

**Potomac Torah Study Center**

Vol. 12 #14, January 24-25, 2025; 25 Tevet 5785; Va'era 5785; Mevarchim HaHodesh

**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.**

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

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**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere during 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the first phase of the agreement continue with the remaining hostages coming home, hostilities ending, and for an era of security and rebuilding for both Israel and all who genuinely seek peace.**

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**Remembering Olga: A Warrior for Israel \***

**On January 6, Israel lost a brave warrior who devoted her life to defending Israel and the Jewish people: Olga Meshoe-Washington (1981-2025). A dynamic young South African native and devout Christian, she placed Israel's defense second only to her family. Baruch Dayan HaEmet.**

\* Israel365 News, Newsletter, January 16, 2025).

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When my children were attending day school and yeshiva, they always enjoyed studying Va'era and Bo, the Torah portions in which Hashem brings ten plagues that afflict the people of Egypt while not affecting the Jews. Our sons love the stories from Midrash about the unusual details of the plagues, such as hail that contains both ice and fire at the same time and comes up from the ground as well as down from the sky. After reading about the parsha for a few days and selecting several special Devrei Torah for this issue, I notice that this collection contains very little discussing the plagues. I suspect that the messages below might not have kept my sons' attention when they were pre-Bar Mitzvah – but I find them more compelling than, for example, a discussion of why the Egyptians could move around in the darkness during the first three days but could not even move during the next three days.

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine and Rabbi Yehoshua Singer observe that Paro's arrogance and pride make him unable to deal with Moshe or Hashem during the period of the plagues. Rabbi Rhine concludes that Paro insists on being in control and therefore, for example, when Moshe asks him when he wants the plague of frogs to end, Paro says tomorrow rather than immediately. Paro insists on being in control of the timing, despite that decision requiring the Egyptians to suffer an additional day of the plague. Rabbi Singer observes that Paro is afraid of God's punishments but does not recognize or appreciate Hashem's greatness or power. God wants humans to recognize His greatness and understand that despite our relative insignificance, we are still important to Hashem. The positive sense of "fear of God" means acknowledging Hashem's greatness and role in the world – not serving God out of submission.

Miriam, Aharon, and Moshe take leadership positions in their generation, especially during the Exodus. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, observes that great leaders become great after coming back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes. Rabbi Sacks states that God never loses faith in us, even if we sometimes lose faith in ourselves. What makes these siblings great? Miriam shows an ability to be a prophet, starting at age five or six (predicting that her parents will have a son who will redeem B'Nai Yisrael) and always believing that Hashem will find a way to save the Jews, even though she cannot predict how. Their parents, Yocheved and Amram, however, seem to be fairly ordinary Jews, not the sort of parents likely to have children destined to be heroes. Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Dov Linzer claims that the hero in charge of addressing Paro and leading the Jews out of Egypt would need to be someone who had not been a slave, someone who could possess and sustain a religious vision. Moshe, raised in Paro's palace as his adopted grandson, does not live as a slave but grows up learning from and addressing Paro directly. This background enables Moshe to be comfortable speaking directly to Paro during the year of the plagues.

Miriam, Aharon, and Moshe live only a few generations after Levi, soon enough to learn about their distinguished ancestors. Their rich legacy comes through with the positive self images they have. One outstanding characteristic of Jews throughout history is a sense of legacy that we see going back to the Avot. Eva Gluckman, a seventh generation Jewish young woman from New Zealand, is observing her Bat Mitzvah at the Auckland (New Zealand) Hebrew Congregation in Remuera (where the synagogue is). In her email to the congregation, Eva expresses her pride in being a seventh generation Jew in New Zealand. Eva's legacy comes from a long family and shul history in a small but close Jewish community. This pride in a Jewish legacy is an important part of how Jews have survived for 3500 years despite being a very tiny congregation surrounded by other people.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander carries the theme of legacy through the Haftorah and brings the lesson forward to the current situation for Jews in Israel and other danger spots. The Haftorah, from Yechezkel, uses the profound word *venikdashti* five times. This rare word, which means "I (Hashem) shall be sanctified," appears in Neviim and Ketubim only in Sefer Yechezkel. Chazal understand this word as the source for the commandment to sanctify God's name – including through human commitment as we publicly demonstrate our loyalty to Hashem and Torah values. The brave men and women of the IDF embody *venikdashti* by risking and far too often giving their lives to protect our people in Israel. Rabbi Brander dedicates his Devar Haftorah this week in memory of one such hero, Elchay Teharlev, z"l, killed by a terrorist while guarding the city of Ofra. May the day come soon when we no longer risk and lose lives of our brave young Israelis because of the hatred and violence of terrorists.

As we turn the secular calendar to a new year, we also come to a new month with Rosh Hodesh Shevat on Wednesday evening. This Rosh Hodesh is the yahrzeit of my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, our family Rabbi for nearly fifty years. Rabbi Cahan experienced anti-Semitism numerous times during his lifetime, most often when I was fortunate enough to escape such episodes. The explosion of anti-Semitism in the past 15 months would have horrified but not surprised him. I find myself missing him at least as much now as I did several years ago when he

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir**

**ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

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## **Haftarat Parshat Va'era – Returning our Hostages: Human Courage and the Sanctity of God**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \* © 5785 (2025)  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

*Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.*

*Rabbi Brander dedicates his Dvar Haftorah this week in memory of Elchay Teharlev, z"l, son of Rav Ohad Teharlev, Rosh Midreshet Lindenbaum, killed by a terrorist while guarding the city of Ofra (see below).*

In this week's reading, we encounter a profound word: "venikdashti" )'and I shall be sanctified'(. In Neviim and Ketubim, the word appears exclusively in the book of Yechezkel, with one of its five occurrences being in our Haftarah: "When I have gathered the House of Israel from the peoples among which they have been dispersed, and have shown Myself holy through them in the sight of the nations."

In every instance )20:41; 28:22; 28:25; 38:23; 39:27( the word carries the same meaning and context: God is sanctified 'through the eyes of the nations,' when the peoples of the world witness His intervention in history to redeem the Jewish people.

Indeed we live in a time that God's intervention is seen. Thousands of missiles have been fired on us in Israel with limited loss of life and possessions. Our soldiers share with their family and friends the overt miracles they have witnessed on the battlefield.

Yet there is one other reference to "venikdashti" found in the Torah itself. In Sefer Vayikra )22:32( we read, "You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the people of Israel — I am God who sanctifies you." Our Sages understand this verse as the source for the commandment, incumbent upon each and every one of us, to sanctify God's name. This sanctification occurs not just through divine acts of wonder, but through human commitment, as we publicly demonstrate our loyalty to God and Torah values. This ultimate form of sanctification often requires tremendous sacrifice, even the giving of one's life when compelled to do so. Rambam codifies this approach )Yesodei Hatorah 5:1( while also explaining in other places in the Mishneh Torah that we sanctify God's name through our daily actions that honor Him and the Torah.

Upon deeper examination, Yechezkel's five instances of "venikdashti" also encompass human courage and responsibility. As Rabbi David and his son Rabbi Hillel Altschuler explain that in our Haftarah, the word "venikdashti" refers to the sanctification of God through our own courageous actions; the miracles that we ourselves perform )Mezudot David Yechezkel 28:25(. The soul breathed into us by God enables us to be His partner, putting our actions on par with His miracles.

We have seen this through bereaved family members, injured soldiers and the hostages who demonstrate unbelievable resilience.

Today we witness this paradigm of divine intervention. I think of Rav Ohad Teharlev, Rosh Midreshet Lindenbaum, whose soldier son Elchay z"l was killed by a terrorist while guarding the city of Ofra. Now, in an almost unbearable turn of events, his son's murderer is being released as part of the hostage deal. Yet despite this profound personal loss, Rav Teharlev expresses genuine joy for the hostages' return. This heroism extends beyond the Teharlev family to dozens of other families who have learned that those who murdered their loved ones will be freed to secure the hostages release. They embody the highest form of "venikdashti" – putting aside their personal anguish for the sake of saving lives and unifying the people.

While we may be saddened by a world in which goodness and evil seem confused, where those with blood on their hands are exchanged for innocent hostages, these families show us what it truly means to sanctify God's name. They demonstrate that the sanctity of life and the unity of our people can transcend even the deepest personal pain. Their actions are no less divine than the miracles and wonders we have witnessed on the battlefield. In their courage, we see both paradigms of "venikdashti," Hashem's hand working through human sacrifice and dedication, and that is what I will be thinking about as I listen to the Haftarah this week.

Through these heroic acts – both divine and human – we pray for the ultimate sanctification of God's name: the wondrous redemption that will be witnessed by all nations, the return of all our hostages, the end of this war, and the cessation of all our trials and tribulations.

\* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact [ohrtorahstone@otsny.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsny.org) or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

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### Vaera: The Milkman

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2021 (5781)

*And G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him; "I am Hashem! I appeared to Avraham to Yitzchak and to Yaakov as Kel Shaddai, but with My name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them. Moreover, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojourning in which they sojourned. )Shemos: 2-4(*

Here we are in the Book of Shemos which literally means "names" and again it's all about names. Why are there different names for HASHEM? What difference does it make that HASHEM never let the Avos know about his name HASHEM? What's the great credit to the Avos that they only knew about the name Kel Shadai?

The Nefesh HaChaim explains that the various names of HASHEM describe different ways that we experience HASHEM. HASHEM is manifest to mankind as playing a variety of differing roles. Ultimately HASHEM is ONE, but HE shows up in a variety of ways.

I have a friend, Aaron that worked for a milk delivery business, way back. I remember when the truck would pull up in front of the house and he would come running up to the door we would say, "*The milkman is here!*" To the milk consumer he was as his function. He was the milkman.

IN the afternoon I would meet up with him in the Bais Medrash and we would learn together. Then he was my Charusa. . His new title as my study partner, again, is an expression of his new occupation. That was his well-deserved and correct title.

Later in life, he became fabulously successful in business. The world became aware of him, and once again his role changed visa vie a lot people. Then he became Aaron the entrepreneur or Aaron the philanthropist. His notoriety as a wealthy man earned him new titles and names amongst the masses.

Who he is in his private life, in his heart of hearts, no one can say. It's hard enough for me to know who I really am, let alone to begin to plumb the depths of another's psyche with any certainty.

Now we can apply the analogy in reverse. WHO HASHEM is beyond this world, in HIS essence, no one can possibly say! The world knows about HASHEM because of the great acts of history by the 10 plagues and the splitting of the sea and the revelation of Torah before an entire nation of 600,000 adult males between the ages of 20 and 60. Way before that though, HASHEM had a learning relationship with certain special people that distinguished themselves as good, decent, wholesome, and even holy men. Then there was the likes of Avraham that discovered HASHEM when he was unknown.

The name KEL SHADAI has a specific meaning. KEL means kindness. Reb Sadia Gaon said the world is a food world. HASHEM is constantly raining down and growing and developing and delivering food. We spell it out explicitly and aloud in our Bentching every time. *"He gives bread to all flesh because of His kindness, and His great goodness, constantly we are not lacking, and we will never lack food forever..."*

What's the Name SHADAI? The word DAI means enough! HASHEM delivers with precision. An adult can chew a steak, but a baby needs much softer foods. The perfect example of this, all of this, is the miraculous appearance of fountains of milk the minute a child is born. Suddenly he has a perfectly designed formula in exact measurements. The milk does not flood the child's mouth causing him to choke. As much as he needs that's how much he is provided with. An incredible arrangement!

That delivery system is called SHADAIM, related to word SHADAI. Now Avraham and the Avos can truly say they knew HASHEM when, when He was the milkman!

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5781-vaera/>

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### **Va'eira: Becoming a People of Faith**

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2015

Moshe tells the children of Israel that he is coming as God's messenger to take them out of the bondage of Egypt and to bring them to the land of Canaan. To Pharaoh, however, a different message is given: Send out the people for three days so that they can celebrate to God in the wilderness. It seems impossible that Pharaoh will ever willingly agree to permanently free the people, so a more reasonable request has to be made, allowing him to choose to do the right thing of his own free will. Hence, the stated purpose to Pharaoh is not freedom and possession of a land but merely a festival to God.

But there is more to it than that. For while it is clear why Pharaoh was not told of the goal to return to Canaan, it is unclear why the people were not told of the more religious goals of the Exodus. Our parasha is the first time that these goals are stated clearly:

*And I appeared unto Avraham, unto Yitzchak, and unto Yaakov... And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan... and I have remembered my covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians... And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and you shall know that I am the Lord your God... And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning*

*which I did swear to give it to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov; and I will give it you for a heritage: I am the Lord. )Shemot, 6:3-8(*

Consider all the points made in this passage: there is a covenant with the forefathers that continues now and that defines the relationship between God and the people; the people will know that their God exists and is their God; the people will be freed so that they will be able to be God's people in the land that is their inheritance from their forefathers and from God.

These are the lofty national-religious goals of the Exodus. But this is not what the people were originally told. If we look back to the original vision at the burning bush, the primary message is one of freedom from oppression and material well-being:

*"And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good and spacious land, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" )3:8(.* It is true that God tells Moshe that the people will worship at this mountain, and it is true that Moshe asks God how to respond to the people who will ask for God's name, and that God identifies Godself as the God of their fathers )3:12-16(. But the purpose of all this is to persuade the people that Moshe has indeed been sent by God; it is not to define a religious purpose for the Exodus. Thus, even the statement, *"the God of your forefathers has appeared to me,"* ends with, *"I will bring you out of the oppression of Egypt... to a land flowing with milk and honey" )3:16,17(.*

The emphasis on the freedom from slavery rather than some spiritual goal is understandable. Oppression and slavery are inherent evils, and the highest priority of freeing them is to relieve their suffering and eradicate these evils. This in itself is a spiritual mandate. As Rav Yisrael Salanter said, *"Yenems gashmius iz dein ruchnius"* – another person's physical needs are for you a religious mandate. So this must be the first stated goal of the exodus. But why is the next message not the religious one for the people – that this will be a fulfillment of the covenant and that they will come to live as God's people?

It seems that the people are not ready to hear this. As famously described by Abraham Maslow, we have a hierarchy of needs. When our most basic needs – food, shelter, and safety – are not being met, we cannot attend to any higher-level needs, such as those for love, belonging, esteem, self-actualization and self-transcendence, or the desire for a higher, spiritual purpose. The people were only prepared to hear the message about their material needs and desires. It is thus not surprising that, at this early stage, God is already telling Moshe that the people will despoil Egypt and leave laden with gold and silver )3:22-23(. This is a message that will resonate. The religious message could come later.

But this won't last. The focus on some future material success does not give the people the inner strength to withstand their current hardships, especially when things begin to get worse. As long as the promise is not realized, the immediacy of the current harsh reality will overshadow any promised future. And this is exactly what happens. Pharaoh increases the demands, the beatings increase, and the people attack Moshe. You have only made things worse, they say to him, so who needs you?

The solution to this problem lies in realizing that Maslow was not totally right. Even people in privation can focus on something beyond their physical needs, and it is often exactly this that gives them the resilience to withstand great hardships. This is the primary teaching of Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*: the key to persevering amidst even the most horrific of circumstances is not to focus on what one most immediately needs but to identify and immerse oneself in a higher purpose.

This is why Pharaoh increased the workload on the people – to ensure that they would not busy themselves with *"vain words"* )5:9(. If they are laboring ceaselessly, he reasoned, they won't have time to cultivate a vision that will feed and strengthen their spirit. He believed that the people were saying, *"Let us go sacrifice to our God"* )5:8(, that they desired not milk and honey, but God. It was this that was so threatening, for such a goal would fill the people with a sense of purpose, with ideas that could foment a rebellion and give them the fortitude to withstand any opposition. Popular rebellions only succeed when people are willing to lay their lives on the line, believing that they are fighting for something greater than themselves. Barring any Divine intervention, this was Pharaoh's greatest worry.

Pharaoh succeeded in keeping the people down. The people were now toiling endlessly. They had no time to think about any religious purpose, and in fact they had never been supplied with one in the first place. It is now, in our parasha, that there comes the attempt to do just that. Moshe is told to reveal to the people what this is all about. It is about covenant; it is about God; it is about being God's people in the Promised Land. But this spiritual vision also falls on deaf ears: "*And they did not listen to Moshe, for anguish of spirit and cruel bondage*" 6:9.

After all the years of enslavement and the resultant deadening of the human imagination and spirit, a religious vision was not something that the people were capable of. It is one thing to be free and then be enslaved. Such a person can hold onto or cultivate a sense of meaning and a sense of purpose. But to create this almost *ex nihilo* for those who were never in control of their time, their destiny, or any degree of self-directed purpose, is almost an impossible task.

The redemption from Egypt could not be a popular rebellion; it could not be a redemption from below. It could only be a redemption from above, from God, and also through Moshe, a person who did not grow up as a slave and who could truly possess and sustain this religious vision.

Moshe, for now, will have to turn his attention away from the people. From this point on his interactions will be solely with Pharaoh. It is only at the end of all the plagues, when the moment of redemption is almost upon them and they can begin to dream, that the people can be reengaged and begin to become an active part in their own redemption. It is then that they will take the paschal lamb and begin to imagine a future in the land of Israel, passing on their traditions and religious history to their children.

This will be a long process. There will still be much backsliding; the people will need to work constantly to sustain this higher purpose to withstand the privations of the desert. They will have to learn to focus on the promised land of Canaan and not on the fleshpots of the land of Egypt. They are about to begin a long and arduous journey, a journey to becoming a people of faith.

Shabbat Shalom!

\* Rosh HaYeshiva and President, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

From my archives

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## **Learning the Lessons of the Holocaust**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

[Editor's Note: The Institute for Jewish Ideas & Ideals is reprinting this article by Rabbi Marc Angel for International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Monday, January 27, 2025. Holocaust Memorial Day in 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi concentration camp complex. May we all remember the horrors of the Nazi killing machine – those who do not remember and learn from the past risk experiencing such horrors again in the future.]

The Holocaust exemplifies the very worst qualities of humanity. The ruthless cruelty and systematic murder of 6 million Jews took place under the aegis of Germany, thought to be one of the most advanced societies in the Western world. Millions were murdered in cold blood not only by Germans, but by accomplices in many lands throughout Europe and beyond.

How did so many human beings become torturers and murderers of innocent victims? How were blatantly false anti-Jewish stereotypes so readily believed by masses of people, including those who considered themselves to be religious?

When Jews – or any group – are dehumanized, then all humanity is on trial. Either we draw on our humane values and resist the haters and perpetrators; or we ourselves become accomplices to the crimes. Those who do nothing to resist evil are partners in the evil.

If the Holocaust teaches how inhumane people can be, it also sheds light on moral heroism – the heroism of Jews who resisted their enemies; the heroism of Jewish martyrs who died upholding their faith; the heroism of Christians who risked their own lives to save Jews; the heroism of those who spoke out and acted against Nazism and all the evil it represents.

The Jewish motto after the Holocaust is "Never Again." We won't allow this to happen to us again. But the motto goes beyond Jews. It calls on all human beings of all races, religions and nationalities to spurn the ideology of Nazism, to work for a humane and compassionate world, to see each other as fellow human beings and not as stereotypes.

The Holocaust shows how low humanity can sink. It is an eternal warning to all people to promote love, tolerance, mutual respect. Once the humane values are compromised, tragedy ensues. It's not just about Jews; it's about all humanity. Wake up! See what is at stake! Never again means never again...ever!

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. This article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel originally appeared in the Inaugural Issue (January 2024) of *Lingap*, the official publication of Sanlingap, Inc., in the Philippines. The editor-in-chief of this publication is Carlos Cristobal.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3204> .

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### Abraham Joshua Heschel: An Appreciation

By Dr. Susannah Heschel \*

[Ed. Note: I am reprinting this appreciation to help remember International Holocaust Remembrance Day.]

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 *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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

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## **Greatness Where Least Expected: Thoughts for Parashat Va'era**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

*"Amram took into his [household] as wife his father's sister Yocheved, and she bore him Aaron and Moses" (Shemot 6:20).*

Amram and Yocheved were Israelite slaves; they lacked wealth, social status, or political influence. Yet, this seemingly undistinguished couple gave birth to Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Their children were among the most outstanding figures in human history.

Moses became the greatest prophet and religious leader. Aaron was Moses's partner in confronting Pharaoh and working for the redemption of the Israelites; Aaron went on to become high priest. Miriam was gifted with prophecy and was a significant leader of the people.

We might have expected that these illustrious siblings would have had an impressive background. Such heroic figures might more naturally have arisen among nobles and parents of great distinction. But the Torah specifies: they were children of slaves.

The Bible often describes outstanding leaders, prophets and teachers as having derived from humble beginnings. The lesson: greatness is not inherited; it is not the preserve of a royal class; it cannot be purchased. Each individual, regardless of background, has the possibility of rising to great heights.

The Talmud (Nedarim 81a) instructs: *"pay attention to the children of the poor, for from them the Torah will emerge."* Many of the most remarkable scholars and teachers of our people came from poor, uninfluential families. They rose to greatness by dint of their own strivings. They lacked the seeming advantages of wealth and family distinction; but they succeeded eminently.

*"Humble beginnings"* may be difficult in some ways; but they may also be blessings in other ways. Parents who are poor in finances and status may be rich in faith, wisdom, and lovingkindness. They may not have been able to give their children an abundance of material assets, but they conveyed wonderful values, idealism, love of learning, spiritual dignity.

Even the least affluent and influential parents can raise outstanding children. Even children born without great material advantages can rise to preeminence.

The Torah tradition teaches us that greatness can emerge where least expected.

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

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## Vaeira -- The Art of Con-Control

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

*Dedicated in Memory of Mr. David Rhine Sholomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l.*

*May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel*

Paroh was in a difficult place. Although he was playing tough, he had clearly been bested. The Jewish G-d had turned the Egyptian god, the Nile, into blood, destroying the economy. Now, frogs were croaking throughout the land. The intensity of the croaking was causing mental anguish, and Paroh summoned Moshe asking him to remove the plague. In what looks like a unique gesture of generosity, Moshe asked Paroh, *“When would you like the plague removed?”* Paroh responded, *“Tomorrow.”* Moshe agreed and asked Hashem to end the plague on the next day.

The commentaries wonder why Paroh didn’t ask for the plague to be removed immediately. With such an intense plague upon him, why didn’t Paroh ask for immediate relief?

When we consider how the plague began, we notice something remarkable. The plague of frogs began in the singular (frog) and then became frogs. This prompts the Talmud (Sanhedrin 67) to say that initially only one frog arose. But when the Egyptians hit it, it multiplied. The more they hit the frogs, the more they multiplied, until eventually, a full-blown plague was the result.

The commentaries wonder why the Egyptians kept hitting the frog, if that increased the affliction. The answer seems to be that the Egyptians could not hold themselves back, even for their own benefit. This was a plague declared by Moshe. They would fight it, even to their detriment, because they wanted to be in control.

Similarly, **Paroh didn’t ask for immediate relief because he wanted to be in control.** Although he hadn’t been able to stop the plague from coming, he was determined to control when it left, even to his detriment. *“Tomorrow,”* Paroh says. Even though as a result his country would endure another day of torment. [emphasis added]

One of the greatest life skills a person can develop is to realize that we are not in control. Fighting some old battle with great insistence doesn’t work. Instead, we would be wise to look to the future and decide what course is beneficial as we move forward.

The Talmud relates that Shimon HoAmsuni made it his life’s work to infer laws from the smallest word in the Torah, the word “es.” At one point he was challenged to explain the reason for the word “es” in a certain verse. So, the Talmud records, he stopped. When he felt he was mistaken he did not keep insisting and justifying. He said, *“I did right by following my understanding until now and explaining each word ‘es.’ Now I will do right by stopping, because I realize I was mistaken.”*

Rabbi A. J. Twerski z.l. was fond of relating the story of a wagon driver who was set in his ways and needed to be in control. Although there were various ways to get to the next town, he always chose to take the route with the bumps and ditches, insisting that all would be well. Invariably, the wagon would hit a bump, and the wagon wheel would break off. He was regularly seen next to his disabled wagon muttering, *“I can’t figure out why this always seems to happen to me.”*

This is a skill that can be implemented in our relationships. Husband and wife, for example, may have different positions on a given issue. They should be encouraged to discuss the issue passionately and thoroughly from their perspectives. Eventually it will be time for them to make a decision. **By choosing not to win or to be in control, it is possible to**

**arrive at a decision that truly is the best way to move forward.** What is important is to set a tone of altruism. In this way the couple will be choosing, *“What is best for US.”* [emphasis added]

To understand the dynamic of forward thinking instead of winning, consider the following:

Imagine yourself driving on a two-lane road, cruising along nicely. Suddenly, without warning, a slow-moving car in the next lane switches lanes into yours and remains turtling in front of you. You consider changing lanes to pass this fellow who didn't even have the decency to use a blinker before changing lanes, but traffic is too heavy to responsibly switch lanes. So, you remain behind the turtle as you both approach a traffic light.

As the light turns yellow then red, there is a piece of you that might yearn for him to get stuck with you on this side of the traffic light. It seems so unfair, as you think about what just happened, that he should get through and you should have to wait. There might even be a tinge of jealousy that crops up as you think that he took your spot, and you should have been the one to get through the light, not him. Yet, when you activate forward thinking, it is certainly better that he gets through the light and inches forward on his merry way. This way, when you start driving again you will be able to drive at a normal speed. Living in the unfair situation of the past isn't helpful. There is no need to gain control or win, to your own detriment. Better that he should get through the light so that you can then drive at a normal pace without being encumbered.

When Moshe asked Paroh, *“When would you like the plague removed?”* he wasn't just making a generous offer that Paroh pick the time. Moshe was inviting Paroh, for Paroh's own benefit, to step out of the grandiose image he had of himself and recognize that G-d is in control. Instead of submitting humbly and answering, *“As soon as possible,”* Paroh continued to try to dictate the time, even to his own detriment.

The story is recorded in Torah, not because of Paroh, but as a guide to us all. When confronted in relationships, we can insist we are right and insist on control. Or we can choose to look forward, with a desire to be successful and happy. Let us learn a lesson from Paroh. Forward thinking provides a better and happier result.

With heartfelt blessings 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](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.

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### **When It's Wrong to Fear G-d**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \* (© 2022)

Pharaoh is a powerful illustration of the dangers of arrogance and what pride can do to a person. Over the course of a year, he is given numerous opportunities to acknowledge the Creator and allow the Jewish people to leave. He belligerently refuses and watches as his entire empire is brought to its knees. Their plagues start with the Nile, one of their gods, turning it to blood. Their entire belief system is shattered. Their economy and infrastructure are collapsing. By the eighth plague, Pharaoh's advisors tell him to let the Jews go because Egypt is already lost. Time and again Pharaoh begins to bend and says he will let the Jews go, only to renege on his word as soon as the plague ends. After the tenth plague, when afraid for his life, he finally lets the Jews go. Yet only a few days later he chases after them to bring them back, taking the remnants of his army with him. As he watches the miraculous Splitting of the Sea, he decides to send his army into the sea assuming somehow that the phenomenon will continue and that they will be safe in the sea. At this point, Egypt is fully decimated. There is not one soldier left. The crops, infrastructure and economy were already shattered. Pharaoh maintained his arrogance despite the risk and suffered total destruction.

Yet, we find that even this arrogant and prideful individual was truly moved at one point during the plagues. During the plague of hail, Pharaoh calls Moshe and Aharon and says *“I have sinned this time, G-d is the righteous one and I and my people are the wicked ones. Pray to G-d and there has been enough sounds of G-d and hail and I will send you and you will no longer wait.”* (Shemos 9:27-28) Although, we know it was short lived, it would seem for this brief moment, Pharaoh acknowledged G-d. For this moment, he understood.

Surprisingly, it was specifically at this point that Moshe addresses Pharaoh's habit of changing his mind, saying to Pharaoh, *“I know that you do not yet fear G-d.”* (Shemos 9:30) Rash”i explains that Moshe was telling Pharaoh that he was fully expecting Pharaoh to change his mind as soon as the plague ended. Yet, how could Moshe say that Pharaoh did not fear G-d now? While we know that Pharaoh did indeed strengthen himself and harden his heart, he was only able to make himself callous once the plague had ended, *“and Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and sounds had stopped and he continued to sin and he hardened his heart, he and his servants.”* (Shemos 9:34) Yet, so long as the hail continued to bombard Egypt, even Pharaoh could not help but recognize G-d. He had even gone so far as to clearly express his repentance, acknowledging that G-d is righteous and he and his entire nation are wicked. Why is Moshe saying that his statement is not fear of G-d?

In *The Ways of the Righteous*, in the chapter on fear of Heaven, he explains that there are two different types of fear of G-d. One type is when one is afraid of punishment or afraid of not receiving reward. This type of fear, he explains, is considered service of G-d, but it is not the fear of G-d which we speak of. The second type of fear is that one is afraid of G-d Himself, not just of G-d's power. He is afraid of what G-d will think of him. This begins with an understanding of G-d's omnipotence and power. When we are in the presence of greatness, we naturally desire to connect with that greatness. As one recognizes that G-d is the Creator and Sustainer of all, and that the laws of science are simply that which G-d has willed to be, one becomes overwhelmed by G-d's greatness. The more one feels that sense, the more one wants to come close to G-d.

Moshe understood that Pharaoh was only afraid of G-d's punishments, but he had no recognition or appreciation of G-d. Moshe was saying to Pharaoh, *“You do not yet fear from before G-d.”* You only fear punishment – that is not fear of G-d. This is not what G-d wants from you. G-d does not want us to serve him out of submission. Rather, he wants us to recognize His greatness, and that despite our relative insignificance, we are nonetheless important to Him. This is what we call fear of G-d – when we are concerned about G-d.

\* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and associated with the Savannah Kollel.

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## Vaera – The Names of God

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

If you were paying attention as we were reading Genesis, you will probably be perplexed by the opening statement of this week's Parasha. And God (E-lokim) spoke to Moses and told him: I am Hashem, I have appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as Kel Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by my name Hashem. How can that be possible? All through Genesis, God speaks to the patriarchs using the Tetragrammaton, the Ineffable Name, the Name written with the four quiet, almost mute letters Y, H, V and H but pronounced Hashem, the Master. How can He tell Moses now that he never revealed this name to the patriarchs?

To answer that question we must consider concept of names in the Bible. A name connotes an inner quality, a special strength or character trait, as can be seen when Adam is asked to name all living creatures. It is not unlike marketers today running complex programs to try and find the best name for new medicines or other products. Then there is also the name as a sensor of one's status and relationships with family and friends, as is the case with Yishmael. When he is

driven away by Sarah, the Torah calls him, in one short paragraph, by four different names: the maid servant's son, Abraham's son, the lad and the child. So when God speaks about the names He uses, it is about a certain quality they stand for. The meaning here, therefore, is not that the patriarchs were unfamiliar with the name, but rather that the special characteristic of the name Hashem has not yet been witnessed or understood by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What is the special characteristic of "Hashem" then? The name Y-H-V-H is derived from the Hebrew root H.Y.H or H.V.H. - to be, and contains all tenses of the verb, past, present and future. This name symbolizes the eternity of God, the God of history. For the patriarchs the name Kel-Shaddai was enough, and that is exactly its meaning: that which is sufficient. When the patriarchs were chosen, they were promised that their immediate descendants will grow to be a populous, prosperous nation, but nothing more than that. There is a covenant between God and the patriarchs, but it is quite unilateral – I shall be your God, without the so familiar reciprocation "and you shall be my nation." For the patriarchs, it was a hard enough task to break ranks with and depart from the surrounding, pagan world to trail blaze a new monotheistic path. They were not ready yet to be handed the greater mission that extends to the End of Days, to that ideal future where all humanity lives in peace and harmony. Theirs, as Nachamides aptly puts it, was the Book of Individuals, but it was with Moses, the passionate dedicated freedom fighter, that the Book of the Nation, Exodus, starts. It is the nation transformed from a group of desolate, spirit broken individuals into a Kingdom of Priests, in the sense of teachers, guides, who know the name of God that will accompany the Israelites throughout history.

The Israelites had to internalize the concept of history. They had to learn and understand the past in order to live the present the best possible and bring the whole world into a better future. The Jewish People never forget. We remember the Holocaust, which just happened, the expulsion from Spain, 517 years ago, and the destruction of the Temple, 1937 years ago. But we are not stuck in the past, we don't dwell there and let the terrors of the past haunt us and stifle our quest for truth and justice, because we also remember the Giving of the Law and the Golden Age in Spain and all the wonderful achievements of our brethren throughout the ages, achievements made possible thanks to that historical perspective introduced by God to Moses in the name Hashem, and reiterated towards the end of the Torah )Deut. 32:7(: Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past. Or in the words of Paul Johnson, the renowned historian, in his excellent book *The History of the Jews* )p. 120(:

*"They knew they were a special people who had not simply evolved from an unrecorded past, but had been brought into existence by a specific series of Divine acts. They saw it as their collective business to determine, record, comment and reflect upon these acts. No other people has ever shown, particularly at that remote time, so strong a compulsion to explore their origin. The Jews developed the power to write terse and dramatic historical narrative half a millennium before the Greeks, and because they constantly added to their historical records, they developed a deep sense of historical perspective that the Greeks never possessed. Greek texts, from Homer onwards, were guides to virtue, decorum and modes of thought; but the Hebrew texts had a marked tendency to become plans for action."*

Shabbat Shalom.

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

**Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.**

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## **Va'era: Building a Legacy in a Small Jewish Community**

By Rabbi Moshe Rube \*

This week I travelled to Wanaka to officiate at my third wedding as a rabbi. A lovely couple from Australia sought to get married under the magnificent gaze of the mountains around Lake Wanaka.

Apparently, weddings are big business in Wanaka. So many couples want to start their marital journey in this beautiful part of the world. Perhaps theirs is a belief that foundations matter. If the marriage starts in such a picturesque and idyllic place, their love story has so much more of a chance at being happy and long lasting. Nothing is foolproof of course, but such a mountainous foundation may help.

For a similar reason, God sends 10 plagues to Egypt to redeem the Jews instead of just taking them out immediately. God explicitly says that the purpose of the plagues is so His wonders may be known throughout the world -- to the Egyptians, the Jews, and to all other nations. In other words, it was important to God that the formation of the Jewish nation start with wonders and miracles -- a grand spectacle that surpassed anything the world had ever seen. God succeeded, as remembering the Exodus from Egypt serves as the foundational story of the Jewish people -- i.e. the marriage between God and Israel.

This week we also celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of Eva Gluckman, a seventh generation Jewish young woman from New Zealand. It is our blessing to you, Eva, that this wonderful Friday night celebration serve as a solid foundation for your journey into Jewish adulthood. You have worked so hard to reach this point, and we are confident you will grow from strength to strength and accomplish all you set your mind out to do. May the memories of this night and all the Jewish learning you've done thus far serve you well as you continue to write your story.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera (Auckland), New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel (Birmingham, AL).

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### **Rav Kook Torah**

#### **Va'era: 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://ravkooktorah.org/VAERA61.htm>

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### **Vaera: Overcoming Setbacks (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 FOR VAERA**

- ]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://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/overcoming-setbacks/>

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#### **Of Mortals and Superheroes**

By Yossy Goldman © Chabad 5785

In Parshat Va'era,<sup>1</sup> the Torah interrupts the storyline of the Egyptian bondage and G d's promise of redemption and begins enumerating the genealogy of the 12 tribes. It starts with Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, and his children, proceeds to the brothers born immediately after him, Simeon and Levi, and their descendants. When it reaches Moses and Aaron, the great-grandchildren of Levi, suddenly the genealogical record stops. It never moves on to the fourth of Jacob's sons, Judah.

## Why?

Some, like Rashi,<sup>2</sup> reason that the Torah only wanted to give us the ancestry of Moses and Aaron, the descendants of Levi, but started from the beginning with the eldest son, Reuben. Rashi also suggests that since Jacob had previously chastised Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, this was an attempt to sort of make it up to them and demonstrate their worthiness.

Why list Moses and Aaron's genealogy in the first place? To remind us that as great as they were, they were still only human beings after all.

One could certainly be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Splitting the sea was no Purim prank. Receiving the Ten Commandments from G d on the mountain was no mere Cecil B. DeMille production. To have believed that Moses was a celestial being would not have been implausible.

But no, says the Torah. Moses and Aaron were both sons of Amram and Yocheved. Amram was the son of Kehat, who was the son of Levi, so Moses was the great grandson of Levi, son of Jacob. A mortal man born of mortal man and woman. A human being of flesh and blood, just like you and me.

They were neither gods nor demi-gods, and yet look at what incredible greatness they achieved!

Now, while we should not be suffering any delusions of grandeur and think we are the next Moses or Aaron, we are encouraged to learn from their shining examples and aspire higher. Look how much they accomplished despite their very human shortcomings!

Can I emulate Moses, the greatest prophet that ever lived? Who am I? If I thought myself equal to Moses, I would be either supremely arrogant or completely nuts. And yet, there is an important message here: Do not sell yourself short. Never underestimate your own human potential or anyone else's for that matter. The titans of the Torah were human beings and so are we.

The classic book of Tanya sets out to explain how reaching our Jewish potential is eminently doable. Being a good Jew is actually "*very near to you.*"<sup>3</sup> The author and founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, shows us that while we all have our struggles and our demons, we also have the G d-given strength to overcome them. Yes, we can reach for the sky. Yes, we can banish every improper thought from our minds the minute it tries to enter. We do, in fact, have the power to resist every urge or temptation. It is a philosophy predicated on a belief that we are all innately good and filled with enormous potential for doing good. Yes, we can aspire higher.

Our long-awaited Redeemer is also going to be a human born of father and mother. He is called "*son of David*" and must be a descendant of King David, literally.

Moses and Aaron were heroic leaders, but they were not angels or superhuman. Without losing perspective or common sense, we should still trust ourselves to go for broke and achieve the "*impossible.*"

Please G d, we will.

## FOOTNOTES:

1. Exodus 1:6.
2. Exodus 1:7.
3. Exodus 1:8.
4. Exodus 3:13-14.

5. *Sichot Kodesh*, 5725 Pg. 444.

6. *Talmud Megilah* 14a.

\* Life Rabbi Emeritus **of the** Sydenham Shul in Johannesburg, South Africa and president of the South African Rabbinical Association.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/5776629/jewish/Of-Mortals-and-Superheroes.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5776629/jewish/Of-Mortals-and-Superheroes.htm)

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## Va'eira: Stages of Freedom

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

### Stages of Freedom

*"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am G-d; I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians, save you from their servitude, and redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great chastisements. I will take you to Myself as a nation, and I will be your G-d. You will know that I am G-d, your G-d, who is freeing you from the burdens of the Egyptians.'" (Ex. 6:6)*

The four verbs in this passage allude to four ascending levels in our relationship with G-d:

- I will free you: This first level refers to shunning evil. By shunning evil, we become free, unencumbered by its oppressive grip on us.
- I will save you from their servitude: This second level refers to doing good. By actively engaging in good deeds, we are saved from backsliding into enslavement to evil.
- I will redeem you: This third level refers to studying the Torah, since the Torah is the means by which we access G-d's infinity even while in this finite world, and are thereby redeemed from the limitations of nature.
- I will take you to Myself: This fourth and highest level refers to clinging to G-d Himself, whose essence transcends all categorization, both finite and infinite.

— from *Daily Wisdom* 3

\* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parshat Va'eira from our *Daily Wisdom* Vol. 3 by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

May G-d grant strength and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

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**Covenant and Conversation**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l**

**The Birth of History**

The parsha of Vaera begins with some fateful words. It would not be too much to say that they changed the course of history, because they changed the way people thought about history. In fact, they gave birth to the very idea of history. Listen to the words: God said to Moses, “I am Hashem. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as Kel Shakkai, but by My name ‘Hashem’ I did not make Myself fully known to them. Ex. 6:2-3

What exactly does this mean? As Rashi points out, it does not mean that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah did not know God by the name Hashem. To the contrary, God’s first words to Abraham, “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house,” were said using the name Hashem.

It even says, just a few verses later (Gen. 12:7), Vayera Hashem el Avram: “Hashem appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’” So God had appeared to Avram as Hashem. And in the very next verse it says that Avram built an altar and “He called on the name of Hashem” (Gen. 12:8). So Avram himself knew the name and had used it.

Yet it is clear from what God says to Moses that something new is about to happen, a Divine revelation of a kind that had never happened before, something that no one, not even the people closest to God, has yet seen. What was it?

The answer is that through Bereishit, God is the God of Creation, the God of nature, the aspect of God we call, with different nuances but the same overall sense, Elokim, or Kel Shakkai, or even Koneh shamayim va’aretz, Creator of heaven and earth.

Now, in a sense, that aspect of God was known to everyone in the ancient world. It’s just that they did not see nature as the work of one God but of many: the god of the sun, the god of the rain, the goddesses of the sea and the earth, the vast pantheon of forces responsible for harvests, fertility, storms, droughts, and so on.

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There were profound differences between the gods of polytheism and myth and the one God of Abraham, but they operated, as it were, in the same territory, the same ballpark.

The aspect of God that appears in the days of Moses and the Israelites is radically different, and it’s only because we are so used to the story that we find it hard to see how radical it was.

For the first time in history God was about to get involved in history, not through natural disasters like the Flood, but by direct interaction with the people who shape history. God was about to appear as the force that shapes the destiny of nations. He was about to do something no one had ever heard of before: bring an entire nation from slavery and servitude, persuade them to follow Him into the desert, and eventually to the Promised Land, and there build a new kind of society, based not on power but on justice, welfare, respect for the dignity of the human person and on collective responsibility for the rule of law.

God was about to initiate a new kind of drama and a new concept of time. According to many of the world’s greatest historians, Arnaldo Momigliano, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, J. H. Plumb, Eric Voegelin, and the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, this was the moment when history was born.

Until then, the basic human drama was struggling to maintain order against the ever-present threats of chaos, whether through natural disasters, foreign conquest, or internal power struggles. Success meant maintaining the status quo. In fact, religion in the ancient world was intensely conservative. It was about teaching people the inevitability of the status quo. Time was an arena in which nothing fundamentally changed.

And now God appears to Moses and tells him that something utterly new is about to occur, something the patriarchs knew about in theory but had never lived to see in practise. A new nation. A new kind of faith. A new kind of political order. A new type of society. God was about to enter history and set the West on a trajectory that no human beings had ever contemplated before.

Time was no longer going simply to be what Plato beautifully described as the moving image of eternity. It was going to become the

stage on which God and humanity would journey together toward the day when all human beings – regardless of class, colour, creed, or culture – would achieve their full dignity as the image and likeness of God. Religion was about to become not a conservative force but an evolutionary and even revolutionary one.

Think about this: Long before the West, the Chinese had invented ink, paper, printing, porcelain manufacture, the compass, gunpowder, and many other technologies. But they failed to develop a scientific revolution, an industrial revolution, a market economy, and a free society. Why did they get so far and then stop? The historian Christopher Dawson argued that it was the religion of the West that made the difference. Alone among the civilisations of the world, Europe “has been continually shaken and transformed by an energy of spiritual unrest.” He attributed this to the fact that “its religious ideal has not been the worship of timeless and changeless perfection but a spirit that strives to incorporate itself in humanity and to change the world.”[1]

To change the world. That is the key phrase. The idea that – together with God – we can change the world, that we can make history, not just be made by it, this idea was born when God told Moses that he and his contemporaries were about to see an aspect of God no one had ever seen before.

I still find that a spine-tingling moment when, each year, we read Vaera and recall the moment history was born, the moment God entered history and taught us for all time that slavery, oppression, injustice, are not written into the fabric of the cosmos, engraved into the human condition. Things can be different because we can be different, because God has shown us how.

[1] Christopher Dawson, Religion and the Rise of Western Culture, New York: Doubleday, 1991, p. 15.

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## Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

### Redemption as a Universal Call to Freedom

"Therefore say to the children of Israel, 'I am the Lord. I shall take you out from under the sufferings of Egypt, I shall save you from their toil, I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm, I shall take you to Me for a nation, and I shall bring you to the land...'" (Exodus 6:4)

With these "four expressions of redemption" (in bold above), the book of Exodus emerges as the biblical book of redemption; indeed, the very Hebrew meaning of the name Moshe (Moses) literally means "the one who draws forth", the one who takes out, the one who frees from slavery within the context of Egyptian enslavement of the Hebrews. And so, when the Mishna begins to describe the order of the annual Passover Seder, we find the imperative, "And no one may drink less than the prescribed four cups of wine, even if they must take from the community charity kitchen," with Rashi explaining the source: "Corresponding to the four languages of redemption regarding the exile of Egypt... in the portion of Va'era" (Pesachim, Mishna 10, 1, 99b, Rashi ad loc.).

The famed halakhic authority and arbiter of the last century, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein of blessed memory, even initially requires four cups of wine rather than grape juice. This is because wine actually makes the individual feel "free" physiologically – and the four cups of wine at the Seder are not only for the sake of sanctity, memory and joy (as is the case with ordinary Kiddush on the Sabbath and usual festivals) but are also for the sake of freedom!

But what is the precise nature of the freedom that we are celebrating on Passover in general, and at the Seder in particular? Conventional traditional wisdom would maintain that it is the freedom of the Hebrews, the special relationship between God and Israel which caused the Almighty to step into history, as it were, and free the children of Israel from their servitude under Pharaoh. And it is from this perspective that the great universalist philosopher Maimonides is generally associated with the biblical book of Genesis – the book he most usually cites as his proof-texts for the views he offers in his Guide for the Perplexed – whereas the more nationalist philosopher Yehudah HaLevi is more closely identified with the biblical book of Exodus – the book most widely drawn upon in HaLevi's Kuzari.

However, I would insist that such a distinction does not do proper justice to the biblical message. Moses' mission, and God's miraculous freeing of the Hebrew slaves, was never meant for Israel alone. Indeed, if the Almighty had merely desired to redeem Israel because of His special relationship with them,

He could have simply airlifted the Israelites from Egypt without having to upset all of nature with the ten cataclysmic and fantastic plagues, and then with the sensational splitting of the Yam Suf (Reed Sea). The Almighty was rather attempting to teach a crucial lesson to Pharaoh, and to all subsequent despotic and totalitarian rulers in world history: slavery is a rank evil. No human being has the power to lord it over another human being. Every human being is created in the divine image, and therefore every human being has the inalienable right to be free!

It is largely from this perspective that the book of Exodus emerges from, and is based upon, the book of Genesis. You will remember that the Sabbath day, the seventh day wherein all manner of physical work is forbidden and in which the human being has the ability to exercise his existential freedom under God, has two distinct but intertwined biblical significances: first, the Lord Creator because "in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the seas and everything which is in them, and rested on the Sabbath day.

Therefore, the Lord blessed the seventh day and sanctified it" (Exodus 20:11); and second, the Lord Redeemer: "You shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God took you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; therefore did the Lord your God command you to make the Sabbath day," (Deuteronomy 5:16).

Clearly, the second reason emanates from the first: the God who created every individual in His own divine image decries and abhors the enslavement of one human image of the divine over another human image of the divine. Every human being has the right to be free. Hence the second Decalogue includes the additional message of the Sabbath: "In order that your [gentile] manservant and your [gentile] maidservant may rest like you" (Deuteronomy 5:14).

A fascinating support to this universal message of the Exodus may be found in the Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 10, 1), where the source for the four cups of freedom wine is not traced to the four expressions of redemption in the Torah portion of Va'era, but rather to the four instances of the word "goblet" in the dream of the butler that was interpreted by Joseph:

"In my dream, behold a vine was before me...and the goblet of Pharaoh was in my hand, and I took the grapes, and I squeezed them into the goblet of Pharaoh, and I gave the goblet into the hand of Pharaoh...And Joseph said, 'In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place the goblet of Pharaoh into his hand as you did before when you were his butler...'" (Genesis 40:9, 11, 13)

### Likutei Divrei Torah

Now the butler is an Egyptian, who was arbitrarily and unfairly imprisoned by Pharaoh; his dream portends his freedom from enslavement by an unjust despot. I believe that the Jerusalem Talmud – in making this passage from the end of the book of Genesis the source for the four cups of freedom wine at the Passover Seder rather than the passage from Va'era – is emphasizing the universal message of freedom for all of humanity rather than merely parochial freedom for Israel. In the interdependent global village in which we now live, when the ideal of freedom and world peace is so cardinal, when life-preserving democracy is locked in battle against suicide-bombing, fundamentalist terrorists for world hegemony, this interpretation of the Exodus has never been so vital!

### Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

#### Reconsidering Long Held Beliefs Made Moshe

I am well aware that this week is Parshas Vaera, and therefore I really should speak about Parshas Vaera. I am also very aware that last week for Parshas Shemos, I said a pshat in the very same pasuk that I will now focus on again, but on Friday morning I listened to a shiur from the Tolner Rebbe that he had given the previous Thursday night. The Tolner Rebbe has a whole different approach to the same pasuk. I think it is a brilliant mehalech, and I think the message that he takes out of this is a very important message.

In addition, the parshios of Shemos, Vaera, Bo and Beshalach are the parshios of Yetzias Mitzraim. I always consider them one entity, so therefore it is legitimate for me to speak about Parshas Shemos again this week.

The pasuk says, "And the Angel of Hashem appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the thorn bush. He saw and behold! The bush was burning in the fire but the bush was not consumed. Moshe thought, 'Let me turn aside now and see this great sight – why will the bush not be burned?' Hashem saw that he turned aside to see, and G-d called out to him from amid the bush and said, 'Moshe, Moshe,' and he replied, 'Here I am!'" (Shemos 3:2-4)

This is a seminal moment in Jewish history – the beginning of Moshe Rabbeinu's career. Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest of all nevi'im (prophets) and this is the first time that Hashem speaks to him. Why does Hashem speak to him? It is because "He saw that Moshe turned aside to see."

The Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim asks four questions: Rashi, on the words "asura nah" (Let me turn aside now) writes: "asura m'kan l'hiskarev sham" (I will turn from here to approach there.) Is this a kind of elaboration we need Rashi to provide? Why does Rashi

need to provide this obvious inference, which really adds nothing to our understanding of these words?

The whole expression in the pasuk “And Moshe said, ‘Let me turn aside now’ to investigate” – only indicates that Moshe was talking to himself. Why is it important for us to know that Moshe had this conversation with himself before approaching to check it out?

The word *nah* in the expression *asura nah* indicates a *bakasha* (request). It is as if Moshe is saying (to himself), “Please, let me check this out.” Moshe is not asking anyone else to do him a favor here, so why does Moshe use the word *please* (*nah*) in this sentence?

Finally, the pasuk says “And Hashem saw that Moshe turned to investigate.” What is the import of this statement? Obviously, this strange incident merited investigation. People watch fire scenes even when they do consume because watching a burning fire is an interesting spectacle. Certainly, a miraculous fire that did not consume is worth checking out. The pasuk appears to say that the fact that Moshe went to check out the Burning Bush was the factor that motivated the Ribono shel Olam to speak to him. What is that all about?

In order to understand the answer given to these questions by the Tolner Rebbe, we need to know a little bit about the history of Moshe Rabbeinu: Going back a bit in time, Moshe went out and saw an Egyptian beating a Jew, one of Moshe’s brethren. Moshe looked around, saw that no one was watching and he killed the Egyptian. The next day, Moshe encountered two Jews fighting with each other. He said to the attacker, “Why are you beating a fellow Jew?” The man answered, “Who made you the boss around here? Do you intend to kill me like you killed the Egyptian (yesterday)?”

Moshe became afraid and said, “Behold, the matter is now known!” (Shemos 2:14) Rashi interprets: Moshe feared that if there could be such wicked people in Klal Yisroel that they threaten me that I will be reported to the authorities for saving a fellow Jew from violence, then they are not worthy of being redeemed. They speak *Lashon HaRah* (slander) and they beat each other up so they are unworthy of G-d’s redemption. Rashi explains the expression “achein, noda ha’davar” (behold, the matter is now known): I now understand the matter that I had long been wondering about: Why are Jews suffering in exile all these years? Now I get it! I see that they deserve it!

Rabbeinu Ephraim al haTorah, who was an early commentary, makes this point in an even stronger fashion: Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand why Klal Yisroel should not be destroyed for being so contentious and slanderous vis-a-vis one another. According to Rabbeinu Ephraim, after witnessing these

incidents, Moshe came to the conclusion that not only would Bnei Yisroel remain in Mitzraim and not come out, but that they would ultimately disappear.

Now, unlike the impression we get from a simple reading of the opening chapters of Sefer Shemos, Moshe did not flee to Midyan directly after killing this Egyptian. The Ramban writes that this incident of Moshe going out and killing the Egyptian took place when he was just twelve years old, or slightly older. When Moshe Rabbeinu came before Pharaoh, he was already eighty years old. What happened to those sixty-plus years in between, from the time he was twelve until the time he was eighty?

Rabbeinu Tam writes in his *Sefer haYashar* that Moshe ran to Eretz Cush (Ethiopia) in between, and stayed there for sixty years. Then, he went to Midyan, and that is where we pick up the story. For all that time, Moshe has nothing to do with Klal Yisroel. This matter of “He went out to his brethren and saw their suffering...” (Shemos 2:11) seemed to be merely a passing moment of concern. Then, for the next sixty-plus years, “It is not my problem!” Is this the Moshe Rabbeinu who is so concerned about the fate of his fellow man?

The explanation is that Moshe had concluded (as Rashi and Rabbeinu Ephraim mentioned) that Bnei Yisroel were doomed! His interaction with those two Jews that second day convinced him that the Jews were not worthy of redemption. That is why he could stay away for so much time with the firm belief that the Jews would never get out of Mitzraim.

Moshe came to Midyan and then saw the Burning Bush. He saw that it was not being consumed. This was a miraculous event. There was a message over here. Klal Yisroel are like this thorn bush. Anyone who starts up with them is going to suffer! Hashem was sending Moshe a message via this miraculous sight: Against all expectations to the contrary, a thorn bush, representing the Jewish people, was not being consumed. Suddenly, Moshe Rabbeinu has an epiphany. Moshe says: Do you know what? Maybe, I was wrong! Maybe, my operating assumption for the past sixty-plus years that Klal Yisroel will never get out of Mitzraim was incorrect.

It is not easy for a person to change a deeply ingrained belief or assumption that has guided his life for the last twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years! Moshe Rabbeinu was confronted with a challenge here that is very difficult for human beings to face. Should I change my mind? It is possible that I was wrong all these years?

Moshe Rabbeinu said to himself “I will turn aside and investigate” (Asura nah v’er’eh).

### Likutei Divrei Torah

Moshe needs to talk to himself. He needs to convince himself. “Please, Moshe, check this out because maybe I have been mistaken. Maybe I am wrong!”

This is why Rashi provides the seemingly unnecessary elaboration “Turn aside from here and go to there.” (Question #1) This is not just a matter of moving six feet. This is a very important life changing moment. (Question #2) This is a matter of changing an entire philosophy and world vision. This is why Moshe uses the word *nah* (please) (Question #3), because Moshe needed to convince himself. People find it very difficult to admit that they have been wrong.

Finally, that is also why the next pasuk says “And Hashem saw that he turned to investigate.” The Ribono shel Olam saw that Moshe Rabbeinu was investigating. We asked, “What’s the big deal about checking out a fire?” (Question #4) Sure. We would all check out such an incident. But if it meant having to reassess and possibly retract that which we have strongly believed for the last half century, that is not such a simple matter. This made an impression on the Ribono shel Olam because this proved to Him that Moshe Rabbeinu had the quality to be a *manhig Yisroel* (Jewish leader). The quality to be a *manhig Yisroel* is the ability to admit “I may be wrong. Maybe there is another way of looking at things. Maybe I made a mistake.”

At this moment in time, Moshe Rabbeinu becomes the leader of the Jewish people. We pointed out the same concept a couple of weeks ago (in Parshas Vayechi), when we discussed the bracha that Yaakov gave to Yehudah – the blessing of leadership. Onkelos explains that the reason why Yaakov picked Yehudah for the role of Jewish leadership was because he admitted (in the incident with his daughter-in-law Tamar) that he had made a mistake. “She is more righteous in the matter than I.” (Bereshis 38:26) Yehudah also admitted “I may be wrong. Maybe there is another way of looking at things. Maybe I made a mistake.” Since Yaakov saw that Yehudah had this quality, he proclaimed “The scepter will not depart from Yehudah.” (Bereshis 49:10)

This happens to us as well. We have certain opinions, certain presumptions in life. There are certain things that we believe in throughout our lives. Maybe, just maybe, we are wrong. Everyone has opinions. They have opinions about Eretz Yisroel. They have opinions about secular education. They have opinions about women. People have deeply ingrained presumptions about all different matters. We are all opinionated. And of course, we are always right. “It is my way or the highway. There is no other way!”

If we are always right and the other guy is always wrong, we become intolerant of other people. Because they are wrong. Because they are silly. Because they are stupid. Because they don't get it! This intolerance that is so prevalent today stems from this inability to ever reassess long held personal opinions, which just might be wrong!

The ability to say "Guess what? I was wrong!" is an attribute that everyone needs to have.

The Tolner Rebbe mentioned that the Gerrer Rebbe in Poland had 100,000 chassidim. The Gerrer Rebbe in pre-War Poland held that Orthodox Jewry must support Agudas Yisroel. If the Gerrer Rebbe held that everyone must support Agudas Yisroel, then automatically 100,000 chassidim supported Agudas Yisroel. Then, the Gerrer Rebbe heard that there was a Jewish leader, named Rav Yissachar Dov Rokeach (the Belzer Rebbe), who disagreed.

Now imagine that you are the Gerrer Rebbe with 100,000 chassidim and there is another distinguished Chassidic leader, who does not have nearly as many followers, who disagrees with you. What should be your reaction? "I'm right. He's wrong!"

But what did the Gerer Rebbe do? He sent two people to the Belzer Rebbe to better understand what he held and why he held that opinion. The delegation went to the Belzer Rebbe and explained their mission. The Belzer Rebbe asked them "And what is your opinion about the matter?" They responded, "We have no opinion about the matter, we are just here on a mission from the Gerrer Rebbe." The Belzer Rebbe explained to this delegation the reason for his opposition.

They came back to the Gerrer Rebbe and reported on their conversation. The Gerrer Rebbe responded, "Yes. There is such an opinion and it is important that there should be such an opinion." The Gerrer Rebbe explained: We are all nogeah (biased) in our decision-making processes. We need to consult with someone on the outside who can hear our side of an argument and tell us "Do you know what? You're wrong!" A leader cannot be surrounded by "Yes-men." We need people around us to tell us when we are wrong. Everyone needs such a person. Our wives often fill this role.

This one act of reassessment and reevaluation – Why is the bush not burning? – vaulted Moshe into the position where he was deserving of becoming the Manhig Yisroel. He demonstrated that he had the quality of saying "I was wrong!"

## Dvar Torah

### Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

**A miracle within a miracle.** That is how Rashi describes the seventh of the ten plagues in Egypt. The plague of hail.

And how was that the case? The Torah tells us 've'esh mitlakkachat betoch habbarad' – 'there were sparks of fire within each and every hailstone.'

So, what was the miracle? =Well, it is obvious. Fire melts ice, and water puts out fire, so there was that miracle within the miracle.

And this made a deep impression on Pharaoh, King of Egypt. He declared 'chatati happa'am' – 'on this occasion I have sinned'. 'Hashem Hatzaddik' – 'God Is right'. 'Va'ani ve'ammi haresha'im' – 'and I and my people are evil'.

Sadly, after that, he did change his mind. But Pharaoh was taken by this extraordinary phenomenon of fire and water co-existing successfully.

Emerging from this is an exceptionally powerful and timely message for us. In the midst of a dark and tragic war, we can have internal Jewish unity.

Let us guarantee that this will be preserved well beyond.

In addition, sometimes when it comes to the pursuit of peace, it seems simply unachievable for opponents, for different sides, for enemies to eventually achieve peace between each other.

And, yet the message of hailstones in Egypt is, that it is possible, for a miracle within a miracle to transpire.

Let us pray that ultimately that will be achieved, and we will enjoy peace with one and all.

## Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

### Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg

### Do You Know What You're Missing?

At the beginning of Parshas Va'era, Hashem instructs Moshe Rabbeinu to tell the Jewish people that He will redeem them from Mitzrayim. He uses four different terms to express this idea, "I will take you out (v'hotzei) from under the burdens (sivlos) of Egypt; I will rescue you (v'hitzalti) from their servitude; I will redeem you (v'ga'alti) with an outstretched arm and great judgements; and I will take you (v'lakachti) to Me for a people and I shall be a G-d to you, and you will know that I am Hashem your G-d who takes you out from under the burdens (sivlos) of Egypt" (6:6-7).

## Likutei Divrei Torah

What is added with the last phrase, "and you will know that I am Hashem your G-d who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt?" Moreover, why is the word sivlos in this phrase spelled with a vav, while the word sivlos in the beginning of Hashem's statement is spelled without a vav?

The Be'er Yosef explains that the Jewish people suffered two forms of persecution in Egypt. First, they were physically oppressed. The Egyptians enslaved them with crushing harshness (Shemos 1:13). They embittered their lives with hard work, forcing them to make mortar and bricks (1:14) to build storage cities for Pharaoh (1:11). In addition, Pharaoh decreed that all Jewish male children were to be thrown into the Nile. The Jewish people suffered terribly from the back-breaking labor and oppression to which they were subjected.

But aside from this physical subjugation, the Jewish people also suffered a spiritual persecution at the hands of the Egyptians. After years of forced labor and torture, the Jewish people no longer felt their elevated status as the children of the Avos and Imahos. They lost some of the special aura of kedusha and the distinctive middos they had inherited from their ancestors. While the Jewish people did maintain their names and their language even in Mitzrayim (Midrash Tehillim, Shochar Tov, 114:4), they also assimilated Egyptian culture. "They mingled with the nations and they learned their ways" (Tehillim 106:35). They imitated the Egyptians in their behavior to such an extent that the angels complained that the Jewish people did not deserve to be saved because they were no better than the Egyptians. "These serve avodah zara, and these serve avodah zara" (see Alshich, Va'eira 8:18, based on Midrash Rabba, Vayikra 23:2).

The Jewish people suffered a double persecution in Egypt, but they felt only the physical oppression. Their spiritual affliction was no less significant, but sadly they did not even sense how much their enslavement had changed them. This is hinted to in the passuk, "And Bnei Yisrael groaned because of the hard work and they cried out...Hashem heard their cries, and He remembered his covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Hashem saw Bnei Yisrael and Hashem knew" (Shemos 2:23-24). The Jewish people cried out from the grueling physical labor, but Hashem saw not only their physical oppression. He remembered his covenant with the Avos. He thought of the distinguished ancestors of the Jewish people and He knew. Only He knew the spiritual depths to which Klal Yisrael had sunk, while they were totally unaware of their own spiritual affliction.

This, says the Be'er Yosef, is the meaning behind Hashem's statement in the beginning of

Parshas Va'eira. Hashem promises that He will rescue the Jewish people from under the physical burdens (*sivlos*) of Mitzrayim. Here *sivlos* is spelled without a vav because it is referring only to the physical slavery, the persecution that Klal Yisrael perceived. But then Hashem adds that He will take the Jewish people as His nation, and be for them a G-d, and then they will know that Hashem is the one who rescued them from the burdens of Mitzrayim. After Hashem gives the Torah to Klal Yisrael and they elevate themselves to become "a kingdom of princes and a holy nation", then they will understand that Hashem actually saved them from a double persecution (*sivlos* with a vav), both a physical and a spiritual oppression. Only after Klal Yisrael received the Torah and appreciated their illustrious ancestry and their inherent spiritual potential, did they truly understand what kind - of spiritual affliction they had suffered in Mitzrayim.

Until a person is exposed to kedusha, he doesn't know what he's missing. This is a common phenomenon with ba'alei teshuva. For years, they live without Torah and mitzvos, and they think they have a fulfilling life. They are successful professionally and socially. And they often don't even realize what they are missing. But after they are introduced to talmud Torah and Shabbos and tefilla, they appreciate how much more enriched their lives can be.

Even Orthodox Jews from birth can sometimes feel this way as well. They observe the mitzvos but may not feel a love for talmud Torah or don't connect to tefilla, or maybe Shabbos isn't an uplifting experience for them. Often we all get so involved in the responsibilities of life that we don't have the time or the head space to deepen our connection to Torah and mitzvos.

This, says the Ramchal (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Ch. 2), is the evil scheme of the yetzer hara. As Pharaoh said, "Let the work become more intense on the men and let them engage in it; and let them not speak false words" (*Shemos* 5:9). The yetzer hara throws all kinds of distractions in front of a person just so that he will not be able to focus on spiritual pursuits, and then gradually the person loses sight of the true value of Torah and mitzvos. The antidote to such a mentality is to take a step back, to invest more time and effort into mitzvos, to expose oneself to more experiences of kedusha, and hopefully that can set a person on a path toward spiritual growth.

Sometimes momentous events in history are what give us a different perspective and motivate us to take our Yiddishkeit more seriously. That certainly is how many people have felt recently. Whether it's developing a heightened appreciation for Shabbos, a

renewed focus on tefilla, a more acute realization that only Hashem can provide protection, or a deeper understanding of the importance of unity in Klal Yisrael, the Simchas Torah massacre and its aftermath have been a wake-up call not only for secular Israelis but for Jews all over the world. It's an opportunity for all of us to consider how we can strengthen our involvement in talmud Torah, connect more emotionally to mitzvos, and deepen our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Who knows? We just might discover that we were missing out all along on something of priceless value.

### Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

**OMG** - Therefore, say to the Children of Israel, 'I am HASHEM, and I will take you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you from their labor, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a G-d to you, and you will know that I am HASHEM your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (*Shemos* 6:6-7)

Every good lesson requires a goal. The students should know in advance what they are going to learn. Then the teacher cleverly imparts his lessons and in the end checks to see if the goal of the lesson hit its mark and the intended message was actually and successfully delivered. The goal of this lesson plan, this exercise entitled "Exodus from Egypt" is explicitly spelled out. When all is said and done, the Jewish People will "know that I am HASHEM, your G-d". That is exactly what a great teacher does!

The Zohar writes: This is the first Mitzvah of all the Mitzvos, to know that there is the Holy One Blessed Be He in general. What is in general? To know that there is an Almighty Ruler on High and He is the Master of the world and He creates all of the worlds, heaven and earth and all of its agents. This is in general and the end of the matter is in detail. General and detail they are; the beginning and the end."

What is this talk of general and specific knowledge? If we take a brief look at the Ten Commandments, the way they were configured on the Luchos we might gain a picture of what this is about. Crowning the top on the first side, which contains Mitzvos between Man and G-d is that grand proclamation, "I am HASHEM your G-d Who took you out of the Land of Egypt!" There it is the general declaration! Sitting on the bottom is "Honor your mother and father".

Why are they on the side between Man and G-d? There are many answers and approaches.

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Let us try this simple one. The Ten Commandments are not just a random sample of the 613 Mitzvos. It is an orientation to reality. The supreme and global reality is that HASHEM alone made, makes, and will make everything in the universe.

On the local and personal level, the parents we were gifted with, the DNA that we inherited is specifically designed and tailored for the purpose of our existence. This is the seat we were assigned on the airplane of life, by HASHEM. It's not negotiable! It's a fact of life, a given, and given for a supernal reason!

Looking out directly to the side, neighboring the Mitzvah of honoring parents is a similar idea and ideal of not being jealous of what has been granted to your neighbor. Reb Wolbe zl. said that the last of the Ten Commandments is a final exam on the first. If one understands well and has internalized that HASHEM is master decider in all these matters great and small, local and global, then he cannot be jealous of what somebody else has. That's the cure to existential anxiety, nausea, forlornness, and despair. It's the key to happiness to accept and work with reality rather than against reality.

I remember many years ago our family was settling down at the Pesach Seder and my mother was arranging the seating in a small dining room to the best of her ability. It was like a parking lot puzzle. I had an uncle Zevy, a soft sweet intellectual person who was joining us that year. My mother apologized to him that his seat was on the corner of a rickety card table with an equally shaky folding chair. My mother said, "I'm sorry you didn't get such a great seat." He responded incredibly, "It's Ok! I'll make it great!" That, for me, was rich, and memorable! "I'll make it great! Not having this orientation can be maddening. Everything is seen as negotiable, fluid, or judged as a cosmic mistake and something to feel bitter and complain about. It makes a world of difference!

Many years ago, I heard directly from the mouth of the Tzadik of Monsey, Rabbi Mordechai Schwab ztl. dramatically recited the whole Adon Olam, "Master of the Universe before any creature was created ... He was, He is, and He will be- He is One – there is no comparison to Him – Without beginning, without end... and after all these grandiose proportions, he rubbed his heart gently and declared, "Hu Eli" – "He is my G-d". HASHEM, not as a distant entity but an intimate – personal G-d who is deeply interested in every detail of your life and my life, as we often say, "OMG"!

The second plague which G-d brought upon the Egyptians was frogs. They invaded Egypt, including the ovens for baking. The Talmud (Pesachim 53b) relates that the frogs were the inspiration for Chananiah, Mishael, and Azaryah.

What did they see that caused them to enter the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar? They reasoned a fortiori from the frogs. If frogs, which are not commanded to sanctify G-d's Name entered the furnace, how much more so should we, who are commanded to sanctify G-d's Name, do?

Rambam in Sefer HaMitzvos says the path to love Hashem is through Torah learning. Yet, in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, Rambam says contemplating the natural world and its awe-inspiring wonders leads one to love Hashem. There are crucial differences between nature and Torah as paths to Hashem.

The Midrash says that HaKodosh Boruch Hu didn't create the world with the first letter, alef, for it signifies arur – cursed – but with the second letter, beis, which signifies bracha – blessing. When using nature as a path to Hashem, one's explorations must be carefully guided, so that one indeed finds Hashem.

As King David proclaimed, Hashem can be found in nature. "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, I am inspired to realize my insignificance in relationship to G-d, Who is overwhelming" (Tehillim 8:4). But danger remains in the observation of nature, as the Torah warns us: "Lest you raise your eyes heavenward and observe the sun, the moon, and stars, and are enticed to bow to them and serve" (Devarim 4:19).

Yuri Gagarin, first Soviet cosmonaut, announced upon returning to earth that he was sure that G-d didn't exist, chas veShalom, because he didn't see Him. On the other hand, American astronauts on one of the Apollo missions transmitted breathtaking views of Earth from space, and recited Psalm 119, "The Heavens declare the glory of G-d..." Observations of the same thing with two different responses.

The basis of blessings must be clear and decisive when observing G-d through nature. However, the path of Torah isn't fraught with such danger. Quite the contrary, the inner light of Torah guides one toward the good. When it comes to Torah, even what can potentially be cursed, alef, can be inspired and directed by inner light of Torah for good. For this reason, Torah study must be the primary path. Only

one steeped in study of Torah can truly and properly utilize the path of observing nature, the secondary path. As physical beings, we are affected more by what we sense than by what we know intellectually. Emunah and ahavas Hashem are as real and intense as what we experience with senses. Torah manifested in nature helps one concretize his emunah. Entering the furnace to sanctify Hashem's name required strength and commitment. Unless Chananiah, Mishael, and Azaryah reached a level where their knowledge of kiddush Hashem had become concretized by their senses and observed as a fact of nature, they might have shied away from taking that step. They saw nature's sanctification of G-d's Name through the frogs, which supplemented their knowledge of the mandate to sanctify G-d's Name. Their knowledge gave them courage and will to fulfill what they knew to be intellectually binding. Seeing kiddush Hashem represented in nature, they sensed and felt it. If frogs had strength to do this, they reasoned, that same strength exists within us.

May learning Torah and observing nature, especially in Eretz Yisroel, where nature and Torah bond intensely through the mitzvot dependent on agriculture, bring us to greater levels of love and awe of Hashem.

### Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

#### Sensitivity Training

After the plague of locusts, Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron in and in exasperation says to them, "לכו ובחו לאליכם בארץ," "Go and sacrifice to your God in the land." He is anxious to rid himself of the plague, and in return he is willing to grant freedom of worship to the Israelites – but only on condition that they practice their religion and worship their God here, in Egypt, and not leave the country.

לא נכוּ לעשׂות כֵּן כִּי תועבָת מִצְרָיִם נזְבָּח 'But Moses will not have this. His response is It is not right to do this, for we will be sacrificing "אלֹקָנָנו הָן נזְבָּח הַתֹּועבָת מִצְרָיִם וְאַיִלְלָנו", the gods of Egypt to the Lord our God, and if we sacrifice the god of Egypt before their very eyes, will they not stone us?" Moses was concerned because the worship of the God of Israel included the sacrifice of animals, and animals were the idols of Egypt.

Now, one wonders why Moses was so frightened. Surely he could not have used the excuse of fear that the Egyptians would stone the Israelites as a reason for having to stay in Egypt. Pharaoh was a tyrant, an all-powerful despot, and he simply could have responded that he will command his troops to keep order and prevent the masses from stoning the Hebrews.

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A very beautiful answer is offered by Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, of blessed memory. Moses, he says, was not afraid of stoning. Not at all. Indeed, the Aramaic translator, Onkelos, renders the end of our verse as: **ולא ימרגנין** – Will they not *want* to stone us?" In other words, Moses was not afraid that the Egyptians would attack him, but he simply did not want to outrage the Egyptians' religious sensibilities. His response to Pharaoh was **לא נכוּ לעשׂות כֵּן**, "It is not right to do this." He did not want so to offend the Egyptians' feelings that they would want to stone the Israelites. That is why he insisted that the Israelites would have to perform their worship outside of Egypt.

Consider the moral stature and ethical nobility of Moses. Here he was, leading a revolution against Pharaoh and his whole political system; undermining the entire culture of Egypt; undertaking, on behalf of monotheism, a broadside attack against the whole system of **לִיעִינִים** – paganism and heathenism that had dominated Egypt since time immemorial. And yet before the very eyes of the Egyptians, he will not do anything to offend their deepest feelings!

So the Torah is teaching us a lesson of the utmost importance: that, except where the Halakhah clearly defines the *Mitzvah* as such, even the greatest commandment – such as the service of the Lord, **נזְבָּח לְה' אֱלֹקֵינו** – may not be achieved at the expense of the anguish of others, even if that anguish is a result of beliefs which we know to be empty and foolish and false.

Within the Orthodox community we must learn this lesson in sensitivity training. We are often asked to be tolerant of our fellow Jews who are non-Orthodox. That is right – we certainly should. Where no diminution of our own belief or practice is concerned, insulting others and wounding their feelings is wrong. However, we must point out that true tolerance (which, as is well known, is a very poor word), true magnanimity of spirit, is not identical with a spineless lack of conviction. Too often, those who most boast about their tolerance are merely displaying a lack of concern or care. There are too many people who mistake lack of commitment for great tolerance, and empty head for an open mind.

When Moses, according to this interpretation, respected the feelings of the Egyptians, he did not fail to identify the gods of Egypt as **תֹועבָת מִצְרָיִם**, literally, "the abominations of Egypt!" To be sensitive to others does not mean to conceal or curb your own commitments.

So, without wavering or compromising our own principles, we must always understand and be sensitive to others. We must not yield on any significant or even insignificant

Halakhah, we must not participate in non-Orthodox services, but never must we denigrate or offend others.

But at least equally important is to be sensitive to those to the right of us. If we are asked to be patient with those who are less observant, so much more so with those who are more observant. It does not mean that we must agree with those who wish to impose upon us standards with which we do not agree, and which we do not believe are required by the Halakhah. But if others think that certain things are right, then *לעניהם*, in their presence, we must respect them.

It is for this reason that I have asked our people to abide by a special condition concerning the Eruv in Manhattan. As you well know, I completely and fully agree to the validity and authoritativeness of the Eruv. It is permissible to carry in Manhattan. However, it should not be done demonstratively if unnecessary. The reason for this is not that the Eruv does not cover open carrying – baby carriages certainly may be used – but since there are many people who do not recognize the validity of the Eruv, carrying in their presence without cause would be an unnecessary offense to them; *מן דרכי שלום*, for reasons of communal harmony and peace, we ought to refrain from gratuitous provocations.

It is true that some of those who have condemned the Eruv have not always acted with admirable restraint, and have expressed themselves too strongly even for a polemical issue. But ...It is not right to do this,” and two wrongs do not make one right“ *לא נכון לעשות כן*,

Such sensitivity is also needed in interreligious relationships, between Jews and non-Jews. Even as Moses was considerate of the Egyptians 'feelings, so must we be sensitive to Christians 'feelings. In dealing with Christian groups, especially Protestants, I have never insisted that they give up their evangelical functions, their missionizing. Unlike a number of my fellow Jews, I recognize that for many Christians this is an integral part of their faith. I do lay down certain conditions, namely, that their missions to Jews not be disguised as "dialogue"; that they not exploit, as they so often have, the poor and the sick and the ignorant; and that they keep hands off Israel, the first Jewish commonwealth in two thousand years which is still seeking its own soul. On the human level, and by this term I intend a moral statement exclusive of any religious content, I think that the whole idea of sending a mission to the Jews is horrendous. The sordid Christian record of two thousand years in dealing with Jews, and especially Christian passivity and even complicity during the Holocaust, have forever after deprived Christians of whatever moral justification they

may ever have had for proselytizing the Jews. Their greatest need is to send a mission to Christians, not to anyone else. Nevertheless, if a Christian feels that such proselytizing is a basic principle of his faith, and he is willing to do it honestly and honorably, I will not object to it, and I will try to understand him. Quite frankly, my sensitivity is in this case abetted by a practical consideration. That is, if a Christian genuinely believes in evangelical activity, and I deny it to him, then one of two things will happen, neither of which is good. Either he will go underground, and he will seek the same conversionary goals indirectly and subtly, in a manner which will make it impossible for us to successfully resist; or else he will

demand of us a *quid pro quo*, that we give up some basic element of *our* faith in turn. There are, unfortunately, some Jews who are willing to "negotiate" such deals, but these are people whose faith has long since evaporated, and we ought have nothing to do with them.

But sensitivity is a two-way street. And if we are to be sensitive to the Christians 'self-definition, they must be equally sensitive to us. That is why I frequently find myself exasperated in conversation with Protestants. I speak of people who are moral, cultured, and well-intentioned, and yet have difficulty appreciating the depth of Jewish feeling about the State of Israel and the significance of Eretz Yisrael in Judaism. They cannot empathize with the Jewish post-Holocaust condition and thus they are insensitive to our feeling about the State of Israel; and they look at Judaism with Christian eyes, and imagine that we must pattern our religion on theirs, and that is why they occasionally express such derisive comments as, "Why must you get involved in sacred real-estate?" But such misunderstanding simply will not do. Even if they do not agree to the policies of Israel, or policies of Jews in the Diaspora about Israel, certainly we ought to expect some sensitivity. Surely the Jewish "obsession" with Israel is no worse than the the abomination of Egypt, for which Moses demonstrated such delicate *חויבת מצרים*, understanding.

But whatever complaints we may have against the Protestants, there is far less mitigation for the Catholic Church and its leader. For a while, the noises coming from the Vatican were appealing, and indicated a new orientation. But the longer this Pope stays in office, the less credible the Catholic openings to the Jews become. For the Pope to shed crocodile tears, as he did several years ago when Israel bombed Lebanon's Beirut airport with no loss of life, but with damage only to hardware, and remain silent when Arabs kill Jews – men, women, and children; for the Pope to rush to condemn Israel's recent raid into Lebanon and so haughtily to recommend that Israel deal with the PLO, and to maintain strict silence at

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the murderous provocations which resulted in these retaliations, namely, the attacks by the PLO within Israel – these are instance of ! לא נכוון לעשות כן!insensitivity so crude, so callous, and so calculating as to tax credibility

So we Jews learn from today's Sidra a principle which must guide us in interreligious relations, in relations amongst Jews, and for ourselves in our relations in our own families and societies. *לא נכון לעשות כן*, it is not right to be insensitive.

And as a complementary principle, we must pray for that which is right and sensitive. In *חיש רוח נכוון* "Create for me a pure heart, O God", *לב טהור ברא לי אלקים*, the words of the Psalms ".And a right spirit renew within me"  
*בקרובי*,

That is something worth praying for – that which is right, that which is sensitive. [1976]

**Home Weekly Parsha VAEIRA**

**Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

The Lord, so to speak, according to Rashi and the Talmud, longs for the previous generations of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel who seemingly bore their trials and difficulties without complaint even though God's revelation to them was in a lesser level than was the case with Moshe. Yet we do find that the patriarchs, Avraham and Yaakov did challenge God at moments of crisis.

Avraham says to God; "What can you grant me as I go childless?" And Yaakov says to God: "And You promised me that You would be good to me [and now Eisav threatens to destroy me.]" So why is the Lord disturbed by Moshe's statement that the lot of the Jewish people in Egypt has not yet been improved? Where do Moshe's words differ radically from those of Avraham and Yaakov? And why does God, so to speak, long for the previous generations over the behavior of the current generation? And according to the aggadic interpretation of the verses in the parsha, Moshe is punished for asking that obvious question as to why the Jewish situation has shown no improvement even though Moshe is apparently fulfilling God's mission accurately and punctually. Where is the shortcoming that provokes such a critical response from Heaven?

I think that the answer perhaps lies in recognizing the difference between the individual Jew as an individual and the belief in the fate of the Jewish people as a nation and community. The individual Jew, Avraham, Yaakov, you and me, regularly face crises and difficulties in our lives as individuals. We have no guarantee that the Lord will extricate us from our difficulties.

As Yaakov put it; "Perhaps my sins will have cancelled out any Heavenly promises of success and aid." Avraham realizes that perhaps God's promises to him can also be fulfilled through his faithful disciple and servant Eliezer. The doubts of the patriarchs are personal, not national. They never for a moment waver in their belief in the ultimate survival and triumph of the Jewish people, of the truth and justice of their cause and code, and of the validity of the mission of the Jewish people. Moshe's moment of complaint is not only personal, but it is national. Maybe this people will never leave Egyptian bondage. Maybe the Jewish people as a nation will not be able to come to Sinai and accept the Torah and become a kingdom of priests and a holy people. Maybe they are not worthy of the grandiose promises made to them.

Moshe is forced to account for doubting the people and implying that God has not chosen well, for the troubles of that people have not subsided. One can doubt one's own place in the story of Israel. One can never doubt the validity of Israel and the Heavenly promises made to it itself.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

**Freedom and Truth**

**Vaera**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

Why did Moses tell Pharaoh, if not a lie, then less than the full truth? Here is the conversation between him and Pharaoh after the fourth plague, arov, "swarms of insects"[1]:

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land." But Moses said, "That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us? We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, as He commands us." Exodus 8:27-28

Not just here but throughout, Moses makes it seem as if all he is asking for is permission for the people to undertake a three-day journey, to offer sacrifices to God and then (by implication) to return to Egypt. So, in their first appearance before Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron say:

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival to Me in the wilderness.'"

Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go."

Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or He may strike us with plagues or with the sword."

Ex. 5:1-3

God even specifies this before the mission has begun, saying to Moses at the Burning Bush: "You and the elders of Israel will then go to the king of Egypt. You must tell him, 'The Lord, God of the Hebrews, revealed Himself to us. Now we request that you allow us to take a three-day journey into the desert, to sacrifice to the Lord our God'" (Ex. 3:18).

The impression remains to the very end. After the Israelites have left, we read:

The king of Egypt received news that the people were escaping. Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds regarding the people, and said, "What have we done? How could we have released Israel from doing our work?"

Ex. 14:5

At no stage does Moses say explicitly that he is proposing the people should be allowed to leave permanently, never to return. He talks of a three-day journey. There is an argument between him and Pharaoh as to who is to go. Only the adult males? Only the people, not the cattle? Moses consistently asks for permission to worship God, at some place that is not Egypt. But he does not speak about freedom or the Promised Land. Why not? Why does he create, and not correct, a false impression? Why can he not say openly what he means?

The commentators offer various explanations. Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto (Italy, 1800-1865) says that it was impossible for Moses to tell the truth to a tyrant like Pharaoh. Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenburg (Germany, 1785-1865, Ha-Ktav vеха-Kabbalah) says that technically Moses did not tell a lie. He did indeed mean that he wanted the people to be free to make a journey to worship God, and he never said explicitly that they would return.

The Abarbanel (Lisbon 1437 – Venice 1508) says that God told Moses deliberately to make a small request, to demonstrate Pharaoh's cruelty and indifference to his slaves. All they were asking for was a brief respite from their labours to offer sacrifices to God. If he refused this, he was indeed a tyrant. Rav Elhanan Samet (Iyyunim be-Parshot Ha-Shevua, Exodus, 189) cites an unnamed commentator who says simply that this was war between Pharaoh and the Jewish people, and in war it is permitted, indeed sometimes necessary, to deceive.

Actually, however, the terms of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh are part of a wider pattern that we have already observed in the Torah. When Jacob leaves Laban's house, with all his family, we read: "Jacob decided to go behind the back of Laban the Aramean, and did not tell him that he was leaving" (Genesis 31:20). Laban protests this behaviour:

"How could you do this? You went behind my back and led my daughters away like prisoners of war! Why did you have to leave so secretly? You went behind my back and told me nothing!"

Gen. 31:26-27

Jacob again has to tell at best a half-truth when Esau suggests that they travel together after the brothers' reunion: "You know that the children are weak, and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for even one day, all the sheep will die. Please go ahead of me, my lord" (Gen. 33:13-14). This, though not strictly a lie, is a diplomatic excuse.

When Jacob's sons are trying to rescue their sister Dina who has been raped and abducted by Shechem the Hivite, they "replied deceitfully" (Gen. 34:13) when Shechem and his father proposed that the entire family should come and settle with them, telling them that they could only do so if all the males of the town underwent circumcision.

Earlier still we find that three times Abraham and Isaac, forced to leave home because of famine, have to pretend that they are their wives' brothers not their husbands because they fear that otherwise they will be killed so that Sarah or Rebecca could be taken into the king's harem (Gen. 12, Gen. 20, Gen. 26).

These six episodes cannot be entirely accidental or coincidental to the biblical narrative as a whole. The implication seems to be this: Outside the promised land Jews in the biblical age are in danger if they tell the truth. They are at constant risk of being killed or at best enslaved.

Why? Because they are powerless in an age of power. They are a small family, at best a small nation, in an age of empires. They have to use their wits to survive. By and large they do not tell lies but they can create a false impression. This is not how things should be. But it is how they were before Jews had their own land, their one and only defensible space. It is how people in impossible situations are forced to be if they are to exist at all.

No-one should be forced to live a lie. In Judaism, truth is the seal of God and the essential precondition of trust between human beings. But when your people is being enslaved, its male children murdered, you have to liberate them by whatever means are possible. Moses, who had already seen that his first encounter with Pharaoh made things worse for his people – they still had to make the same quota of bricks but now also had to gather their own straw (Ex. 5:6-8) – did not want to risk making them worse still.

The Torah here is not justifying deceit. To the contrary, it is condemning a system in which telling the truth may put your life at risk, as it still does in many tyrannical or totalitarian societies today. Judaism – a religion of dissent, questioning, and “arguments for the sake of heaven” – is a faith that values intellectual honesty and moral truthfulness above all things. The Psalmist says:

“Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place? One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken My name in vain nor sworn deceitfully.”

Psalms 24:3-4

Malachi says of one who speaks in God's name: “The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips” (Malachi 2:6). Every Amidah ends with the prayer, “My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech.”

What the Torah is telling us in these six narratives in Genesis and the seventh in Exodus is the connection between freedom and truth. Where there is freedom there can be truth. Otherwise there cannot. A society where people are forced to be less than fully honest merely to survive and not provoke further oppression is not the kind of society God wants us to make.

[1] Some say the arov was a plague of wild animals.

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[CS -late breaking dvar torah from torahweb added:

from:TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>

date: Jan 23, 2025, 9:57 PM

**Rabbi Mordechai Willig**

**Sharing the Pain**

I "These are the names of the sons of Levi in order of their birth: Gershon, Kehas, and Merari" (Shemos 6:16). The Shelah asks, why does it say "the names of" regarding Levi's sons and not regarding Reuven and Shimon's sons (6:14:15)? The Shelah explains that Shevet Levi did not suffer in galus. Levi knew this and wanted to include himself in the distress of the community (l'hishtateif b'tza'ar ha'tzibbur). Therefore, he called the names of his sons after the galus: Gershon, as they were geirim (strangers) in a land not theirs (see Breishis 15:13); Kehas, as their teeth were kaihos - set on edge (see Rashi Vayikra 26:20); and Merari, as the Mitzrim embittered (vayemararu) their lives (Shemos 1:14). From here one learns to join in the pain of the community even if the suffering does not touch him.

These names were given before galus Mitzrayim (Breishis 46:11). Presumably, Levi was not only privy to the ensuing galus, but also to the fact that his descendants would be spared (see Rashi Shemos 5:4).

II The phrase "in order of their birth" (letoldosam) is also unique to Shevet Levi. Perhaps, the three names reflect the three stages of galus. The galus lasted two hundred and ten years (Rashi Breishis 42:2). As long as Levi himself was alive, there was no slavery (Rashi Shemos 6:16). This period, which lasted ninety-four years (Sifsei Chachamim), is represented by Gershon, as they lived in a land not theirs. The remaining one hundred and sixteen years of slavery were not identical. Initially, their teeth were set on edge from the hard labor (Shemos 1:11), corresponding to Kehas. The bitterness intensified thirty years later, the third stage represented by Merari. Amram, son of Kehas, named his daughter Miriam (from mar), because of the increased bitterness. This period lasted eighty-six years, which was Miriam's age at yetzias Mitzrayim (Yalkut Shimoni 165, see Zayin Ra'anah note 8).

III The legacy of Levi, passed down to Kehas and Amram, who named Miriam based on the suffering which did not reach him, extended to Moshe Rabbeinu as well. On his first very first foray outside of Pharaoh's house, Moshe saw the suffering of his brethren (Shemos 2:11). He focused his eyes and heart to be distressed over them (Rashi). Remarkably, in his comment on "G-d (Elokim) saw B'nai Yisrael, and G-d knew" (Shemos 2:25) Rashi uses a similar expression: "He focused His heart upon them, and did not hide His eyes from them." Hashem was responding to the crying out of B'nai Yisrael because of their suffering (Shemos 2:23). Similarly, "He will call me and I will answer him, I am with him in distress (imo Anochi b'tzara)" (Tehillim 91:16). Thus, Moshe fulfilled imitatio dei, by being in distress over Am Yisrael's suffering.

IV The very next passuk (3:1) begins: Moshe was grazing the sheep of Yisro. The Medrash Raba (2:2) relates the Moshe had mercy on a wayward sheep and carried it on his shoulder. Hashem said, as a result, "You will shepherd my flock Yisrael". Earlier, Moshe saved Yisro's daughters from the shepherds who drove them from the well (Shemos 2:17). They reported to Yisro, "A Mitzri man saved us from the shepherds" (2:19). The Medrash (Breishis Raba 36:3) teaches: Moshe is greater than Noach. Noach descended from "ish tzaddik" (Breishis 6:9) to a drunkard - "ish ha'adama" (9:20). Moshe ascended from "ish Mitzri" (Shemos 2:19) to "ish Elokim" (Devarim 33:1), a man of G-d. The Meshech Chochma (Breishis 9:20) explains the contrast: Noach was self-absorbed in his righteousness and did not rebuke his generation. Moshe was forced to flee Mitzrayim because he did intervene to save a fellow Jew (Shemos 2:11-15, see Rashi 2:15). [Alternatively, he saved Yisro's daughters who called him ish Mitzri] Logically, one focused on his own service of Hashem would reach greater heights than one who sacrifices himself for the needs of others. Yet, the Medrash teaches, the opposite is true. Noach, the "tzaddik in peltz", who ignored his surroundings, became a drunkard. Moshe, who cared for anyone who suffered: Bnai Yisrael, a victim of a Mitzri's beating (Shemos 2:11,12), damsels in distress, and even a wayward sheep, reached the highest level attainable, a man of G-d. In contrast to Noach, he saved his entire generation (Medrash Devarim Raba 11:3).

V Today, 22 Teves 5785, marks exactly sixteen months since the pogrom of 22 Tishrei, Simchas Torah 5784, Oct. 7, 2023. The atrocities of rapacious murderers are unprecedented since the Holocaust. Ever since then, the soldiers and citizens of Israel have suffered terribly: lives and limbs lost, homes abandoned, missiles and drones from faraway foes forcing millions into protected rooms. As Mitzrayim of old, they, our enemies, have embittered our lives. Now, as then, we have cried out to Hashem to end our suffering. We, American Jewry, like Levi, must include ourselves in the suffering of our embattled Israelis, even if it does not reach us. Like Moshe, we must focus our eyes and hearts to be distressed over them. The exponential rise in antisemitic acts and rhetoric reminds us that we, too, are in galus. We represent Gershon, strangers even in this kingdom of kindness (Igros Moshe, Choshen Mishpat 2:29), notwithstanding unprecedented wealth and prominence. All our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land have suffered, in vastly varying degrees, during these difficult wartime months, set on edge reminiscent of Kehas. And thousands ofacheinu B'nei Yisrael, batzara u'bashivya, in distress and in captivity, and their families, are victims of

life-ending and life-altering terror, tragedies corresponding to Merari. May Hashem respond to the sincere crying out of worldwide Jewry sharing the distress, past and present, in Eretz Yisrael, as He did in Mitzrayim. May He focus His heart and His eyes upon Klal Yisrael, even as we focus ours on the victims of terror and trauma. "As in the days when you left the land of Mitzrayim show them (Am Yisrael and/or our enemies) wonders" (Micha 7:15, see MHK edition).]

[CS -late breaking dvar torah from R' Frand added:

from: Rabbi Yissocher Frand <ryfrand@torah.org>

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subject: **Rav Frand - The Key to Solving Personal Challenges Is to Help Someone Else With That Challenge**

Rav Frand

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

To Dedicate an Article click here

Parshas Vaera

The Key to Solving Personal Challenges Is to Help Someone Else With That Challenge

print

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1321 – Should You Make a Bracha on Seeing President Donald Trump? Good Shabbos!

**The Key to Solving Personal Challenges Is to Help Someone Else With That Challenge**

A wealthy Jew who had fallen on hard times once came to the Chasam Sofer (Rav Moshe Schreiber 1762-1826; Pressburg) and asked him for a bracha (blessing) or an eitzah (idea) to help him recoup his money. The Chasam Sofer told him that he should give money to another Jew who has fallen on hard times.

This Jew was not thrilled with the eitzah given him by the Chasam Sofer. He suggested: Maybe the honorable Rav did not hear what I said. I said that I have fallen on hard times. I need an eitzah and I need a bracha. What are you telling me? To give out money now? I don't have any spare money at this time! I am facing bankruptcy as it is.

The Chasam Sofer told him that there is a pasuk in the Torah that teaches us that this is the appropriate eitzah when a person has fallen on hard times. Which pasuk in the Torah? The pasuk in Parshas Vaera says, "V'gam (And I have also) heard the screams of the Children of Israel" (Shemos 6:5) The Chasam Sofer asked what the word v'gam implies. Who else heard it other than the Ribono shel Olam? What does it mean "And I also heard...?" The Chasam Sofer answered that it must be that in Mitzrayim, every Jew, when he heard his fellow Jew cry out in pain from the work, felt badly for that other Jew. He then cried not only for himself, but he cried for the other Jew as well.

Therefore, "I also heard the crying..." means that I heard Jews crying for the pain of other Jews. The Chasam Sofer said that we see from here that the path to inspire the Ribono shel Olam to have mercy and save a person from the troubles he is in, is to become a partner and to feel mercy and try to do something about someone else's problems. That is the segula – to give to someone else. You will get out of your financial hole however you will get out of it. But the eitzah is that "v'gam ani sha'mati."

The Meshech Chochma (Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk 1843-1926) says the same idea in different words and in a different context. The pasuk says "Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon and commanded them regarding the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." (Shemos 6:13) Chazal say that Moshe commanded them regarding the law of freeing slaves (after six years). While still in Mitzrayim, the Ribono shel Olam gave Moshe the parsha of shiluach avadim! The Meshech Chochma notes that this seems like a most inappropriate context for commanding these yet-Jewish slaves to send their own slaves free! Who had avadim? The Meshech Chochma says that wherever the Yidden (Jews) found themselves, there have always been wealthier Yidden and less wealthy

Yiden. There is always someone who figures out an angle how to make more money. The wealthier Yidden in Mitzrayim bought Jewish slaves from the Egyptians. These Jewish slaves worked for their Jewish owners. Moshe Rabbeinu tells these people, do you know how the Ribono shel Olam is going to emancipate us? When you go ahead and free your slaves, that will elicit from the Ribono shel Olam to free His slaves as well.

This is the same idea that the Chasam Sofer expresses. A person needs to do more than be aware of his brethren's pain. He must actually feel that pain and do something about it! This is the way to elicit that same response from the Ribono shel Olam for yourself.

An incident is brought from the Rebbe of Zlotshov. After a day of hard work in a concentration camp, the Rebbe came to his barracks and was about to eat his daily ration of bread. He noticed another Jew lying on his 'bed' who was literally dying of hunger. This Rebbe took his own portion of bread and gave it to this Jew. The Jew gave him a bracha: "I bentsh you that you should get out of this place alive."

This was no minor act of sacrifice on the part of the Rebbe. It is not like if you skipped supper one night, you could make up for it with a larger meal for breakfast the next morning. Now the Rebbe was lying there on his bed, famished. He said to the Ribono shel Olam "I received a bracha from this person, but I am not going to make it either!"

At that moment, a kapo walked into the barracks and saw the Rebbe of Zlotshov and noticed the dire condition he was in. The kapo had a sack of sugar cubes in his pocket and he gave the sugar cubes to the Rebbe. The Rebbe said that those sugar cubes saved his life, and he felt that the bracha of the Jew to whom he gave the piece of bread was fulfilled. He received those sugar cubes in the merit that he shared his last piece of bread with that other person. "Anyone who has mercy on his fellow creature, has mercy upon himself from Heaven." (Maseches Shabbos 151b).

This is the same concept as the Rabbinic teaching: "Someone who prays on behalf of his friend and he needs the same thing – he will be answered first." (Bava Kamma 92a). If your daughter needs a shidduch, daven that someone else's daughter should find a shidduch. If a person needs a refuah, pray for the refuah of someone else. The nature of human beings is not to do that. "I have enough tzores (suffering). I have my own problems!" However, that is not the right attitude. The right attitude is that even if you have your own problems, the 'key' to getting out of those problems is to do something for someone else.

This is the lesson of "v'gam (and also) I heard the cries of Bnei Yisrael."

#### |Current Pain Sometimes Mitigates Much Greater Pain Later

The beginning of Parshas Vaera is really a continuation of the end of Parshas Shemos. Parshas Shemos ends with Moshe Rabbeinu saying to the Ribono shel Olam "From the time I came before Pharaoh, he has made matters worse for this nation and You have not saved Your nation." (Shemos 5:23). The Ribono shel Olam's response to Moshe's complaint is at the beginning of Parshas Vaera: The Avos (Patriarchs) did not have such complaints (when things were apparently not going as I promised) and you complain about such matters.

The Medrash says, on the pasuk where Moshe complains that matters have been made worse, that the Ribono shel Olam responded to Moshe with a pasuk from Koheles: Tov achris davar m'reishiso. (Koheles 7:8) The literal interpretation of this pasuk is that the end of something is better than its beginning. However, the Sefas Emes interprets differently. The Sefas Emes says that Moshe Rabbeinu was correct. "What You are doing to this generation of people is too much! You have caused too many bad things to happen to these people." The Sefas Emes concurs: The people did not deserve all these tzores (suffering). So why did the Ribono shel Olam do it? He did it because He knew that the tzores now would mitigate or erase future tzores. Therefore, in the larger picture, it was worth it for them to suffer now beyond what they deserved, in order to save future generations from even worse tzores.

We shared a similar thought several weeks ago: When Yosef met Binyomin, he started crying because of the Beis Hamikdash that would be destroyed in the future. At that time, we asked why Yosef was crying

THEN about the Beis Hamikdash? He is finally reunited with his brother Binyomin after all these years. Why is he thinking about the Beis Hamikdash at specifically that moment? We mentioned an insight from the Sefas Emes along the same lines: If Yosef would have been able to hold out longer and put the shevatim (tribes) through greater pain and anguish, the Batei Hamikdash would not have been destroyed.

This means that the shevatim had been experiencing a kaparah (atonement) for what Klal Yisrael was destined to undergo in future generations. Had they suffered more now, then in the future, Jewish history would have been different. They would no longer have needed to endure the tzores that came to them in later generations. But since Yosef could not hold back any longer, their tzores at his hands was capped and the balance was held in abeyance for the times when the Batei Mikdash would be destroyed.

This is the way the Ribono shel Olam sometimes works. One generation needs to suffer or one person needs to suffer or one family needs to suffer to save them from far greater tzores. Even though the pain right now is terrible, it saves them from worse pain in the future. Sometimes a person needs to undergo a very painful operation but it saves him from future pain. If he does not undergo this medical procedure now, it is going to be much worse for him in the future. On a very basic level, this is the case with inoculations. A person receives a flu shot or a pneumonia vaccine. It hurts now, but that pain pales in comparison to what would be if someone would not receive the shot. This is a very simplistic example, but it is the reality: The pain now sometimes precludes much greater pain.

This, the Sefas Emes explains, is the meaning of this pasuk in Koheles: Tov achris davar m'reishiso. The achris (end of the story) is sometimes better because of what happened earlier on. This is what the Ribono shel Olam says to Moshe Rabbeinu: You are right. I have dealt out too much punishment to this nation. They don't deserve it. But this is saving Klal Yisrael from terrible things in the future.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/> learn@torah.org

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[CS-Late-breaking dvar torah from Rabbi YY Jacobson:

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date: Jan 23, 2025, 3:0 PM

subject: Find the Courage to Heal - Essay by Rabbi YY

The First Commandment: Find the Courage to Heal

"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 interpretation, 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 slaves 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 simple and moving, and is vital to the understanding of liberty in Judaism.

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 being free? That you learn to confer freedom on others.

The dictator, the control freak, or the abusive spouse or parent does not know how to give others freedom. He or she feels compelled to force others into the mold that he/she 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, insecurity, and confinement.

When I do not confront the parts in me that are wounded, my animal-soul consciousness which has developed myriads of coping mechanisms, emotions, drives, instincts, and belief systems to keep it safe and in control, will be running my inner operating system. Without even noticing it, I am trying to control the people around me through all types of creative and sometimes brilliant ways so that I can feel superficially safe and comfortable. My relationships and emotions are shaped by my internal wounds and terror—the need to survive in a scary and unsafe world.

In such a situation, how can I give up control? How can I celebrate otherness? How can I remain vulnerable, present, regulated, feeling your heartbeat with no agenda, when I need to put my heart on lockdown in order to survive, or I need to control you?

I am simply not capable of truly celebrating another person's life and individuality because I am desperate each moment for emotional oxygen; all I can think of is how to remain protected in a world that is dangerous. I may be aware of this, but I do feel the anxiety of manipulation.

Who is powerful? He who truly knows how to empower and trust. 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 internally the presence and heartbeat of the other? Can you enjoy the soaring success of your loved ones and constituents? Do you encourage them to spread their wings and maximize their potential? Can you allow others to shine?

Pharaoh may set you free physically. But former slaves can become present tyrants. People who were abused sometimes 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 could go to Pharaoh to let them go free was: One day you will be free. Remember that freedom is a gift; use it to free others.

As it turns out, this is a remarkable Talmudic insight. The first commandment ever given to the Jewish people was: Don't internalize what the Egyptians have done to you. Find the spark of freedom, the inner Divine core, that no trauma can tarnish or paralyze; that part has remained free and will cherish conferring it upon others.

Footnotes [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. ]

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### This week's parsha mentions the marriage of Aharon and Elisheva... A Layman's Guide to Marriage

By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Question #1:

"A friend's son in Yeshiva in Israel got engaged to a local girl, and my friend was told that there will be a tena'im. I thought only chassidishe families do this."

Question #2:

"I was told that I should not include quotations from pesukim on my daughter's wedding invitation. Yet I see that 'everyone' does! Could you please explain the halacha?"

Question #3:

"I wish someone could walk me through all the halachic steps that we need in planning our daughter's wedding. I am afraid I'll forget to take care of something."

From the Engagement to the Wedding

Mazel tov!! Mazel tov!! Your daughter just became engaged to an amazing Yeshiva bachur from a wonderful family. You are in seventh heaven!

Virtually everyone plans some type of formal celebration when his or her child becomes engaged. Some call it a "lechayim," others a "vort," and still others a "tena'im." Since these differences are not inherently halachic, I am going to note only one point about this part of the simcha: Does one sign a tena'im shortly after announcing the engagement? In chassidishe circles, and in Eretz Yisrael even among "Israeli Litvishe" families, it is accepted that one finalizes the engagement by signing tena'im, which is an agreement between the two sets of parents what each will provide their child before the wedding and to conduct the wedding before a certain agreed-upon date. The climax of the engagement celebration is when this document is signed, read aloud, and the two mothers break a plate together. Those who want to know why we break a plate at a tena'im and a glass at the chupah are referred to the commentaries who discuss this issue. (See Pri Megadim, 560: Mishbetzos Zahav 4 and Keser Rosh #114.)

In "American" non-chassidishe circles, these arrangements are more informal, and the two parties usually do not sign any formal tena'im. Some sign a type of tena'im at the wedding prior to the chupah.

#### Invitations

There actually are a few halachos about printing invitations. One may not quote any pesukim in invitations and, according to most authorities, the wording of an invitation should not use kesav ashuris, the Hebrew writing used for Sifrei Torah, Tefillin and Mezuzos (Shu"t Rav Pe'alim, Yoreh Deah 4:32). This is because kesav ashuris has sanctity and should not be used for mundane matters (Shu"t Radbaz 1:45; Rama, Yoreh Deah 284:2; Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 283:3). We should note that the Kesav Sofer writes that his father, the Chasam Sofer, permitted using kesav ashuris in wedding invitations and did so himself, contending that since making a wedding is a mitzvah, the invitation to the seudas mitzvah is not considered a mundane use. Nevertheless, the Kesav Sofer concludes that it is better not to use kesav ashuris for invitations (Shu"t Kesav Sofer, Even HaEzer #22 at end).

#### Shomrim

Why do the chassan and kallah require shomrim? From what time do the chassan and kallah require shomrim?

The Gemara says that three people require a shomer: an ill person, a choson and a kallah (Berachos 54b). Although many people have the custom of providing shomrim from the ufruf Shabbos, technically the choson and kallah require shomrim only from the wedding through the week of sheva berachos. The prevalent practice is that this includes only when they leave their house. This means that during sheva berachos week, the choson may attend minyan only if someone escorts him from his house and he may leave his bride without a shomer when he does, although some hold that a choson can go to shul without a shomer (told to me in the name of Rav Moshe Feinstein).

Nowithstanding what I wrote immediately above, it is common practice to provide the choson and kallah with shomrim on the day of the wedding also.

#### Things to Bring to the Wedding

The following can function as a useful checklist of items that should be brought to the wedding:

(1) Kesubah

From personal experience, I suggest bringing not only the kesubah one intends to use, but also several blank extra forms.

(2) Kittel

If the choson will wear one.

(3) Candles and Matches

Four candles for the shushbinin, who are the two couples that will escort the choson and kallah to the chupah, and matches with which to light the candles. The matches are also useful in the creation of ashes that will be placed on the choson's forehead before he walks to the chupah.

(4) Wine

Many deliberately bring a bottle of white wine, a position that I advocate, to avoid concerns of red wine staining a white wedding dress.

(I am aware of some poskim who prefer that one use red wine at a chupah. However, I prefer white wine, since it spares the worry of a stained gown.)

#### (5) Berachos

Cards, or something similar, with all the berachos for the various honorees.

#### (6) Ring

The wedding ring. This should be a ring without a precious stone (Even HaEzer 31:2). Some rabbonim prefer that it have no design at all. It is important that the ring be the property of the choson. In other words, the choson must either purchase it with his own money, or whoever purchased it must have given it to the choson as a gift and the choson picked it up to acquire it. So, if the bride wants to use her late great-grandmother's wedding ring, the current rightful owner of that ring must give it to the choson with no strings attached, prior to the wedding, and he must make an act of kinyan, halachic acquisition, to possess it, such as by picking it up with this intention.

#### (7) Glass

A well-wrapped glass that will be broken. (Note that the Rama [Even HaEzer 65:3] states that the choson should break the glass that was used to hold the wine of the wedding beracha. Although I have seen this actually practiced, it is definitely not the common contemporary custom.)

#### (8) Key

Also, make sure that someone has the key to the yichud room, or that it is left unlocked!

#### (9) Choson and kallah

Of course, someone should make sure that the choson and the kallah get to the wedding.

Wow!! We have actually gotten all the way to the wedding! What happens next?

#### The Choson Tish

If the tenu'ah were not performed earlier, some people make a tenu'ah now. If the tenu'ah will take place at the wedding, one should have a plate handy that one intends to break.

The kesubah is filled out and signed at the choson tish. (In Eretz Yisrael, many follow the practice of not signing the kesubah until the chupah itself.)

At this point, we introduce the mesader kiddushin, the talmid chacham who is honored with making certain that the halachic aspects of the wedding are performed correctly. Although this should go without saying, one should make sure that the mesader kiddushin is qualified for his role, including the extensive laws regarding how to write the kesubah correctly. I emphasize this point because of the dozens of times that I have been at weddings in which the mesader kiddushin is not halachically qualified for the job.

#### Kabalas Kinyan

Following the instructions of the mesader kiddushin, the choson lifts up a pen, handkerchief, or other item as a means of kinyan in the presence of two witnesses. By doing this, he assumes the financial responsibilities of a husband and future father.

#### Should We Use the Same Witnesses?

There are two prevalent practices as to how many sets of witnesses are appointed, and which practice is followed depends on the preference of the mesader kiddushin. The more common American practice is that each part of the ceremony -- the signing of the kesubah, the kiddushin itself, and the yichud -- is witnessed by different sets of witnesses, in order to honor more people. In Eretz Yisrael, the common practice is to have one set of witnesses for all the stages. The Tashbeitz (2:7) explains that once one is honored with performing a mitzvah, we encourage that he perform the rest of the mitzvah (hamaschil bemitzvah omrim lo gemor). Other reasons for this custom are provided by the Eizer MiKodesh (end of Even HaEzer 42) and Rav Shelomoh Zalman Auerbach.

#### Signing of Kesubah

After the choson makes the kabalas kinyan, the witnesses carefully read through the kesubah and then sign it (Rama, Even HaEzer 66:1 and

Choshen Mishpat 45:2). If they are attesting to something by signing, they must know what it is.

#### Choson Signing Kesubah

Many have the practice that the choson also signs the kesubah beneath the witnesses' signatures. This practice dates back to the times of the Rishonim and demonstrates that the choson approves what the witnesses are signing (Rashba, Bava Basra 175; Eizer MiKodesh 66:1 s.v. hayah ta'us).

#### Bedeken

The choson, escorted by the two fathers and accompanied by the celebrants, now goes to badek the kallah, by pulling the veil over her head. At this point, the kallah's father and perhaps others bless her. The celebrants then proceed to the chupah.

#### The Chupah

The chupah itself should ideally be open on all four sides (Eizer MiKodesh). This is reminiscent of the tent of Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imenu, whose tent was accessible from all four directions of the globe so as not to inconvenience any potential guests. We are conveying blessing upon the bride and groom that the house they build together should be as filled with chesed as was the house of Avraham and Sarah. Immediately prior to walking to the chupah, the mesader kiddushin places some ashes on the choson's forehead. The ashes are placed where the choson wears his tefillin, and are immediately removed, and serve to remind the choson that even at this moment of tremendous joy, he should remember that our Beis HaMikdash lies in ruins. This literally fulfills the verse in Yeshayah (61:3) Lasum la'aveilei tzion laseis lahem pe'er tachas eifer, To place on the mourners of Zion and to give them splendor instead of ashes -- the Navi promises that in the future we will replace the ashes that currently remind us of the churban (Even HaEzer 65:3).

#### Chupah Under the Stars

The prevalent Ashkenazic practice is that the chupah is conducted outdoors or under an open skylight in order to provide a beracha for the marrying couple that their descendants should be as numerous as the stars (Rama, Even HaEzer 61:1). However, if a couple prefers to hold their chupah under a roof, the mesader kiddushin should still perform the wedding ceremony for them, since there is no violation to perform the chupah this way (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Even HaEzer 1:93).

#### Jewelry at the Chupah

There is a common custom that the kallah removes all her jewelry before she goes to the chupah. Some explain that this custom is based on the Mishnah that after the Churban of the Beis HaMikdash, Chazal decreed that the choson and kallah should no longer wear the crowns that they were accustomed to wearing before that time (Sotah 49a). Although removing jewelry may be associated with this idea, most authorities contend that this is only a custom borrowed from this idea, but is not really required. If it were required, then wearing jewelry would be prohibited from the night before the wedding until the end of sheva berachos (see Mishnah Berurah 560:17). The accepted practice is to prohibit only jewelry of silver, gold or precious stones that are worn on the head (Mishnah Berurah 560:17, quoting Pri Megadim; however, note that the Yam shel Shelomoh, Gittin 1:19, rules that a kallah may not wear any silver or gold jewelry the entire sheva berachos week.)

#### Wearing a Kittel

The common practice among Eastern European Jews is that the choson wears a kittel at the chupah. The reason for wearing the kittel is that the wedding day is his personal day of atonement and the choson is encouraged to do teshuvah on this day.

When does he put on the kittel? There are two common practices; some have the choson wear the kittel under a coat or folded up under his suit jacket, whereas others have the kittel placed on top of his suit as soon as he stands under the chupah. The kittel is removed either immediately after the chupah or in the cheder yichud.

The accepted practice is that the shushbin places the kittel on the choson. His "dressing" the choson reinforces the idea that the wedding day is a day of teshuvah and atonement --when the choson puts on his kittel for the first time, he is reminded of when he will be wearing his

kittel for the last time – and that, at that time, he will not be putting it on himself (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 147:4).

#### Who Walks Them Down?

The choson and kallah are escorted by two couples, called the shushbinin, who are usually their parents. There was an old custom that the two shushbinin couples should both be couples who are in their first marriage (cited by Eizer MiKodesh 68:2, who says that he is uncertain about the origin of this custom). Some have the custom that a woman who is visibly pregnant should not serve as shushbin (Shearim Hametzuyanim Bahalacha 147:12). Since these practices are custom and not halacha, when following them may create a dispute, shalom is more important.

There are two common practices as to who specifically escorts the choson and who escorts the kallah. Some have the custom that the choson is escorted by the two male shushbinin and the kallah by the two female shushbinin, whereas others have each escorted by a couple. To decide what to do, I quote a well-known practice of Rav Yaakov Kamenetski, who at three of his children's marriages had the shushbinin walk as couples and in the other three the fathers escorted the choson and the mothers escorted the kallah. His rule: I do whatever the mechutan prefers.

#### Kallah in the Right

Based on a verse in Tehillim (45:10) that teaches that the place of honor for a princess is to be stationed on the right, the kallah stands to the right and the choson on the left.

#### Standing at the Chupah

In America, the guests usually sit throughout the chupah ceremony, whereas in Eretz Yisrael the standard practice is that everyone stands throughout the chupah. The latter practice, or, more specifically, that everyone stands at the wedding while the sheva berachos are recited, is quoted in the name of the Zohar (see Shu't HaElef Lecha Shalom, Even HaEzer #115).

#### Erusin and Nesuin

There are two stages to a Jewish wedding. The first stage is called kiddushin or erusin (not to be confused with the Modern Hebrew word erusin, which means "engagement"), and revolves around the choson giving the wedding ring to the kallah. The second step is called nesuin.

In Talmudic times, these two stages were conducted separately – often as much as a year apart. After kiddushin, the couple is married, but, in earlier days, they did not yet live together.

Today, the two stages are conducted as one long ceremony.

#### Is the Kallah's Face Covered?

The Rama (31:2) cites an old Ashkenazi custom that the kallah's face is covered at her chupah. The Rama does not say how thick the veil is, and we find a dispute among later authorities about this. Some authorities object strongly to the kallah wearing a veil that is so thick that the witnesses cannot identify her (Mabit, quoted by Pischei Teshuvah 31:5). Others rule that it is not problematic for the veil to be this thick, and therefore in many places the custom was that the kallah wore a very thick veil.

The mesader kiddushin recites the beracha of borei pri hagafen on behalf of the choson and the kallah. They should have in mind to be included in his beracha and not to interrupt before they drink the wine (see Afikei Yam 2:2). According to the Noda Be'Yehuda (Shu't Even HaEzer #1) the chosson should also have in mind to be included in the birchas erusin, but Har Tzvi (Orach Chaim #44) quotes Tevuos Shor, R. Akiva Eiger and several others that the birkas erusin is not a chiyuv of the choson. The choson and kallah then sip from the cup. The most common practice is that the mesader kiddushin gives the choson to drink and then hands the cup to the kallah's mother, who gives the kallah to drink. The choson and kallah need to drink only a small sip of the wine (Be'er Heiteiv, Even HaEzer 34:6; Amudei Apiryon page 71).

#### Yichud Eidim

On behalf of the choson, the mesader kiddushin appoints the two witnesses, and then asks the witnesses, within earshot of the kallah, whether the ring is worth a perutah, which is only a few cents. The

reason for this strange conversation is so that the kallah agrees to be married even if the ring is worth so little (Rama, Even HaEzer 31:2).

According to many authorities, the witnesses must see the choson place the ring on the kallah's finger (Shu't HaRashba 1:780; Rama, Even HaEzer 42:4). Although most authorities rule that this is not essential, the accepted practice is to be certain that the witnesses see the actual placing of the ring on the kallah's finger (Pischei Teshuva, Even HaEzer 42:12).

#### Reading the Kesubah

At this point, the kesubah is read to interrupt between the erusin and the nesuin, and then the sheva berachos are recited. Although some authorities question how one can divide the sheva berachos and not have one person recite them all, the accepted practice is to divide them among six, and in some places seven, honorees (Shu't Igros Moshe, Even HaEzer #94; cf. Har Tzvi).

#### Out of Order

Mistakes are commonly made in the order in which the sheva berachos are recited. One should be careful to make sure that each person being honored knows which beracha he is reciting. If the wrong beracha is recited such that the berachos are now recited out of order, one should not repeat a beracha, but recite the skipped beracha and then proceed to recite the remaining berachos that have not yet been said. Similarly, if the honoree began reciting the wrong beracha, including Hashem's name, he should complete the beracha he has begun, the omitted beracha should then be said, and then proceed to recite the remaining berachos. If someone began reciting out of order either the beracha of Sos tasis or Samayach tesamach, which do not begin with Hashem's name, one should correct the situation and recite the correct beracha (Amudei Apiryon page 76).

#### Putting his Foot down

After the sheva berachos are completed, the choson smashes a glass (Rama, Even HaEzer 65:3). (According to an alternative practice, the choson smashes the glass earlier in the ceremony -- immediately after the kiddushin are completed.) Many have the custom that prior to breaking the glass the choson recites or the audience sings the pasuk, "Im eshkachech Yerushalayim tishkach yemini." This custom has sources in Rishonim (Sefer Hachassidim #392).

The choson and kallah are then escorted with music and dancing to the yichud room. Two witnesses, called the eidei yichud, see that there is no one else in the yichud room, and then post themselves outside for the amount of time that the mesader kiddushin instructs them.

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#### Va'eira: Hamotzi - For all Times

##### Rav Kook Torah

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

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

Hamotzi — Past or Future?

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

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

What is the difference between motzi and ha-motzi?

The Talmud explains that this disagreement is based on how the verse in Exodus should be understood. According to Rabbi Nehemiah, the word ha-motzi implies the future. The Jews were still slaves in Egypt, and God assured them that He would take them out in the future. The future

tense, however, is not appropriate for the blessing over bread. We recite this blessing in recognition of the wheat that has already come out of the earth. The word *motzi*, on the other hand, refers to the past, and is therefore more suitable.

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

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

#### Contemplating God

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

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

Rabbi Nehemiah, by preferring the word *motzi*, concurred with the first approach. Before eating bread, we need to raise our intellectual awareness of the event that occurred: this bread was baked from wheat that God brought forth from the earth. The word *motzi* is a verb, referring to an event that has taken place. Rabbi Nehemiah stressed the importance of the past tense, since appreciation of God's greatness is achieved by objectively analyzing God's hand in history and past events. The other scholars disagreed. The blessing should be *ha-Motzi*, "the One Who brings forth." *Ha-Motzi* is not a verb but a descriptive phrase. We do not only observe the event itself, but we attempt to look beyond it to the Cause of the action. This is a supra-scientific, intuitive approach, relating to God according to His actions. The scholars held that the blessing over bread is not just a way of contemplating the process of wheat growing out of the earth. We must concentrate on the Source of this process, and form a corresponding mental image of God.

#### Beyond Time

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

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#### Perceptions

##### By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Parshas Vaera

Not What It Looks Like

HE LED FOR one term. But when he refused to turn against the Jews, they got rid of him and forced him from office. But when he decided he liked being king more, he accepted the role and made the lives of the Jews a living hell. The ally had become the enemy.

Sound familiar? Donald Trump? Perhaps one day. But in the meantime, it had certainly been Pharaoh back in the time of this week's parsha, and it begs the question, how does such a "180" occur?

Then, there is the part about Moshe Rabbeinu. I cringed after reading the end of last week's parsha again, which spilled over into this week's. I mean, can you imagine how Moshe felt when his good news turned into the worst news, and his attempt to free his people further enslaved them? It was completely demoralizing, and he took that out on God at the end of last week.

Adding tons more salt to the wound was having to face the enemy and their cronies on the way out. They laughed at the Jewish leader while celebrating their great "victory" over him, his God, and his people. Also, sound familiar? The Palestinians and their allies? Yes, but also Moshe Rabbeinu and the Arabs of his time.

And yet, unbeknownst to everyone was that not only was God in charge the entire time, but He was making it all happen. And not only was God making it happen, but He was making it occur in consonance with the overall plan of Creation. And not only were the events in consonance with the purpose of Creation, but they were the ideal path to fulfill it...from GOD'S perspective.

That was easy to see while it was only God and Moshe on Mt. Sinai discussing the upcoming redemption from Egypt. There were references to Pharaoh, but miles away, he was only "two-dimensional," like a fictional character in a book. On Mt. Sinai, Moshe could not hear the cracks of whips or the screams of people being beaten. And there certainly wasn't any social media to distract and mislead him about what was happening.

It's a completely different reality once you enter the world in which it is happening. Sensory overload. We need to understand. We want to maintain control. We want a happy ending and at minimal cost to us. There is intelligence out there, but it is also mixed with tremendous ignorance and, in many cases, complete stupidity. Egos are everywhere, greatly clouding history.

Now, more than ever, it is hard to know the facts about anything. Once upon a time, the news was a way to do that but has since become so unreliable. Social media is in the hands of good and bad people, and it is not always so easy to tell who is who. I have been shocked by things people have told me that they buy into because of something they "learned" from one social media or another.

This, coupled with the fact that people don't think as clearly as they once did, makes for a very confused society and very warped opinions. The fears that William Bennett, the Secretary of Education from 1985 to 1988 under President Ronald Reagan, had about the direction of the American mind have since come true, and then some. The intellectual descent seems unstoppable, though the amount of knowledge available to the average person is unprecedented.

The Gemora predicted all of this over 1500 years ago. How did it know so long ago what would happen at the End of Days when it was impossible to even know what would exist at this time? Did they just project the trend of their time? Or, also being the greatest kabbalists of their time who knew so much about God's plan for Creation, they knew what that plan would require, somewhat, to get to the Messianic Period. It is one of the most important lessons of the Exodus. Amazingly, though we read these parshios every year and celebrate redemption from Egypt every Pesach, we overlook the most important message necessary to spiritually survive, and in some cases, even physically survive, Jewish history. That message? Only God knows the full plan of history and, therefore, He is the only One Who can know what history needs at any given moment in time to fulfill it.

For this reason, sometimes what God does might make sense to us, and oftentimes does not make sense to us at all. When Iyov questioned God's actions, He responded by pointing out that Iyov's judgment was based only upon what he knew of God and history. And that was based upon what God allowed him to know, which was only a fraction of a fraction of a fraction, etc., of what he needed to know to understand how what was confusing in the short run was completely logical in the long run.

And by long run, we don't mean a year from now, or even a millennium from now. We won't see the full extent of God's master plan until much later in the World to Come. By then history will have been what it was meant to be since Day One, and everything in between will fall perfectly into place like pieces of a large puzzle.

In the meantime, we learn Torah to guide us and perform mitzvos to help us stay on track during the confusing part of history. God gave them to us with the full knowledge of His plan in mind and that, together with Divine course corrections when they are necessary, helps us to

participate in the fulfillment of Creation even while lacking a sufficient understanding of where all of this is heading, and why. Check out my new Haggadah, b”H, called “The Wise Son Says.” You can see it here: <https://www.shaarnunproductions.org/lwise-son-says-haggadah.html>, and take advantage of the special offers available at this time. Pesach is closing in on us fast, b”H, so please check out my new Haggadah while the special lasts. It’s Torah for the entire year...and possibly life-altering.

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## Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vaera

Hail to the Chief

Some people just never learn. For almost a year Pharaoh was literally plagued by every conceivable misfortune, yet he refused to let the Jewish people leave his land. Of course, he pleaded with Moshe during every plague to stop the great inconvenience, pain, and disaster that were befalling his country. He would even promise to let the Jews go, yet he never admitted guilt. He would beseech Moshe to stop the various plagues. “Pray for me and remove the frogs! I will let you serve your G-d in the desert (Exodus 8:4).” Sometimes he would offer unrestricted freedom, only to renege when the plagues ceased. Never, except on one occasion, did Pharaoh admit that G-d was correct and he was corrupt.

That exception was the plague of hail. In fact, the plague of hail was so powerful that even Hashem Himself categorized it in a unique way. Moshe quoted Hashem to Pharaoh: “This time I shall send all my plagues against your heart, upon your servants, and your people so that you shall know that there is none like Me in the world” (Exodus 9:14). Why did Hashem consider the hail a more powerful act than His turning water into blood, or delivering pestilence, or wild animals or frogs? True, the hail did miraculously contain a fire ensconced in the ice, but all the plagues had miraculous attributes to them. Turning the Nile into blood is not an everyday occurrence either! What characteristic did the hail have to label it “all my plagues?”

Even more troubling is Pharaoh’s response. After the plague strikes Egypt he calls Moshe and Ahron and he tells them “this time I have sinned, Hashem is righteous and I and my people are the wicked ones” (Exodus 9:27) What caused Pharaoh to utter those submissive words at this particular time? Didn’t he already see blood, frogs, pestilence, boils, wild animals, and a host of different miraculous misfortunes that befall his people? What was so special about the fire and ice that fell from the heavens that charred even this man’s cruel temper?

Radio commentator, Paul Harvey, relates the following story: William and his Aunt Caroline were constantly feuding. Actually, William was jealous of his aunt’s popularity and social status in the New York of the late 1890’s. Compared to her, he was considered a social outcast, and was never invited to any of her lavish parties. That would have been bad enough. Having to live next door to her was too much for William to bear. The sight of elegant carriages arriving and departing made him seethe. Yet he could do nothing. At least he did nothing until the family fortune was distributed and he received 100 million dollars. Then he knew what to do. He decided to rip down his mansion and build a monstrosity. It had 530 rooms, 350 baths, and a whopping 970 employees. It would be the grandest, most elegant guest house of it’s kind. More carriages would pull up to his home in a day then to his aunt’s mansion in a month! Her home would pale in comparison, and the tumult of it all would force her to move.

William was right. Aunt Caroline moved way north of the shadow of her nephew’s hotel. And then she ripped down her old home. With the mere 50 million that she received, she too, decided to build a hotel on the site of her old mansion! It would be even more elegant, with nicer rooms and better service than her nephew’s. Two adjacent, competing hotels would have been built right next to each other if not for the wisdom of William’s own hotel manager. He got the two feuding relatives together and explained that hostility is not the way to success.

“If you two could just work together and adjoin the two hotels as one, it would become the most outstanding and influential accommodation on earth,” he explained. They listened and followed his instructions. He even advised them to make sure that every opening between the structures could be sealed again in case of a renewed falling-out. But in the end, William Waldorf and his aunt, Caroline Astor decided to bury the hatchet and replace it with a hyphen. And the world’s most luxurious accommodation was built — The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

There are many opposing forces in the world. However, when they work in tandem, they are the most powerful force possible. During this plague, fire and ice, two opposing forces in the world of nature disregarded their differences all in the service of the Supreme Commander. When Hashem announced that He will send all of His plagues, he was referring to conflicting forces that work harmoniously. After that, even Pharaoh was sensible enough, albeit for a short moment, to see his frailty and delusions. When even the worst of men see fire and ice dance together on one mission, there is nothing he can do but watch in amazement and admit, “Hashem is the righteous one and I and my people are the wicked ones.” When opposing opinions gather for one objective – to do the will of Hashem – they are as unstoppable as the hail that brought Pharaoh to his knees.

Dedicated by Ben and Beth Heller in memory of Sidney Turkel  
Good Shabbos!

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## Inauguration and Extortion, Pageantry and Pain

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Why are we so captivated by a presidential inauguration?

In 1797, after John Adams was inaugurated as second president of the United States, succeeding George Washington, he wrote to his wife Abigail, “When the Ceremony was over, [Washington] came and made me a visit and cordially congratulated me and wished my Administration might be happy, successful and honourable.” Four years later, in 1801, the transfer of power from Adams to Jefferson was significant as it was the first transfer between political opponents. It was uncomfortable, but it was successful.

With the inauguration of a new American president, we have come to expect a peaceful transfer of power, a hallmark of American democracy. Whether you are excited or disappointed in the outcome of this election and no matter your opinion on who rose his hand to be sworn in, we should all be grateful and proud that this week we experienced a peaceful transfer of power. Perhaps what is so captivating is the celebration of the democratic process itself and the comfort we take in it. As all of America inaugurated and many celebrated a new president, we may have felt like this exercise in American democracy is a given in our lives, since it is all we have ever known. But the truth is America is relatively young. This was only the 60th inauguration. Just two hundred and fifty years ago, there was no democracy called the United States of America.

In contrast to America’s relative youth, God promised the land of Israel to Avraham Avinu almost 4,000 years ago. He made good on that promise when the Jewish people marched into the land with Yehoshua 3,430 years ago. Almost 2,500 years ago, we returned to Israel with Ezra and Nechemia. After a long and bitter loss of sovereignty in our homeland, just over seventy-five years ago, we returned to govern and defend ourselves in the modern State of Israel.

The Jewish connection to Israel is sixteen times longer than America has existed, and nevertheless, while America celebrated its 60th inauguration, Israel is still fighting for its very right to exist. Over the last year and a half, our brothers and sisters in Israel have been facing enemies on seven fronts, all bent on Israel’s demise, all denying the Jewish right to the Land of Israel. As President Trump addressed his inaugural parade, families of Israelis being held hostage for 472 unimaginable days stood behind him holding posters of their loved ones and draped in symbolic yellow scarves as the arena chanted, “BRING THEM HOME!”

While America’s leadership was attending ceremonies with pomp and circumstance and changing outfits between inaugural balls, Israel’s

leaders were making impossible decisions and concessions and fighting to keep its coalition alive.

The Jewish world couldn't be more grateful or joyous to welcome Emily Damari, Romi Gonen, and Doron Steinbrecher home from captivity, but that joy is severely tempered by the cost of their release and by how many remain behind.

As Alan Dershowitz neatly put it:

The decision by the Israeli government to make significant concessions to the Hamas kidnappers should never be called a "deal." It was an extortion. Would you call it a deal if somebody kidnapped your child and you "agreed" to pay ransom to get her back? Of course not. The kidnapping was a crime. And the extortionate demand was an additional crime.

So the proper description of what occurred is that Israel, pressured by the United States, capitulated to the unlawful and extortionate demands of Hamas as the only way of saving the lives of kidnapped babies, mothers and other innocent, mostly civilian, hostages.

This was not the result of a negotiation between equals. If an armed robber puts a gun to your head and says, "your money or your life," your decision to give him your money would not be described as a deal. Nor should the extorted arrangement agreed to by Israel be considered a deal. So let's stop using that term.

Agreeing to be extorted may be the right decision but it is a deeply tragic one. It is painful for the entire Jewish people and should be for decent people everywhere. But it is also painful for God Himself. When wickedness exists in the world, when it triumphs it is a chillul Hashem, a desecration of God and His name.

In Tachanun on Mondays and Thursdays, we ask, "עד מתי עוזך בשבֵי יהָפָרָך בַּיד צָר?" Hashem, how long will You allow Your strength be held hostage? How long will You let Your glory be in the hand of the enemy?" Is there a greater galus, a darker exile, than God Himself seeming to be in captivity?

When I think about the majesty and excitement of a presidential inauguration, it makes me think about what we are really davening for when we ask Hashem to redeem us from this galus. On the one hand, America's continuous government for almost 250 years strikes as captivating, impressive, and in a way more remarkable than Israel's 76-year history. However, when you consider the miracle of two thousand years of dispersion, persecution and attempts at systematic extermination, the return of the Jewish people to our homeland and the revival of sovereignty and self-autonomy in our country, with all of the challenges and problems, it is hard to think of a greater miracle.

In the introduction to his siddur, Rav Yaakov Emden (1697-1776) describes that our very survival through galus, our mere existence, is the greatest miracle, greater than the miracles we read about in the Torah and Tanach. He wrote: "By the life of my soul! When I contemplated these wonders, they appeared greater to me than all the miracles and wonders that HaShem Yisbarach performed for our forefathers in Egypt, and the wilderness, and the Land of Israel."

The Talmud (Berachos 19b) quotes R' Elazar bar Tzadok who said, "I and my fellow Kohanim would jump over coffins of the deceased in order to hurry towards kings of Israel to greet them." And they did not say this only towards kings of Israel, but they said this even towards kings of the nations of the world, so that if one will be privileged to witness the redemption of Israel, he will distinguish between kings of Israel and kings of the nations of the world.

As we watch the 60th American inauguration, and pay homage to its pomp, circumstance and pageantry, we do so knowing that one day, the people being extorted and fighting for its very existence will welcome the King Moshiach and that day will put to shame the pomp and circumstance of today.

And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be your God [...] (6:7).

This week's parsha opens with Hashem discussing with Moshe His plans for rescuing Bnei Yisroel from Egypt. Herein we find the well-known "arba leshonos shel geula – four iterations of salvation," i.e. four different words describing the process of Hashem taking Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt. The fourth word that the Torah uses is "velokachti" – generally translated as "I will take."

Yet, both Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonasan Ben Uziel translate the word "velokachti" as "ve'eskorev" from the language of "kiruv" as in "I will draw near." This is odd; in general there are two Aramaic translations for taking: "ud'var," which is used when referring to taking people (see Bereishis 12:5 when Avraham took his wife Sarah), and "u'nesiv," which is used when referring to taking inanimate objects (see Bereishis 28:18 when Yaakov takes the rock and places it under his head). So why did both Targumim deviate from the usual translation of the word "to take" in this particular instance?

We find another place where the Torah uses the word "to take" and both Targumim translate it as "ve'eskorev" instead: When Hashem asks Moshe "to take" ("kach") Aharon and his children (Vayikra 8:2). Here too both Targumim translate the word "to take" as "karev – to draw near." In fact, when the Torah itself describes what Moshe did it says, "vayakrev Moshe es Aharon ve'es bonov – and Moshe drew near Aharon and his sons." Why does the Torah describe this "taking" in such a manner?

Moshe is asking Aharon and his children to take a position of responsibility within the Jewish people. This kind of responsibility has to be accepted as a matter of free will. The way to get someone to accept it is to draw them close and allow them to make their own decision. Ask any professional involved in "kiruv" and they'll tell you that the only effective manner of drawing someone near to Judaism is to be "mekarev – to bring them close," meaning to allow them to make their own decision to continue forward.

Chazal teach us that this fourth language of salvation ("velokachti") refers to Bnei Yisroel receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai (See Sforno and Ibn Ezra ad loc). Thus, standing at Mount Sinai Hashem draws us near, but we must choose to move forward and accept the Torah. It is quite significant that the very act of accepting the Torah has to be done as an act of free will.

Maharal, in the introduction to his work Tiferes Yisroel, explains that this is the meaning of the verse "and this is the Torah that Moshe placed in front of Bnei Yisroel" (Devarim 4:24). We weren't forced to take the Torah, it was placed in front of us and we chose to come and take it. In other words, when you're trying to get someone to develop in a certain area you cannot force them to change, they need to choose to want to change and take positive steps in that direction.

Accepting the Torah as a way of life wasn't about getting Bnei Yisroel to act a certain way; it was about getting them to develop in a certain direction. This kind of "buy-in to the program" only happens if one completely accepts it of his or her own free will.

Perhaps this provides the most enduring message for both parents and educators. All too often we spend the majority of our efforts focusing on teaching our children and students how to act. This, of course, is the wrong approach to chinuch. We must focus on exposing our children and talmidim to the beauty and brilliance of the Jewish way of life. This in turn will cause them to be inspired and choose to lead a meaningful life of Torah and mitzvos. Only by guiding our children to choose properly for themselves can we ensure an enduring impact on the next generation.

In the Presence of the King

And Moshe said to him, as soon as I am gone from the city, I will spread out my hands to Hashem [...] (9:29).

Towards the end of this week's parsha the Torah recounts the events surrounding the seventh plague – the plague of hail. After being bombarded with the miraculous form of hail (the Torah tells us that the hail was a deadly combination of fire and ice, see 9:24 and Rashi ad loc), Pharaoh summons Moshe and begs him to daven to Hashem to

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**Rabbi Yochanan Zweig**

**This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Leon Brickman, z"l Eliezer ben Chayim Menachem HaLevi.**

Close to You

remove the plague. Moshe informs him that he will leave the city and beseech Hashem to remove the plague.

Rashi (ad loc) explains that Moshe had to leave the city because it was full of idols. Presumably, this means that Moshe wasn't permitted to daven in a city so rife with idols and idol worship. Ramban wonders why Moshe chose this time to go outside the city when previously he didn't feel compelled to leave to communicate with Hashem. Ramban answers that on prior occasions Moshe davened in his house, but this time he wanted to spread his hands towards the heavens and doing that in the city would be inappropriate.

There are several issues with this understanding of why Moshe chose this particular time to leave the city. Firstly, the Torah doesn't say anything about spreading his hands towards the heavens. Secondly, the Gemara frowns strongly on someone who prays in an open area (Brachos 34b, see also Tur and ShulchanAruch, OrachChayim 90:5). If Moshe could have davened quietly in the privacy of his home, why did he venture out of the city?

There are different types of davening to Hashem. There are many prayers that are, for lack of a better term, like placing a phone call to Hashem. In other words, we reach out to Hashem in many different circumstances and for a variety of reasons. Many teffilos beseech Hashem for different needs – such as asking Hashem to heal a relative –

and one can make these kinds of teffilos even while laying down in bed or while riding a bike. The same goes for all of the general things we wish to communicate with Hashem.

However, there is another kind of prayer, that of standing in Hashem's presence. This is typified by the Shemoneh Esrei. There are very specific rules about how a person must conduct himself in the presence of the King. Shemoneh Esrei isn't like a phone call to Hashem, rather it's like standing directly in front of Him.

Moshe told Pharaoh that he needed to spread his palms toward Hashem. Holding up your hands with your palms open facing someone is an indication of surrender. One can only surrender to another in their presence, thus this prayer required the presence of Hashem. This is the first time that Moshe wanted to daven in this manner. Moshe was actually bringing the presence of Hashem down, and it would have been inappropriate to have the presence of Hashem in a city filled with idols. Therefore, Moshe had to leave the city.

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## **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 purposes 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'kin (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: Hoshek (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 it 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'lō **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'lō 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'lō 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 liSHMO'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 decadent 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 Eliyahu 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

## =====

### 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 Seforo (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 Seforo's introduction to Sefer Shmot (in some Chumashim it is found in the first volume of Sefer Breishit, where Seforo 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 Seforo.

#### 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.

## TESHUVAH IN EGYPT

In sharp contrast to the line taken in the shiur, Ibn Ezra in his *peirush Ha-aroach*(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 (*Oznyim 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 commentators, 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* – *mili'um* 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-aroach* 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.

## 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 reprobate 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:

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

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

## **HASHEM APPEARS:**

We now move on to Moshe Rabbeinu's first meeting with Hashem -- the burning bush. Hashem hears the cries of anguish of Bnei Yisrael, the Torah says; Hashem "remembers" His covenant with the Avot (forefathers), the promise to make their descendants into a great nation and to give them the Land of 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 it is too holy to tread upon. Hashem warns Moshe repeatedly that anyone who steps on the mountain will die. Once again, the reason the ground is sanctified is because the revelation by Hashem of a mission of national significance is what sanctifies a place.

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

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

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

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

It happened, on the way, at a rest stop, that Hashem met him and wanted to kill him. 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 her, 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