speech limitations did not impair his mission but, if anything, enhanced it. Had Moshe been a better orator, perhaps he would have been a worse leader. His impairment was an asset.CultismMoshe freed us from Egypt and defeated the greatest superpower on earth, eventually navigating our people to the doorstep of history and the entrance to Israel. Along this journey he performed dazzling miracles and astounding supernatural feats. His rising popularity and expanding influence invited the unhealthy possibility of that a cult of personality would develop. Having been enslaved for two centuries, the former slaves were especially vulnerable to the influence of charisma and the peddling of personality. The impressionable young nationcould very easily have been captivated by charisma and charm rather than being educated by values. The human imagination is always tempted by charisma, and Moshe's spectacular feats, coupled with the gullibility of a young nation, created a perfect storm for the emergence of a personality cult.Retaining Moshe's imperfect speech averted this danger. Our speech conveys ideas, but it also projects our personality and our charisma. Speech without

character and without passion is hollow and boring. Potent speech imbued with powerful spirit, grips a listener and penetrates the soul.However, at some point, passionate rhetoric conveys too much of own personality and enchanting the listener with the speaker rather than with some larger idea or content. Checking against this danger, Moshe's flawed speech assured that his charisma would never overtake his content. No one would ever be impressed with Moshe's eloquence or with his underdeveloped rhetoric, but instead, would be attracted to his nobility of character, his quiet humility, and his uncommon compassion. He would model moral traits such as courage, faith, dedication to nation, tolerance, and of course, dedicated Torah scholarship. Though he may never deliver booming speeches he will provide powerful but hushed moral lessons. There will be no cult of personality surrounding a speech-challenged leader. There will be, however, deep values, profound role modeling and enduring education.

Absolute Fact Additionally, Moshe's muted speech assures that a different voice will reverberate- the heavenly one. Moshe delivered the direct word of Hashem by brokering mass revelation at Sinai. That seminal moment at Sinai, when we heard the direct voice of Hashem forms the cornerstone of Jewish faith. For faith to endure, the accuracy of that mountain conversation must be unmistakable. The Jews at Sinai must be absolutely certain that they were listening directly to Hashem and not to a prophetic translation. Without that absolute certainty, Jewish faith would never survive. If Moshe were a more seasoned orator, the directness of our encounter with Hashem could have been questioned. Perhaps the commandments were a product of Moshe's imagination, or just flowery rhetoric, rather than a direct missive from Hashem. By positioning a heavy tongued speaker on top of the mountain, it was clear to all that all the content at Sinai was Hashem given.Sinai was based on absolute facts of direct revelation rather than on speculation, prophecy or human projection. Ironically, Moshe's speech limitations made it easier to separate these facts from his personality.The Swirl of OpinionsIn the 21st century we face our own struggle to separate fact from personality. It has become more and more difficult to obtain accurate information untainted by personal opinions. Social media has altered the flow of information, by providing a universal and easily accessible platform for strongly held opinions. Social media provides an endless buffet of personal opinion, but there isn't much fact on the menu.Furthermore, by carefully curating and selecting our sources of information, we trap ourselves in echo chambers, listening only to the views of those we agree with, and rarely encountering different views.News outlets are no longer information providers but loud and fanatical megaphones, patriotically broadcasting political agendas. In this storm of swirling opinions, it is impossible to discern honest facts from personal observations. In the past, humanity had little need for "fact checkers" as accuracy was implicit in conversation. Our dependence upon factcheckers, who are assigned to monitor accuracy, is a sad reflection of the sunken state of human communication in the modern world of polarized politics and sharply divided outlooks.

Tragically, we become our own greatest victims. Honesty and deception are each contagious. The more honest our outside world is, the more honest our internal world becomes, and the more accurate we can be in self-assessment, self-awareness and personal growth. A world in which opinions masquerade as fact, erodes our ability to honestly assess our own experiences and behavior. Intellectual honesty and personal honesty have become rare commodities in a world which distorts fact and fiction.It is important to restore the balance between fact and opinion. It is vital to write and speak in a balanced fashion and to present fact as apart from opinion. We should value those who offer their opinion but also admit that other opinions can be drawn from identical facts. We should listen to those who "suggest" rather than those who attempt to convince or indoctrinate. We should value inner wisdom not cheap opinion. We need more quiet people like Moshe and fewer shrill bullhorns

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Ohr Somayach
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Insights into Halacha
For the week ending 2 February 2013 / 21 Shevat 5773
The Colored Water Caper
by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz
Red Alert

Several months ago, pleasure seekers at Australia's famous Bondi (pronounced Bond-eye) Beach, located in the Sydney suburb of Bondi, were left high and dry when a Crimson Tide rolled in, effectively transforming its normally tranquil waters into the 'Red Sea'. This rare natural phenomenon, known as an algal bloom, occurs when there is a rapid increase or accumulation in the production of microscopic algae (dinoflagellates, usually toxic phytoplankton) in an aquatic system. This results in a visible coloration of the water, typically taking on a reddish hue. Apparently all was not "fair dinkum" for the Aussies. Not that it's any consolation for those robbed of a pleasure swim, nonetheless, at least this gives us an inkling of what Makkas Dam might have seemed like, as well as helping us understand an interesting halacha.

Colored Water?

The Shulchan Aruch[1] rules, as did the Tur before him, and based on a Mishna in Maseches Yadayim, that regarding Netilas Yadayim for eating bread[2], if the water's appearance has changed, whether by itself or due to something else falling inside it or due to its location, that water is pasul, disqualified for being used for washing purposes[3]. This would mean that it would be prohibited to use water during "red tide" to wash for Hamotzi.

Yet, many authorities argue on part of the Shulchan Aruch's statement. They point out that the Mishna does not actually mention the water color being changed "by itself" with no outside stimulus as making the water assur. The Mishna only mentions the other criteria, namely different types of inks and dyes falling in, for prohibiting colored water! Additionally, regarding such 'dyed water' for use as a mikva, only when the color has changed due to something else falling in would such a

mikva be invalidated, and not when the color has changed by itself[4]. It stands to reason that the rules of Netilas Yadayim, which are a Takanas Chachamim, cannot be any stricter than those regarding the Biblical mikva!

A further proof cited is that the Rambam[5], when codifying this halacha, omitted any mention of water whose color has been changed by itself being prohibited. Therefore, many halachic decisors, including the Taz, Magen Avraham, Gr"a, Pri Megadim, Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, and Mishna Berura[6] rule that water whose color has been changed by itself is perfectly permissible to be used for Netilas Yadayim. Accordingly, this would mean that 'red tide' water due to an algal bloom would in fact be permitted for Netilas Yadayim, as no one added anything and it is a natural phenomenon that actually occurs on a microscopic level.

Color Coded

However, other authorities disagree, concurring with the Tur and Shulchan Aruch's stringent ruling. They explain that there truly is no such thing as water changing color "by itself". It actually occurs when the water is sitting exposed to the elements, that it gets contaminated, possibly by (microscopic) organisms in the air, which change its color. It is only referred to as changing by itself because nothing was purposely added to the water that might change its color. Proof is that if someone would place water in an airtight sealed clear container, its appearance would remain unchanged.

These authorities argue that the Rema, who does not comment on the Shulchan Aruch's ruling, and perhaps even the Rambam, would actually agree to this. Although the Rambam did not mention water whose appearance changed "by itself", he nonetheless added that water whose color was changed "by the ground" is passul for use for Netilas Yadayim. These decisors opine that it is possible that this was his intent, referring to water sitting exposed on the ground whose appearance was changed naturally. Additionally, they point out that Chazal, and later the Shulchan Aruch, use extremely strong terms for the punishments awaiting those negligent with washing Netilas Yadayim properly[7]. Therefore, they maintain that one may not compare it to a mikva, which would not become invalidated with this type of water. In fact, many halachic authorities, including the Prisha, Chida, Ma'amar Mordechai, Shulchan HaTahor, Ben Ish Chai, Aruch Hashulchan, Kaf Hachaim, and Chazon Ish[8] rule that water whose color has been changed by itself is prohibited to be used for Netilas Yadayim. This would also seemingly include our 'Crimson Tide'.

Breaking Out the Bubbly?

This whole background will help us understand a more common case. Have you ever filled up your cup to wash for Hamotzi and found the water a bit whitish, cloudy or bubbly? Usually, the water settles down and returns to its normal appearance after a few seconds. A quite common question is whether one needs to wait for the water to settle down in order to wash, as it would have the status of water whose appearance changed "by itself", or whether this is not the same issue.

Many contemporary poskim, including Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer, Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul, Rav Nosson Gestetner, and the Yalkut Yosef[9] rule that there is no reason to wait for the water to settle. They explain that the reason the water looks this way at first is due to air pressure in the pipes. Therefore, they maintain that this is not the same case as 'shinui mareh machmas atzmo' as the water's appearance did not truly change. They bring proof from the Shulchan Aruch himself who rules that if the water's appearance changed due to rocks and dirt getting mixed in, then it is still kosher for Netilas Yadayim[10]. Therefore, a temporary whitish tinge or bubbles in the water cannot be considered any worse for Netilas Yadayim.

Yet, other authorities, including the Minchas Yitzchak, Rav Yaakov Blau zt"l,and the Netei Gavriel[11], still maintain that even though washing with such water would be permissible, it is nevertheless preferable to wait until the water clears before washing l'chatchila.

When one views the world through the lens of halacha, current events, Crimson Tides, and even simple tasks like hand-washing take on a whole other dimension.

Postscript[12]: There is another interesting related topic about whether water with bubbles has the halachic status of water: drinking seltzer during Shalosh Seudos (Seudat Shlishit). There is an obscure custom of not drinking water during Bein Hashmashos on Shabbos. This is loosely based on the Rema's comment in O.C. 291, 2 about the dangers of drinking well water during this time period[13]. The Steipler Gaon, as well as his son Rav Chaim Kanievsky[14], maintain that this includes seltzer (which is intrinsically water with carbon dioxide added in), as the bubbles do not detract from the water's status. However, Rav Moshe Halberstam zt"l, citing many earlier authorities including the Maharsham[15], argues that seltzer is not included in the water category in respect to this minhag. A little fizz goes a long way.

The author wishes to thank his friend and talmid, renowned business consultant and marketing specialist Rabbi Issamar Ginzberg, whose sheilah was the impetus for this author's interest and research in this topic.

[1]Tur / Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 160, 1), Mishnayos Yadayim (Ch.1, 3).

[2]The Mishna Berura (158, 1; see also Shaar HaTzion ad loc. 1 & 2) gives an excellent summary of the sources and reasons why Netilas Yadayim is mandated before eating bread, one of them being that it is alluded to by the pasuk in Parshas Kedoshim (Vayikra Chapter 20, verse 7) "V'hiskadeeshtem, V'heyisem Kedoshim", "And you shall sanctify yourselves, and be holy". The Gemara (Brachos 53b) clarifies that "And you shall sanctify yourselves" refers to washing the hands before the meal, Mayim Rishonim, and "and be holy" refers to washing the hands after the meal, Mayim Acharonim. In other words, by washing our hands before making a bracha (in this case before eating bread), we are properly sanctifying ourselves. See previous article titled "Mayim Acharonim, Chova?". Another reason why we wash is to be akin to the Kohanim eating Terumah, who had to eat their food in purity. One should not make light of this obligation as the Shulchan Aruch writes (O.C. 158, 9) extremely strong ramifications for one who does, based on three separate maamarei Chazal (Mishnayos Ediyus Ch. 5 Mishna 6, Gemara Shabbos 62b, and Gemara Sotah 4b). See also Shmiras HaGuf VeHanefesh (vol. 1, Ch. 55 at length).

[3]This halacha is gleaned from the water in the Kiyor in the Beis HaMikdash, used to wash the Kohanim's hands and feet. Just as if that water's appearance was changed it would be rendered unfit for use, so too our water would - Ra'ah (Brachos 53b s.v. chamei), cited by the Beis Yosef (O.C. 161, 1 s.v. tzarich) and Mishna Berura (ad loc. 1).

[4]Mishnayos Mikvaos (Ch.7, Mishna 3), Rambam (Hilchos Mikvaos Ch.7, 12), Beis Yosef and Shulchan Aruch (Y"D 201, 25 - 27).

[5]Rambam (Hilchos Brachos Ch.6, 7).

[6]O.C. 160 ad loc. - Taz (1), Magen Avraham (2), Gr"a (1), Pri Megadim (M.Z. end 1), Shulchan Aruch HaRav (1), Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (40, 8), and Mishna Berura (160, 2).

[7]See end footnote 2.

[8]O.C. 160 ad loc. - Prisha (2), Chida (Birkei Yosef 2), Ma'amar Mordechai (1), Shulchan HaTahor (1), Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Kedoshim 1), Aruch Hashulchan (3, who writes that the appearance change is due to maggots and flies), Kaf Hachaim (5), Chazon Ish (O.C. 22 , 7 & 13). Additionally, the Bach (end 1) who argues on this rule, nevertheless concludes that if at all possible it is preferable to be stringent. Similarly, the Machatzis Hashekel (end 2) who likewise refutes this rule still concludes that if after washing with the colored water one finds water whose appearance has not changed, it would be prudent to wash again without a bracha.

[9]Rav Elyashiv's opinion is cited in Shu"t Rivevos Efraim (vol. 6, 410), Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer (Shu"t Even Yisrael vol. 7, 11), Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul (Shu"t Ohr L'Tzion vol. 2, Ch. 11, 7), Rav Nosson Gestetner (Shu"t L'Horos Nosson vol. 4, O.C. 8), and the Yalkut Yosef (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch O.C. 160, 2). The Chazon Ish (O.C. 22, 9 s.v. sham) implies this way as well, regarding permitting water that got 'dirty' due to something small falling in that does not intrinsically change the water's actual color.

[10]Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 160, 9). It still must be water that a dog would drink. Although there are two different explanations why the Shulchan Aruch's ruling holds true, it is possible that both would apply here. [The Pri Megadim (ad loc. M.Z. 1) explains that since in the end the water itself remains truly clear as the dirt and mud do not actually change the color of the water itself, it is not deemed a problem. The Shulchan Aruch HaRav (ibid.) maintains that since it is the derech of the 'gidul' of water to have dirt and mud mixed in, it won't affect the water's status. See also Mishna Berura (ad loc., 3).]

[11]Shu"t Minchas Yitzchak (vol. 9, 13), Netei Gavriel (Ch.66, 7, pg. 441). This author personally heard this psak of Rav Blau's zt"l, to be

choshesh l'chatchila for the Minchas Yitzchak's position, approximately a week before he was niftar. The Minchas Yitzchak held that the hetter of rocks and dirt mixing into the water was not a comparable case according to several opinions and therefore it would be preferable to wait until the water settled down.

[12]Thanks are due to Rabbi Yaakov Nissan for pointing out this related interesting machlokes.

[13]See Shmiras HaGuf VeHanefesh (vol. 2, 130) and Shu"t Divrei Moshe (O.C. 13) at length, explaining how this custom can be sourced in the Rema's enigmatic and seemingly unrelated ruling.

[14]The Steipler's minhag is found in Orchos Rabbeinu (vol. 1, 109). Rav Chaim Kanievsky's short responsa on topic, defending his father's shitta, is printed in Shu"t Divrei Moshe (O.C. end 14). He concludes that it is "kasha lehakel b'makom sakana".

[15]Shu"t Divrei Moshe (O.C. 14) at length; Maharsham (Shu"t vol. 3, 375; Daas Torah O.C. 158 & Y"D 339, 5).

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda.

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה

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 reproved. 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:

YA'AKOV	**MOSHE**
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 Cana'an. 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 Cana'an, 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 Cana'an. 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 Cana'an. 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 Cana'an 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 Cana'an.

2) Yehoshua's mission will be to bring Bnei Yisrael into Cana'an 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 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. Tzippora 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 Tzippora'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. Tzippora 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. Tzippora 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

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 Hilkhot 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* – *makkat 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 VA'ERA -- *"ANI HASHEM"*

Should Bnei Yisrael's redemption from slavery be 'unconditional'?

According to God's original promise to Avraham Avinu at Brit Bein ha'Btarim (Breishit 15:13-15), it certainly seems that way.

Furthermore, the opening lines of Parshat Va'era also leave us with this impression that the forthcoming redemption will be unconditional – after all, could God have any higher expectations from a nation that had endured so many years of oppression?

In the following shiur, we re-examine those psukim (i.e. Shmot 6:2-9) - to show how and why Israel's redemption from Egypt emerges as a more 'reciprocal' process.

INTRODUCTION

In our study last week of the 'burning bush' narrative, we explained how Moshe Rabeinu received a 'double mission' - as God instructed him to both:

* **INFORM** Bnei Yisrael that God has come to fulfill His promise to the Avot to take them to Eretz Canaan.

AND

* **ORDER** Pharaoh to allow Bnei Yisrael to journey a three day distance into the desert - to worship their God.

At first glance, Moshe's mission to Pharaoh appears to be much more difficult than his mission to Bnei Yisrael. After all, Moshe must **convince** the Egyptian ruler to do something against his will; while Bnei Yisrael need only to be **told** 'good tidings'.

However, as the story continues, we will see how Moshe's 'mission' to Bnei Yisrael becomes no less difficult, and how that mission emerges as a primary theme of Sefer Shmot!

To explain how and why, we must first consider the setting as Parshat Va'era begins.

GETTING BETTER, OR GETTING WORSE

Recall from Parshat Shmot, how Bnei Yisrael immediately believed Moshe's tidings of their forthcoming redemption:

> "...and the people believed that God had come to redeem His people..." (see 4:29-31).

However, this initial enthusiasm quickly turned bitter after Pharaoh doubled their workload (in reaction to Moshe's opening request /see 5:18-21). Understandably, the people accuse Moshe - their new leader - for aggravating their condition; whereupon Moshe turns to God in prayer, asking:

> "Why have you made things worse for this people, why have you sent me! From the time I have gone to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, their situation has only gotten worse, and You have not saved Your nation!" (5:22).

It is precisely at this point when Parshat Va'era opens, i.e. as Moshe awaits God's answer concerning what to tell the people. As the people raise a rather 'legitimate' complaint, Moshe needs to know how to respond.

Note how God's response to this complaint is found in the opening eight psukim of Parshat Va'era (i.e. 6:2-9) - and how it divides into two sections:

1) What God tells Moshe (see 6:2-5), and hence:
2) What Moshe must tell Bnei Yisrael (see 6:6-8).

In our shiur, we will focus on God's answer to Bnei Yisrael (i.e. 6:6-8), while our additional shiur on Parshat Va'era (to follow) will discuss how and why God first mentions "brit Avot" in his preliminary remarks to Moshe in 6:2-5.]

ANI HASHEM

Review the opening line of God's response to Moshe (see 6:2), as it appears to contain a rather superfluous statement:

"And Elokim spoke to Moshe, and told him: **ANI HASHEM**".

Even though Moshe Rabeinu already knows who God is (see Shmot 3:6-7 & 3:13-15), nonetheless, God finds its necessary to preface his response with this statement of "Ani Hashem".

Similarly, the message that God instructs Moshe to convey to Bnei Yisrael begins (and ends!) with this same statement of 'ANI HASHEM' (see 6:6-8). To clarify this, note our emphasis of this point as we quote these psukim:

"Therefore, tell Bnei Yisrael:
ANI HASHEM,
and I will take them out from their suffering in Egypt...
and I will save them from their enslavement,
and I shall redeem them with an outstretched arm....
and I shall take them for Me as My Nation
and I will be their God... then they shall know that:
ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM
who has taken them out of Egypt.
And I will take them to the Land...
and I will give it to them as an inheritance...
ANI HASHEM."
(see 6:6-8, read carefully!)

Clearly, God wants Bnei Yisrael to hear this 'message' of "Ani Hashem". But how does this 'statement' answer the people's complaint? Would the repetition of this phrase, together with yet another promise of redemption lighten their workload?

[Recall, Bnei Yisrael never asked for redemption, they simply desired less work! (see 2:23)]

As we see in the next pasuk, this message did not convince them, and precisely for this reason - that it did not alleviate their heavy workload:

> "And Moshe spoke these words to Bnei Yisrael, **but they did not listen** to Moshe, due to their crushed spirit and **their hard labor**". (see 6:9).

So what was the purpose of God's message of "Ani Hashem", if it didn't work?

A STATEMENT, or A COMMAND?

To answer this question, we contend that the phrase 'ANI HASHEM' (in the context of these psukim) should not be understood as simply a '**statement' –** promising imminent redemption, but rather as a '**command to accept Hashem**' – i.e. demanding improved behavior – **to enable redemption!**

Even though this interpretation may not appear to be the simple meaning of this phrase, a careful reading of this entire section in Sefer Shmot, with a little help from Sefer Yechezkel, will help us prove this conclusion.

To do so, let's take a careful look at Bnei Yisrael's **response** (in 6:9) to God's message (in 6:6-8):

"And Moshe relayed this [message] to Bnei Yisrael...
- ve'**lo SHAM'U** el Moshe mi'kotzer ruach u'm'avoda kasha-
But they did not LISTEN to Moshe, due to their crushed spirits and hard work. (see 6:9).

In our quotation of this pasuk, we have translated the phrase of "ve'lo shamu" as they did not 'listen'. However, as we shall now explain, this translation is problematic.

'TO BELIEVE' OR 'TO OBEY'?

To interpret the phrase "ve-lo SHAM'U", let's consider the possible meanings of the verb "lishmoa", which can imply to either hear; comprehend; listen, or obey – and contemplate how it would relate to the context of these psukim:

* They did not **HEAR** what Moshe said.

That can't be its meaning in this pasuk, as they obviously

heard what Moshe said. [If not, he could have simply raised his voice, and repeated it again.]

* They did not **COMPREHEND** what he said.
This would also seem unlikely, for nothing in Moshe's statement seems particularly complex or intellectually demanding.

* They did not **PAY ATTENTION** to what Moshe told them.
Based on its context, this seems to be the simplest understanding; the problem only being that this is not what the word "sham'u" usually implies.

* They did not **BELIEVE** (or accept) what Moshe told them.
Even though this is the popular interpretation (of this pasuk), this translation is problematic as well, for the Torah should have used the phrase "ve-lo he'eminu", as this is the word Chumash usually employs to describe belief – just as it did to describe Bnei Yisrael's original belief in God's first promise of redemption - see 4:30-31.

* They did not **OBEY** what Moshe told them.
Although this is the most common translation of 've-lo sham'u' elsewhere in Chumash [see for example Devarim 28:15 & Vayikra 26:14], such a translation in our context seems entirely untenable, as Moshe's remarks contained no commandment or imperative for the people to obey!
Or did they?

Based on the above analysis, the best translation for "ve-lo sham'u" would be - that the people did not 'obey' - but if so, it would require that we identify some sort of commandment in God's statement to the people, as recorded in 6:6-8.

To explain how and why the statement of ANI HASHEM could be understood as a commandment – that must be obeyed; we must study a parallel source that describes these same events, as recorded in the book of Yechezkel.

A PROOF FROM YECHEZKEL

[Before continuing, it is recommended that you first read Yechezkel 20:1-12 and carefully compare it to Shmot 6:2-13; noting the obvious textual parallels, e.g. 20:5-6 w/ 3:6-8.]

Yechezkel chapter 20 opens in the seventh year [i.e. seven years after the Exile of King Yehoyachin and the aristocracy from Jerusalem], as the elders of Yehuda (the leaders of the Exile in Bavel) visit Yechezkel to inquire in regard to their predicament.

[Based on chapter 28 in Yirmiyahu, we can assume that rumors of Bavel's imminent fall are spreading (as Egypt will come to their rescue/ see also Yirmiyahu 37:1-10), kindling [false] hope among the people that God may soon redeem the Exile and return them to Jerusalem.]

In response to their inquiry, God tells Yechezkel that the people need to hear rebuke (rather than 'good tidings' /see 2:4).

In that rebuke, God instructs Yechezkel to remind the people that they are not worthy of redemption, just as their forefathers in Egypt did not deserve redemption! [See 20:5-10.]

As your review these psukim, note how Yechezkel describes the set of events that took place just prior to the Exodus, and their obvious parallels to the opening psukim of Parshat Va'era:

"And you shall say to them... on the day that I chose Israel ... [*va-ivada lahem* -] when I made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt... and I stretched out My Hand to them saying ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM".
[Compare with Shmot 6:3 & 6:6]
"... on that same day ["*nasa'ti et yadi"]* I lifted out My Hand to take them out of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey" (Yechezkel 20:5-6),
[Compare with Shmot 6:8 and 3:7-8].

Note especially the repetition of the phrase of ANI HASHEM as well as "ve-**lo avu l'shmo'ah**".

TAKING 'EGYPT' OUT OF THE JEWS

However, the most important piece of information in these psukim, that (for some reason) were left out of Sefer Shmot, is the COMMANDMENT that God had given Bnei Yisrael at that time:

"And I said to them [at the time of Yetziat Mitzrayim]: -
"Each man must rid himself of his detestable ways and not DEFILE himself with the fetishes of Egypt - [for] ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM" (see 20:7).

"But they REBELLED against Me -'***ve-lo avu liSHMOA eilai***' - and they did not want to listen to Me (i.e. **obey**) - for no one rid himself from his detestable ways, nor did anyone give up the fetishes of Egypt, and I resolved to pour out My anger upon them..." (see 20:8).

It becomes quite clear from Yechezkel, that when God told Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael ANI HASHEM (as recorded in Parshat Va'era), this included an implicit COMMAND as well - to rid themselves from Egyptian culture- a command which Bnei Yisrael DID NOT OBEY.

Much to our amazement, Sefer Yechezkel states explicitly that which Sefer Shmot only alludes to. God had called upon Bnei Yisrael to repent prior to the Exodus, to cleanse themselves from the "tum'a" of their Egyptian culture - in preparation for their redemption. Unfortunately, at that time Bnei Yisrael did not OBEY ["ve-lo avu liSHMOA" / see 20:8] and thus deserved to be destroyed in the land of Egypt.

Nevertheless, as Yechezkel explains in the next pasuk, the redemption process did continue, but it was only for the 'sake of God's Name' (see Yechezkel 20:9-10).

[These psukim in Yechezkel support the popular Zohar that explains how Bnei Yisrael in Egypt had reached the 49th level of 'tum'a' before the redemption began. See Further Iyun section for additional sources that are based on (or quote) these psukim in Yechezkel.]

Thus, these psukim in Yechezkel can help us understand the deeper meaning of the phrase 'Ani Hashem' in Parshat Va'era. God's instruction to Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael – 'Ani Hashem' - implies not only that they must accept God, but they must also reject any other gods (and/or culture). Basically, God is telling His nation that He will indeed redeem them from Egypt, as they request; but this redemption demands that they become a 'committed partner' in this relationship.

If this understanding is correct, then Bnei Yisrael's response of "ve-lo sham'u el Moshe" could definitely be understood that 'they did not OBEY' – for they rebelled against God (as Yechezkel explained) continuing their evil ways by clinging to their Egyptian culture!

A LOGICAL 'KAL VA-CHOMER'

Additional support for this interpretation [that they did not 'obey'] can be inferred from the next three psukim that follow in Parshat Va'era:

"Then God told Moshe, go speak to Pharaoh... that he should SEND Bnei Yisrael from his land. [Clearly, a command!]

Then, Moshe retorted [employing a 'kal va-chomer'], saying:

"hein Bnei Yisrael LO SHAM'U eilai – [If even B.Y. did not 'listen' to me] – ve-eich YISHMA'ENI Pharaoh - why should Pharaoh 'obey' me?" (see 6:10-12).

As you review this pasuk in Hebrew, note how the Torah uses the word 'sham'u' on each side of the 'kal va-chomer'.

In the context of Pharaoh's refusal to comply with God's command - 'sham'u' definitely means to OBEY - for Moshe commands Pharaoh to grant Bnei Yisrael permission to leave Egypt (to worship their God). Therefore, for this 'kal va-chomer' to make sense, the verb 'sham'u' in both halves of the pasuk must carry the same meaning. Thus, if 'sham'u' in the second half of the pasuk means 'obey', then 'sham'u' in first half of the pasuk - in reference to Bnei Yisrael - must also mean to OBEY.

In other words, the 'kal va-chomer' implies:" Why should Pharaoh OBEY me, if Bnei Yisrael did not OBEY me!"

Once again, we find proof that the phrase 've-lo sham'u' in 6:9 should be understood as: Bnei Yisrael did not **obey**.

TO KNOW or TO INTERNALIZE

Based to this conclusion, "ANI HASHEM" must now be understood as a **command**; and not as a **statement** (as we originally assumed). In this context, "Ani Hashem" encompasses much more than pure intellectual knowledge, rather it constitutes a precept that must be INTERNALIZED – and hence requires the rejection of any other god.

As Parshat Va'eyra begins, Moshe Rabeinu has been charged with the responsibility to become an 'educator', and not simply the bearer of good tidings. In this capacity, he must help prepare Bnei Yisrael for their redemption – by changing their ignoble culture – leading them in the path of God. It will also remain as his primary job for the next forty years!

THE FIRST TWO 'DIBROT'

This interpretation can help us appreciate the deeper meaning of the first two of the Ten Commandments that Bnei Yisrael receive when they arrive at Har Sinai.

The first commandment: "ANOCHI HASHEM ELOKECHA asher HOTZEITICHA me-eretz Mitzrayim..." (see 20:2-3, compare w/6:6!) is simply a more emphatic form of "Ani Hashem"; and the next commandment: "lo yihiyeh lachem elohim acherim al panai..." - not to follow any other gods – reiterates this warning that accepting God requires the rejection of decedent cultures.

This may also explain why some commentators consider Anochi and Lo Yihiyeh as one commandment, for the first statement automatically implies the second (like two sides of the same coin)!

Even though Bnei Yisrael did not internalize this 'commandment' of ANI HASHEM before they left Egypt (as 6:9 implies), as God had hoped; their redemption process would not be complete until they do – as will unfold in the events that follow in the rest of Chumash.

A DIFFICULT MISSION

From this perspective, Moshe's mission to Bnei Yisrael becomes more difficult than his mission to Pharaoh. His assignment involves not only informing the people, but also EDUCATING them - to prepare them for their redemption. Just as Pharaoh must be convinced to recognize God, Bnei Yisrael must be convinced that they must become worthy for their redemption by God.

This interpretation can also explain the interesting wording of God's response to Moshe's objection in 6:11-12:

> "Then God spoke to Moshe & Aharon, and COMMANDED them [va-yetzavem] **TO** Bnei Yisrael AND TO Pharaoh the king of Egypt to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt" (6:13).

God once again gives Moshe a double mission - to command Pharaoh to allow them to leave, AND to command Bnei Yisrael to 'become worthy' of that redemption.

[See Ramban's interpretation of this pasuk!]

SOME HELP FROM SEFER VAYIKRA

So what were Bnei Yisrael doing in Egypt that was so terrible? Considering that these events took place before the Torah was given, what did they need to do 'teshuva' from?

A possible answer can be found in Parshat Acharei Mot, where we find once again an interesting textual and thematic parallel to Yechezkel chapter 20 and Shmot chapter 6.

In Vayikra chapter 18 (which just so happens to be the Torah reading for Yom Kippur afternoon, and not by chance), God bids Bnei Yisrael not to follow the corrupt lifestyle of the Egyptians. Note once again the repetition in these psukim of the phrase 'ANI HASHEM':

> "And God spoke to Moshe: speak to Bnei Yisrael and TELL them ANI HASHEM!
>
> Do not act as the Egyptians do... and do not follow their customs. Follow My laws instead... for ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM.
>
> Keep My laws, for by them man lives... ANI HASHEM" (see Vayikra 18:1-5).

This short introduction is followed by a long list of forbidden marital relationships [better known as the 'arayot'], which had apparently become common in the Egyptian and Canaanite cultures (see 18:24-25!). Thus, God's call for 'teshuva' may have included a demand that Bnei Yisrael's refrain of their decadent Egyptian lifestyle, and accept instead whatever mitzvot God may command.

A THEME IN SEFER SHMOT

This interpretation not only helps us understand the phrase "ve-lo sham'u el Moshe" in 6:9, it also explains a whole series of events that take place up until Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai.

Recall that God had originally planned (at the 'sneh') for Bnei Yisrael to travel a three-day journey directly to Har Sinai immediately after the Exodus (see 3:12-18). Instead, they arrive at Har Sinai only some six weeks later. Why?

Based on the excerpt quoted from Sefer Yechezkel, the answer is quite simple. As the prophet explained, God saved Bnei Yisrael for the 'sake of His Name' - even though they were undeserving at that time (see 20:8-9). Hence, the redemption process could not continue, i.e. Bnei Yisrael cannot travel on to Har Sinai, until something is done to improve their spiritual readiness.

Therefore, even before Bnei Yisrael leave Egypt, they must offer a special Korban [Pesach] to affirm their faithfulness. [See our TSC shiur on Parshat Bo.] Then, after their first 'three-day journey' into the desert, they must pass the test at 'Mara' (see 15:22-26), where they are given one more chance to accept what they had earlier rejected in Parshat Va'era. Note what God commands Bnei Yisrael at MARA:

> "And He said - IM SHAMO'A TISHMA - If you OBEY the voice of the Lord your God, do what is upright and listen to His commandments, then the afflictions that I brought upon Egypt [which you deserved as well!] I will not bring upon you, for ANI HASHEM, your Healer" (16:26).
>
> [This topic will be discussed in greater detail in our shiur on Parshat Beshalach.]

Finally, immediately upon their arrival at Har Sinai, God again demands as a PRE-REQUISITE for receiving the Torah a similar 'pledge of allegiance':

> "And now, IM SHAMO'A TISHME'U BE-KOLI - if you agree to obey My instruction and keep My covenant..." (see 19:3-6).

Of course, this time Bnei Yisrael agree to follow God and 'listen' [obey] to whatever He may command them (see 19:7-8).

Finally, as we explained above, this explains why the very first DIBUR of the Ten Commandments is "ANOCHI [=ANI] HASHEM ELOKECHA who took you out of Egypt - LO YIHIYEH... Do not have any other gods INSTEAD of Me" (see 20:2).

As we saw in Sefer Yechezkel, these two statements - ANI HASHEM and LO YIHIYEH - act as 'two sides of the same coin' - for the statement of ANI HASHEM automatically implies that you shall have no other gods.

ELIYAHU AT LEIL HA-SEDER

In closing, the conclusions of this week's shiur can also help us appreciate our custom to 'invite' Eliyahu ha-navi to our 'seder table'. On Pesach night, as we commemorate the events of Yetziat Mitzrayim, we conclude the SEDER with our hope for the final redemption. However, before we begin Hallel & Nirtza, we first invite Eliyahu. Most likely, this custom is based on the final pasuk of Mal'achi, which promises:

> "Behold I am sending you Eliyah the prophet, BEFORE the great and awesome day of the Lord, and he will return the hearts of sons to their fathers, and the hearts of fathers to their sons, lest I come and smite and land instead."

In the final redemption, just as in the first redemption, our obligation to perform 'teshuva' is as important an ingredient as God's readiness to redeem us. After all, what purpose would there be in our redemption if we were not ready to fulfill our covenantal obligations?

In order for redemption to succeed, a constant recognition of ANI HASHEM must become not only a 'frame of mind', but even more so, it must become a 'way of life'.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

1. Review Shmot 2:23-25. Note how Bnei Yisrael cry to Hashem for salvation. In your opinion, does this indicate that they did teshuva, or was this simply a cry for help.

See Ibn Ezra (2:23 / aroch), Ramban (2:25), and Seforno (2:23-24) on these psukim, noting how they all relate to this question, and how they all relate to the psukim in Yechezkel 20:1-9 as well!

2. See Seforno's introduction to Sefer Shmot (in some Chumashim it is found in the first volume of Sefer Breishit, where Seforno provides and intro to all five books of Chumash).

Note how his commentary on what transpires in Sefer Shmot is based on what is described in Yechezkel chapter 20!

Note also how he relates to this information in Sefer Yechezkel in his commentary on almost every pasuk in Shmot chapter one, as well as his commentary on 2:23-24.

3. See Amos 5:18! There he claims that it would be better for Bnei Yisrael not to desire a YOM HASHEM. Based on the context of that pasuk (considering the people's behavior during the time period of Uziyahu) and the conclusions of this week's shiur, explain Amos' warning in that pasuk

. See also Yirmiyahu 29:10-14, and relate it to the above shiur!

ADDITIONAL NOTES AND SOURCES

The Forty-nine 'sha'arei tum'a'

The concept that Bnei Yisrael plummeted to the forty-ninth 'gate of impurity' appears in the Zohar Chadash, vol. 1, Parshat Yitro 52a. The Zohar there writes that while Hashem had promised Avraham Avinu only that He will redeem his offspring from bondage, He in fact did much more: He took them from the forty-nine 'gates of impurity' and raised them to the forty-nine 'gates of wisdom'. This, explains the Zohar, is why Hashem constantly reminds Bnei Yisrael, "I am Hashem your God who took you from Egypt", to emphasize that He did more than fulfill His promise to Avraham Avinu.

The Zohar adds that the forty-nine days we count between Pesach and Shavuot commemorate this elevation from the forty-nine 'gates of impurity'. This concept is developed later by the Ramchal, in Choker U-mekubal, 18.

"Ve-lo Sham'u El Moshe" (6:9)

Our explanation, that this pasuk refers to Bnei Yisrael's unwillingness to give up their idolatrous practices, appears explicitly in several Midrashim. The Mechilta, Parshat Bo - Mesechta De-pischa 5 and Shemot Rabba 6:5 explain that Bnei Yisrael could not extricate themselves from idolatry, and the Midrashim make reference to Yechezkel 20 as evidence. Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel also explains this pasuk as suggesting Bnei Yisrael's refusal to abandon idolatry, though he adds as well the element of 'kepidut rucha', anger and frustration. Perhaps this means that the intensified labor that resulted from Moshe's initial meeting with Pharaoh contributed in no small measure to the people's refusal to heed his call for teshuva.

It is worth noting that we find two different approaches in the Midrashim as to why Bnei Yisrael resorted to avoda zara: either for theological reasons, or due to circumstances they deemed out of their control. The Torah Shleima quotes a "Midrash Aggada" that Bnei Yisrael lacked faith and claimed that Hashem did not have the ability to save them. They thus resorted to avoda zara, on ideological grounds. The Midrash Hagadol, by contrast, records the following response of Bnei Yisrael to Moshe's call for their return to monotheism: "Where do you find a slave who acquires for himself two masters? We are slaves to Pharaoh; how can we violate his decrees - we are afraid!" Their subjugation to Pharaoh precluded the possibility of their service to Hashem.

The Netziv, in his comments to Shmot 13:9, finds what he considers a clearer source in Chumash for Bnei Yisrael's involvement in avoda zara. The pasuk there instructs them with regard to the mitzva of tefillin and concludes, "for with a mighty hand Hashem took you out from Egypt". The Netziv explains this clause as a response to the anticipated question as to why Hashem must issue so many commandments to ensure Bnei Yisrael's trust and belief in Him. He answers by reminding the people that they agreed to leave Egypt only after witnessing Hashem's mighty hand. Although they happily welcomed Moshe's initial announcement of their freedom (4:31), they rejected his second proclamation because, as we noted in the shiur, it required them to accept Hashem as their God. Only after witnessing the miracles in Egypt did they agree to forsake idolatry and accept Hashem.

VE-LO SHAM'U EL MOSHE

By and large, the "mefarshim al derech ha-pshat" interpret "ve-lo sham'u el Moshe" differently. We list here the three general directions taken by the mefarshim:

BELIEVE

They did not believe: We dismissed this approach in the shiur, but several prominent mefarshim adopt - either explicitly or implicitly - this interpretation. The Rashbam contrasts the nation's response here with their reaction to Moshe's initial announcement, as recorded in Parshat Shmot - 4:31. Although then, they believed Moshe ("Va-ya'amen ha-am"), having seen their hopes crushed by the decree of more intensive labor they no longer believed. In quoting this pasuk in Parshat Shmot, the Rashbam may have implicitly addressed the possible objection to this approach, as we asked in the shiur: why did the Torah not say, "Ve-lo he'eminu"? The answer may be that in that very pasuk the Torah writes, "va-yishme'u ki pakad Hashem et Benei Yisrael… " There, 'va-yishme'u' seems to parallel 'va-ya'amen', to mean 'they believed'. Other mefarshim who claim that Bnei Yisrael did not believe Moshe include the Ralbag and Seforno.

PAY ATTENTION

Another group of mefarshim explain 've-lo sham'u' to mean a rough equivalent of, 'they did not pay attention'. For one of several reasons, Bnei Yisrael did not or could not pay attention to Moshe as he spoke to them - either because of the pressure of their workload, their emotional distress, or because Pharaoh had already ordered them to disregard the 'words of falsehood' spoken by Moshe and Aharon (5:9).

This approach is taken (though in slightly different forms) by the Ramban, Chizkuni, Abarbanel, Netziv and Meshech Chochma in their commentaries on this pasuk. One interesting variation of this approach appears in the work of Rav Hirsch. He explains, along the same general lines as our analysis in the shiur, that in Moshe's speech he does more than inform the people of redemption; he charges them with a mission, the destiny and purpose of Am Yisrael. Due to the pressures of their work, however, Bnei Yisrael had no patience for such lofty ideas and concepts. All they could concentrate on was the immediate tasks at hand; they therefore could not pay any attention to Moshe's description of their spiritual mission as a free nation.

CONSOLATION

The final approach is that of Rashi: "They did not accept consolation." Unlike our explanation in the shiur, Rashi apparently understood Moshe's address as simply an attempt at consoling the people whose lives had become even more unbearable as a result of Pharaoh's new decree. Rashi expresses this interpretation of the pasuk in other writings, as well. In Sefer Hapardes (compiled by Rashi's students) and in Siddur Rashi (414), this pasuk is cited as proof that those who

seek to offer consolation should do so 'me'at me'at', by expressing modest hopes for better things to come. In Rashi's words, one who does not do so: "is like one who says to a beggar, 'Tomorrow you will be a king' - he does not believe him." Here, too, Bnei Yisrael suffered from physical torment, and Moshe consoles them with promises of a glorious life as God's nation in the land of Canaan. This offered them little consolation; they wished only for a respite from their current hardship.

The Malbim (on our pasuk) explains along these lines, as well, that Moshe here was to console Bnei Yisrael, but did not succeed.

TESHUVA IN EGYPT

In sharp contrast to the line taken in the shiur, Ibn Ezra in his peirush Ha-aroch(2:23) says that the words "Va-yeanchu Bnei Yisrael min ha-avoda va-yiz'aku" implies that they did do teshuva and thus were worthy of being redeemed from Egypt.

'Ani Hashem'

The centrality of this phrase within this opening unit of Parshat Va'era is demonstrated by Nechama Leibowitz (*Studies*, Parshat Va'era 1). She shows that within this segment, which consists of Hashem's speech to Moshe (6:2-8), 'Ani Hashem' appears at either end (6:2&8) as well as in the middle (6:6). Clearly, the notion of 'Ani Hashem' comprises the most important message Moshe is to convey to Bnei Yisrael at this point.

In the shiur we suggest that 'Ani Hashem' involved an educational message, that Bnei Yisrael must rid themselves of Egyptian culture and prepare themselves spiritually for redemption. This approach appears in the works of two twentieth-century writers, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin (Oznayim La-Torah) and Rav Yoel Leib Herzog (Imrei Yoel). They both claim that 'Ani Hashem' was meant as an admonishment that Bnei Yisrael relinquish their attachment to idolatry. Rav Sorotzkin adds that Bnei Yisrael could not accept the fact that the same God who brought about this bitter exile would also come to their assistance and redeem them. They fell under the influence of pagan ideology and so believed in the existence of different gods with different powers. Moshe was thus to teach them the message of 'Ani Hashem', that there is only one God who governs every force in the universe. Indeed, the same God who subjected them to hardship will lead them to a life of freedom.

This interpretation of 'Ani Hashem' may shed light on the passage in the Zohar mentioned earlier. The Zohar asks, why does Hashem so often remind Bnei Yisrael that "Ani Hashem Elokeichem asher hotzeiti etchem me-eretz Mitzrayim" (or similar)? After all, by taking them out of Egypt, Hashem simply fulfilled the promise He had made to Avraham; why does this act merit such emphasis? The Zohar answers that these proclamations stress the fact that Hashem went beyond His promise to Avraham. He had promised Avraham only to redeem his offspring from bondage, not to raise them from the quagmire of the forty-nine 'gates of impurity'. Why must Hashem emphasize this point? Is He trying to 'brag'?

In light of our discussion, the answer becomes clear. Hashem constantly reminds Bnei Yisrael of the commandment He issued to them when they were in Egypt, 'Ani Hashem' - the commandment that they failed to heed. It is as though He reminds them, "You did not internalize this message in Egypt, so I must reiterate it to you again and again!"

We list here three alternative explanations that appear in the Midrashim and mefarshim as to the meaning of 'Ani Hashem' in this context:

The Midrash Hagadol and Mechilta De-Rashbi understand 'Ani Hashem' as a disclaimer of sorts. Hashem here declares that although He knows the future, and thus foresees Bnei Yisrael's future abandonment of Hashem, He will nevertheless redeem them.

Several mefarshim interpret the phrase as a source of encouragement for Bnei Yisrael, underscoring Hashem's unlimited power that enables Him to redeem them. This approach appears in various forms in the commentaries of Rashi, Seforno and Abarbanel. The Ibn Ezra posits a slight variation of this approach, that 'Ani Hashem' emphasizes the nature of the Almighty's promise; as He is God, Bnei Yisrael may confidently trust that He will fulfill His guarantee of redemption.

The Malbim explains that Hashem here informs Bnei Yisrael that He will redeem them with the divine attribute of 'Shem Havaya', entirely outside the bounds of the natural order. Amos Chacham, in Da'at Mikra, takes a similar approach, as does Rav Chayim Yaakov Goldvicht (Asufat Ma'archot - Haggada Shel Pesach, p.113).

"Va-yetzavem El Bnei Yisrael…" (6:13)

The glaring problem in this pasuk, as noted by many commentaries, is the absence of any content to this 'command' Hashem issued to Moshe and Aharon. We claim that this refers to the spiritual preparation of Bnei Yisrael for redemption. This appears explicitly in two Midrashim - the Mechilta cited earlier, and the Midrash Lekach Tov on our pasuk. This may be the deeper meaning of two other Midrashim as well. One Midrash brought down in the Sefer Ha-mivchar (as quoted in the Torah Shleima on our pasuk) says that Moshe commanded Bnei Yisrael to prepare wood for the construction of the Mishkan. This may symbolize Bnei Yisrael's preparation for hashra'at ha-Shechina - Hashem's residence within the nation. Secondly, the Yerushalmi in Masechet Rosh Hashana 3:5, based on the pasuk in Yirmiyahu 34:13, explains this command as referring to the obligation to free one's slaves. (Apparently, as Rav Menachem Kasher notes in Torah Shleima – milu'im to Parshat Va'era, 3, there were noblemen among Bnei Yisrael who, not only were excused from slave labor, they themselves owned servants.) As the Torah explicitly writes in Vayikra 25:42, the laws concerning the freeing of slaves relate to the notion that Bnei Yisrael are ultimately subservient to Hashem alone. Before realizing their freedom from bondage, Bnei Yisrael must internalize this critical lesson, that they are freed from slavery in order to become the servants of Hashem.

Three other general approaches to this pasuk appear in the mefarshim:

The Sifrei in Parshat Beha'alotcha (91), quoted by Rashi here, understands the command to Moshe and Aharon as urging them to exercise patience when dealing with Bnei Yisrael and speak respectfully when they address Pharaoh. Though Rashi views this explanation as drash, as the pasuk makes no mention of patience and respect, this approach does accommodate the context of this pasuk. Moshe had just expressed his frustration over Bnei Yisrael's refusal to listen and the likely prospect of a similar reaction on Pharaoh's part. Hashem thus urges him and Aharon to retain their composure despite the intransigence of both the people and Pharaoh. This explanation appears in the Zohar Ha-chadash (2:26) as well as in the Rambam's Mishneh Torah (Hilchot Sanhedrin 25:2), and in a slightly different form in the Pesikta De-rav Kahana (14). In a similar vein, the Ibn Ezra quotes a Karaite exegete, Yeshua, who explains this pasuk as a charge to Moshe and Aharon not to become angry as a result of their growing frustration. Whereas in his peirush ha-katzar the Ibn Ezra mentions this possibility without any further comment, in his peirush ha-aroch he writes that 'there is no need' for this interpretation. (This approach brings to mind an interesting comment by the Ralbag on the immediately preceding pasuk. He claims that the 'kotzer ruach' which led Bnei Yisrael not to listen to Moshe refers to Moshe's - rather than Bnei Yisrael's - frustration. His growing impatience led him to speak irritably, and his words thus met upon deaf ears. If so, it would then stand to reason that Hashem must urge Moshe to exercise more patience.)

The Akeidat Yitzchak interprets 'va-yetzavem' here as referring to the conferral of a given status, rather than the issuance of a command. Citing examples from Tehillim 33:9 and Melachim I 17:4, the Akeidat Yitzchak explains that Hashem granted Moshe and Aharon prominence and respect among both Bnei Yisrael and Pharaoh's court, such that their words would be heard. Other mefarshim adopting this approach include the Abarbanel (as his first suggestion), the Or Hachayim (though he adds as well the third approach that we will soon see) and the

Tzror Hamor.

Several mefarshim see this pasuk's mention of Aharon as the key to its meaning. Moshe had just expressed his discouragement, compounded by his poor verbal skills(see 6:12), and so Hashem calls upon Aharon and commands both brothers to return to Bnei Yisrael and to speak to Pharaoh. This was Hashem's answer to Moshe's complaint - that he take Aharon with him and address the nation (for a second time) and then the king. The Ibn Ezra (peirush ha-aroch), Chizkuni, Rabenu Yosef Bechor Shor and Abarbanel (as his second approach) explain along these lines. The Jerusalem Publication Society Bible also seemed to have this approach in mind when it translated this pasuk.

Inviting Eliyah Hanavi to the Seder

We suggest in the shiur that Eliyahu's 'participation' in our seder reminds us that before the final redemption we must perform teshuva, and for this reason Eliyahu will come before the unfolding of the redemption. Just as Hashem called upon Bnei Yisrael to repent before leaving Egypt, so must we correct our ways in anticipation of the final redemption.

The Rema - Orach Chayim 480 - mentions the custom of opening the door at the seder and cites the explanation of the Mahari Brona that this demonstrates our belief in Pesach night as a 'leil shimurim' - a night of watching, when Hashem grants us special protection. The Maharal, in his Haggada "Divrei Negidim" rejects this explanation and claims that we open the door to publicize our belief in the coming of Eliyahu Hanavi prior to the final redemption. (See also Aruch Hashulchan.) He does not, however, relate this to the concept of teshuva, as we suggest in the shiur.

Though our explanation does not appear explicitly in earlier sources, it may relate to the approach taken by the Netziv to explain the fifth cup poured at the seder. As we know, the four cups drunk at the seder correspond to the four expressions describing Yetzi'at Mitzrayim in the beginning of Parshat Vaeyra ('ve-hotzeiti', 've-hitzalti', 've-ga'alti', 've-lakachti'). The Netziv, in his "Ha-amek Davar" commentary to 6:7, suggests that the fifth cup - which we pour but do not drink - commemorates the promise, "and you shall know that I am Hashem your God who takes you out from Egypt". According to the Netziv, this promise speaks of a level of comprehension unattainable by the masses; it refers to the unique knowledge and insight acquired by the nation's spiritual elite. Therefore, given the exclusive nature of this 'knowledge', we do not drink this fifth cup.

In contemporary times, Rabbi Eliezer Ginsburg, in his "Shirat Yehuda" commentary on the Haggada, associates the Netziv's explanation with the common reference to this fifth cup as 'kos shel Eliyahu' (see, for example, Mishna Berura 480:10). Eliyahu will come before the final redemption to teach, guide and inspire, such that we may all attain this lofty level of "you shall know that I am Hashem your God", and we thus appropriately name this fifth cup after Eliyahu Hanavi. This closely relates to our suggestion, that the inclusion of Eliyahu at the seder reminds us of the spiritual growth required before the final redemption.