

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

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

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of our living hostages and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

After closely examining many generations of families in Sefer Bereishis, the Torah turns to Sefer Shemot. Since "shemot" is Hebrew for "names," one would expect to see numerous names starting with Parshat Shemot. However, as the Torah turns to the generation of the grandchildren of Yosef and his brothers, we do not see the names of any of these individuals until 2:10, where we first encounter "Moshe," the name that Paro's daughter (also not named in this parsha) gives to the infant child she adopts. The only other individuals whose names we encounter in this parsha are Aharon, Moshe's older brother (4:14) and Tziporah, Moshe's wife (4:25). For example, Moshe's sister (Miriam), their parents (Amram and Yocheved), and Paro's daughter (Batya) are mentioned but not named in the parsha. (We learn their names later.)

The almost complete absence of names of individuals of Moshe's generation fits in with the enormous changes for B'Nai Yisrael after the death of Yosef and his brothers. Yosef's family descend into Egypt in 2238 and leave with Moshe and Aharon in 2448, 210 years later (dates from Chabad). Levi is the last of his generation to die (2332), and the period of slavery starts. These figures imply that the period of slavery lasts no more than 116 years. As Shemot opens, the Torah states that the population of Jews increases rapidly, Paro reacts by oppressing the Jews, and the more that Paro oppresses our people, the faster our population grows. From 70 individuals who come to Egypt in 2238, by the time of the Exodus 210 years later, the population contains at least 600,000 adult males and probably something like 3 million Jews.

The Torah describes the Jews of Moshe's generation vividly as if they were rats and cockroaches – swarming pests who fill the land and make it disgusting (1:7-10). While Paro and the Egyptians have been anti-Semitic from the beginning (such as refusing to eat at the same table with Jews and abhorring their profession (shepherds)), the rapid change from treating Yosef and his family respectfully to enslaving them is shocking.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander picks an appropriate time to call out segments of the world community for disregarding and whitewashing an accelerating wave of antisemitism that has led to increased violence and murder of our people. For one example, the Australian government has repeatedly ignored a growing number of attacks against Jewish people, especially since October 7, 2023. For example, in his first response to the murder of Jews at Bondi Beach on the first night of Hanukkah, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese described "shocking and disturbing scenes" and generically referred to the victims as "any person who was harmed" (quoting Rabbi Brander). Were any of the victims, such as the two Chabad Rabbis, Jewish? Similarly, the BBC will not use the word "terrorist" to describe the willful massacre of civilians. Many university presidents in the United States also engaged in "even handed" policies toward pro-Hamas protesters who took over university offices and prevented Jews and our supporters from engaging with these thugs. The result was violence against Jews until President Trump charged these universities with violating federal law,

insisted on firing some university leaders and professors, and withdrew federal support for the universities until they instituted reforms and paid heavy fines.

There is a long history of governments ignoring threats to Jews. Rabbi Brander mentions the Russian pogroms that started in 1881, the Dreyfus Affair in France, and the recent, shocking election of New York Mayor Mamdani, a man who has not taken back his support of “globalization of the intifada” yet still obtained enough votes from Jews in the recent election to become mayor without even a runoff. Jews voting for a pro-Hamas candidate for mayor in New York City? We have enough self hating Jews, such as the editor of Haaretz (daily newspaper in Israel), who calls Hamas terrorists “freedom fighters.” And is Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders any less of a self hating Jew?

When God wants a representative to send a message to enemies of the Jews, does he select a known hero? Rabbi Yehoshua Singer explains Hashem’s words to Moshe at the burning bush. God can turn any individual He chooses into a hero. All the Moshe needs to know that “I shall be” is with him all the way. One of the messages from God to Moshe is that the Revelation will be at Har Sinai – a low, undistinguished mountain so ordinary that no one in the past 3000 years has been able to identify it. In a time of need, when Hashem wants to find a way to save the Jews, He will do so. As Mordechai told Esther, she had a choice to be God’s chosen person to save the Jews – or she could decline, die, and God would select someone else. We learn and re-learn this message throughout history. This message is in Parshat Shemot, but also in many other places in the Torah and Navi.

We Jews must teach our children and grandchildren that those who oppress Jews in the world today follow in a long tradition going back at least to Paro, and that modern examples include Hitler, Hamas, and others I have discussed above. We must call out when we see antisemitism in the world and do our part to convince world leaders to act appropriately.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z”l, faced antisemitism during his lifetime, and I especially remember a time when high school thugs threw raw eggs and tomatoes at him as he walked to shul on Yom Kippur morning. Rabbi Cahan’s yahrzeit is Rosh Hodesh Shevat, but before then, 20 Tevet (tonight as I write these words) is the tenth yahrzeit of another special man, Dov Pluznik, Dov ben Meir, z”l, who remembered the celebrations on the founding of Israel in 1948, when he was eight years old and living in Israel. Dov always chanted the Haftorah at our shul on Yom Ha’atzmaut, and I join with his wife Judy in remembering him on his yahrzeit. While we remember antisemitism in our world, we must also remember special members of our community whose actions help make our world a better place. May our future contain fewer antisemites and many more of our people whose efforts of tikkun olam make our communities better places in which to live.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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

Please daven for a Refuah Shleimah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezi Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, 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; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, 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.

Haftarat Parshat Shemot: Three Faces of Redemption

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander *

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

As we begin reading the book of Shemot – Exodus – this week, we enter the Torah’s narrative of redemption. At its simplest reading, Shemot tells the story of our liberation from physical bondage and servitude. But from a deeper perspective, it charts our spiritual journey from a base reality of moral collapse toward pure and authentic unity with the Almighty. The Sages describe Israel’s time in Egypt as a descent to the “49 gates of impurity,” underscoring that redemption was not only an escape from slavery, but also a transformation of destiny.

Jewish communities of Ashkenaz, Sepharad, and the Yemenites each read a different prophecy as the haftara for Parshat Shemot, with each focusing on a distinct aspect of this redemptive process. Together, all three aspects offer a crucial vision that is particularly relevant in our own moment of national and spiritual revival.

The Ashkenazi custom is to read from the book of Yeshayahu (chaps. 27–28), a prophecy that focuses on the spiritual progress of the nation as a whole. According to Yeshayahu, the redemptive process is challenged time and again by Israel’s repeated failures, including idolatry and rebellion against God. Yet alongside this critique is an unwavering assertion of perpetually enduring love and commitment between God and the Jewish people. Redemption is guaranteed because of the covenant, not because of perfect behavior, an idea which is stressed in verses appended to the haftara. These additional verses (Chap. 29:22–23) envision a future in which Israel’s children sanctify God’s name and restore dignity to the House of Yaakov:

“And so, this is what the Lord has said – Avraham’s redeemer – to the House of Yaakov: No more will Yaakov be ashamed, his face no more grow pale, for when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, sanctifying My name, it is Yaakov’s Holy One they sanctify; it is Israel’s God they worship.”

The haftara read by Edot Hamizrach from the book of Yirmiyahu (1:1–2:3) focuses less on the people as a whole, instead setting its sights on the personality and mission of the prophet as a leader. Yirmiyahu’s call to prophecy closely parallels that of his predecessor Moshe, whose first prophetic encounter is described in our parsha. Both resist their mission, doubting the worthiness of their capacity for speech: “Please, Lord God, I am not capable of speaking” (Yirmiyahu 1:6). Both are inaugurated into leadership roles through visual signs – in Yirmiyahu’s case, an almond tree and a boiling cauldron. And both are charged with standing up as a lonely voice of justice against corrupt institutions of power and moral decay. By comparing Yirmiyahu to Moshe, this haftara stresses a model of redemption that flows top-down from principled, responsible leadership to the people.

The Yemenite tradition offers yet another perspective, as the haftara is read from the sixteenth chapter of Yechezkel. Interestingly, this prophecy focuses not on the leadership, nor on the people, but rather on the hidden heroes who work silently behind the scenes. Yechezkel tells a parable of an abandoned baby girl, rescued and raised at great personal risk. This narrative echoes the altruism and heroism displayed by the women in our parsha: the midwives Shifra and Puah, as well as Pharaoh’s daughter, who defied the king’s order. These women risked their lives to preserve Israelite newborns from death. Whether Jewish or Egyptian, these women represent an ethical, heroic underground. As our tradition notes, Israel survived thanks to the courageous and pious women who were ready to sacrifice and put themselves in harm’s way – (Rashi Shemot 38:8).

Read simultaneously by the different communities of Israel, these three prophecies represent three complementary paradigms of Jewish spiritual and national redemption. Yeshayahu spotlights the spiritual state and progress of the people in general, which stands as the bedrock of any redemptive process. Yirmiyahu highlights the principles of humility, moral clarity, and communal responsibility in leadership. Yechezkel reminds us that history is shaped by those willing to act selflessly for the greater good. This is not a contradiction in any way. On the contrary, we learn that only when all three

elements are present can we truly move from a state of subjugation to one of freedom, and from the margins to the center of history.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Ohr Torah Stone is 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@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. **Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.** <https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-shemot-rabbi-brander-5786/?pfstyle=wp>

When Words Become Deadly *

By Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander ** (December 18, 2025)

Immediately following the antisemitic terror attack that took place on Sunday in Sydney, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese described “shocking and disturbing scenes,” and generically referred to the victims as “any person who was harmed.” This choice of words, which failed to highlight the obvious antisemitic nature of the attack or the fact that it targeted the celebration of the first night of Chanukah, angered Jews and people of good conscience around the world.

Several hours later, amid public criticism and video footage that left no room for doubt regarding the failure of Albanese’s initial statement, he adopted a different tone. He acknowledged that this was indeed an antisemitic terrorist act against the Jewish community and even went further, reaffirming that Jews have “every right to be proud of who you are and what you believe.” In light of his clear and unequivocal support for the Jewish community in these later remarks, some may argue that too much weight should not be placed on the wording of his initial response. But unfortunately, Albanese’s record of statements from the not-so-distant past suggests otherwise.

In the face of the growing number of antisemitic incidents, attacks, and threats against Jewish citizens of Australia since the attacks of Oct 7 that forced Israel into war two years ago, Albanese and his government have repeatedly chosen to use neutral terminology that ignores antisemitism. In addition, too many Australian officials have disregarded repeated warnings from Israeli security and intelligence officials about the threat of attacks against Jews in their country.

It is doubtful whether even now, confronted with consequences so severe that they can no longer be ignored or denied, Albanese understands that “life and death are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). The language that leaders, public figures, and media professionals choose to use — or choose to avoid — has the power to create reality. Sadly, as Sunday’s attack showed, that reality can be a murderous one that brutally takes even the lives of innocent children who sought only to celebrate the joy of Chanukah.

Albanese is not alone. He is merely another link in a historical chain that has sought to obscure antisemitism and its devastating consequences. Among many examples is the Russian Empire, which framed the pogroms of 1881–1884 as “popular rage” and civil disorder rather than as institutionalized antisemitism that was fueled by anti-Jewish newspapers and government officials. Meanwhile, in France, during the Dreyfus Affair, the French military and political establishment constructed a narrative of pure national security when framing a Jewish officer for treason based on forged evidence, while categorically denying antisemitism.

We see the same patterns now. New York City’s mayor-elect, Zohran Mamdani, did indeed issue strong words of condemnation, calling the Sydney attack “a horrifying act of antisemitic terror” and promising to keep the city’s Jewish residents safe and to “expel this terrible violence from our midst.” However, he has still not reckoned with his own role in fostering that same antisemitic violence, through previous statements like supporting the “globalization of the intifada.” That idea, when encouraged with the words of public figures like him, has not remained a mere slogan but has fueled waves of global antisemitic violence, striking most recently on Bondi Beach.

Language creates reality and legitimacy – through explicit statements, the writing of falsehoods (particularly regarding the war in Gaza), or through silence and the choice of sanitized, neutral terminology. We see this all around us: Antisemitism is painted as legitimate “anti-Israel” sentiment. Presidents of Ivy League universities in the United States refuse to condemn rising antisemitism on their campuses and treat opposition to calls for Jewish genocide as “context-dependent.” The publisher of the Israeli daily Haaretz calls Hamas terrorists freedom fighters. The BBC officially announces it will not use the term “terrorist” in the name of neutrality, even when referring to the deliberate massacre of civilians. A candidate for mayor of the city with the largest Jewish population in the United States expresses support for violent global uprising. Even if the leaders involved in all of these incidents later change course and retract their statements under public pressure, the seed of antisemitism that normalizes escalation and invites the next attack has already been planted in soil.

In the face of this, we as Jews have a duty to bring the dangerous ideas in the words of these public figures into the public light. We must insist on naming antisemitism as it exists, even when others attempt to obscure it beneath a smokescreen of hollow human-rights discourse, imagined colonialism, and fictitious genocide. Otherwise, we leave Jews around the world to fight in the darkness of shadows — shadows that can only truly be defeated once they are exposed to the light.

As we sing Ma’oz Tzur this Chanukah and recall Pharaoh, Babylon, Haman, the Hellenistic Greeks, and the Roman Empire — all forces that promoted global rebellion against the people of Israel — we must remember that Jews also heroically stood up to them, with both the visible and invisible help of God. That is why they all faded and became distant memories, while we and millions of Jews around the world continue to light the candles of Chanukah.

* **Ed. Note:** Ohr Torah Stone sent this message on January 6. Rabbi Brander’s loud warning of anti-Semitism is especially appropriate as we turn to Sefer Shemot. After the death of Yosef and his brothers, Paro (either Yosef’s Paro or a new Paro – the Torah is ambiguous) initiates a campaign of oppression of Jews. The Egyptians’ anti-Semitism was always present during the period when Yosef saved Egypt from an extended famine (Jews could not eat at the same table with Egyptians and had to live in a separate territory. Even Yosef could not come into the presence of Paro and he could not attend his father’s burial in Canaan without Paro’s permission.) After the death of Yosef and his brothers, Paro initiated a campaign of enslaving and oppressing the Jews – similar to the campaign of the Nazis in the 1930s. Rabbi Brander urges people – Jews and non-Jews alike – that we must understand the current campaign of anti-Semitism and fight it everywhere. Should people not fight anti-Semitism now, oppression such as in Gaza, Europe, Australia, and many parts of the United States will continue and become worse.

** Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, an Israel-based network of 32 educational and social action programs transforming Jewish life, living and leadership in Israel and across the world. He is the rabbi emeritus of the Boca Raton Synagogue and founder of the Katz Yeshiva High School. He served as the Vice President for University and Community Life at Yeshiva University and has authored many articles in scholarly journals.

<https://ots.org.il/toi-when-words-become-deadly/>

Dvar Torah: Shemos: What’s Possible – In a Name!

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5767

*And these are the names of the Children of Israel who came to Egypt; Yaakov and his household, Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehuda, Yisachar, Zevulun, Binyamin, Dan, Noftali, Gad, and Asher...*Shemos 1:1-4(

The name of the week’s portion and the name of the entire book – “Shemos” means – “Names” and not “Exodus.” Why are the people listed as names? What’s in a name?

We find that whatever name Adam gave to the various creatures of the world “that was its name.” Breishis 2:19(It sounds like whatever name he gave it stuck, like a little kid that names his doggy woofy. Rashi points out that when Adam called

his wife Isha)woman(because she was taken from an Ish)man(, based on the play of words that we see from here that the world was created with the Holy Language of Hebrew.)Breishis 2:23(What does that mean?

The three sons of Noah from whom the world was reestablished each had a name indicative of their character that played out dramatically in their lives. 1(*Cham* means *Heat* – and with the heat and passion of the moment he abused his own father. 2(*Yafes* – is *Beauty* and so for appearance sake he joined forces to cover his father's indignity but still his concern was more for manners than morals. 3(*Shem's* name means *name*. He did what was essential. He covered his father in the most appropriate way. How is that implied in the name "*Name*"?

When we buy a new car or computer or whatever of moderate sophistication, then there is usually a user's guide that accompanies it. The thicker the booklet, the more complex the machinery is. In that manual you find optimal usages for each of the buttons and levers in the gadget. Rarely would you find a vestigial organ – a part that does not serve some function. The designer gives each piece a name that tells us something about its function. The implication of a name is that it points to the designer's intent.

In any other language, names are arbitrary. *CAT* tells us how to pronounce the word and does little else than remind us of the creature that has whiskers and loves to chase mice. Nothing in the letters is intrinsically connected to the idea it spells. The eastern languages are pictographic. We see in a word a picture of a flower or a friend, and only the pronunciation is absent from the image. In the Holy Language, we have both. A Lamed looks like the silhouette of a person sitting. Its name implies learning. Its grammatical use connotes to "*direction*." It is composed of a "*cof*" + "*vuv*")=26(– with learning we grasp higher connections.

The letters of the Holy Language function conceptually like elements in the periodic table. In Sefer Yetzirah, reputed to have been written by Avraham, it is written:

"Twenty two Foundation letters: He engraved them, he carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, and with them He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed."

Why is the 2nd book not called Exodus? If the real subject was exodus then it should have ended by the splitting of the sea. Yet it continues past the giving of the Torah and on to the construction of the Tabernacle. The Ramban answers that The Book of Breishis tells of the formation of the seed, the possibility of what would later be the Nation of Israel. The Book of Shemos focuses on the plantation and development of that potential into a nation worthy of constant Divine Presence, just like the individual Patriarchs and Matriarchs. When is a seed considered to have fulfilled its mission? When it produces an entire tree filled with seed bearing fruits. Who was it that came down to enter the soil of Egypt? It was the essence, the purpose, and the potential of **what's possible – In a name!**

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5767-shemos/>

A Thought on the Parsha (Shemot): Birthing a Nation

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

In an extended passage from the book of Yechezkel, the birth of the people of Israel is described through the vivid imagery of actual childbirth:

And as for your birth, in the day you were born your navel was not cut, neither were you washed in water to make you supple ... No eye pitied you ... to have compassion upon you ... but you were cast into the open field ... on the day that you were born. And when I passed by you, and saw you polluted in your own blood, I said unto you: Live through your blood; I said unto you: Live through your blood (Yechezkel, 16:4–6).

Part of what makes this image so striking is the graphic, visceral reality of the infant child connected to her mother by the bloody umbilical cord, “*polluted*” in the blood of childbirth, awaiting that moment when the cord will be cut, the blood will be washed away, and she will begin to become a person unto herself. Along with the implicit mother birthing the child and a midwife to cut the navel and wash the child, birth, blood, and water are the key images of this passage.

These images — birth, blood, water, mother, and midwife — are central to the story of Shemot. The parasha opens with a description of the fecundity of the people: “*And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them*” (Shemot, 1:7). The small fetus of a nation had been growing and gestating in the womb of the land of Egypt, but the birth will not be easy. Pharaoh, the father, or perhaps more accurately, the step-father, is afraid of being displaced by the coming child. His first response is to impose slavery on the nation: the beginning of severe and anguishing birth pains. The phrase in Tanakh for birth pains is *chevlei leida*, travails of childbirth, from the root *ch’v’l*, meaning rope or bond. In English, we refer to childbirth as labor. These metaphoric bonds and labor find real-world expression in the bonds of slavery and the harsh labor that Pharaoh imposes on the people.

Pharaoh’s next move is an attempt to abort the nation before it is born by killing their infant sons, whom he finds so threatening. Midwives are called in as the agents of infanticide and are told what to do when they see the infant “*on the birthing stone*,” a hard image reflecting the life of slavery into which these children are being born. The midwives defy Pharaoh’s commands and, when challenged, respond that “*the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are like animals, and before the midwives come to them, they have already given birth*” (1:19). Like animals, these women give birth without midwives, not on the birthing stone but — as in the image drawn by Yechezkel — alone, out in the open field.

Pharaoh does not give up. He commands his entire people to cast every newly born male child into the river, and when the fateful birth of Moshe occurs, his mother is forced to place him in a basket in the Nile. When Pharaoh’s daughter discovers him, she takes him from the Nile and names him Moshe, saying, “*for I have mishitihu from the water*.” The word *mishitihu* is best understood not as a Hebrew word (why would Pharaoh’s daughter be speaking Hebrew?), but as an Egyptian word meaning “*the son of*” (hence Ramses is Ra-meses, or the son of Ra). Pharaoh’s daughter was saying, “*I have made him my son / birthed him from the water*.” And, indeed, her discovery of Moshe and his subsequent naming presents quite a different depiction of birth than that of the Hebrew women. Here we have an idealized picture of birth — a woman who has given birth without blood, cramps, pain, or labor, and in fact, without pregnancy! The baby arrives already washed and swaddled. Rather than taking place on a *hard “birthing stone*,” he has birthed into and out of the clean (and sacred) waters of the Nile. Even the labor-intensive, exhausting, bodily interactions with this baby — nursing, cleaning, and early childrearing — are done by someone else. But this idealized image of birth is not ultimately redemptive; it is the life of bodily pains, labor, breast feeding and child-rearing that ultimately brings about the birth of the nation.

A period of dormancy ensues, but after a time the urgency returns. God sees their suffering (2:25) and remembers them — *va’yizkor* (2:24), *pakod pakadeti etchem* (3:16) — just as God saw (Breishit 29:31-32) and remembered (Breishit 21:1; 30:22) our barren foremothers. God now has “*seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them*” (3:9). The word for oppression here is *lachat*, a word that rarely appears elsewhere and which more literally means “*pressure*.” The pressure is building up, the mother is crying out (see Yishayahu, 26:17), and the time of childbirth is almost at hand. The people will be brought out of Egypt to come into a land flowing with milk and honey (3:8, 17), imagery which evokes mothers, birth, and nurturing (see Devarim, 32:13, and Yishayahu, 7:14–15).

Moshe is dispatched to return to the people and to carry a message to Pharaoh: “*Israel is my son, even my firstborn*,” and it is this child who is about to be born. However, before this can happen, the narrative interrupts with another birth-related scene. With Moshe and family at the inn, God now seeks to kill “*him*.” “*Him*” may refer to Moshe, but it is quite likely Moshe’s son, who, like the firstborn of Egypt, is at risk. His life is saved by Tziporah when she severs his foreskin with a rock.

The cutting of the foreskin is a pseudo-birth, and the harshness of the rock recalls the birthing stones of the midwives. It also evokes the cutting of the umbilical cord as in Yechezkel, and as in that image, the theme of blood is dominant (*"a bridegroom of blood you are to me"*). In fact, this is the only passage in the Torah that connects blood to the significance of the brit milah, and this is not by chance. The *"childbirth"* blood saves Moshe's son, possibly his firstborn, and soon a similar blood — the blood of the Paschal lamb — will save the people, God's firstborn. Marking the release of blood — whether from circumcision or sacrifice — is protective and salvific. Unlike the command to Avraham, here the mother circumcises her child rather than the father, takes control of her childbirth, and marks the release of blood, preparing the way for the final redemption.

Now, as the redemption begins, blood and water imagery come to the fore. The cleansing water of the Nile that had allowed for the bloodless childbirth of Pharaoh's daughter is smitten with the first plague, turning to blood. The unfolding process eventually climaxes with the death of the firstborn. Unlike elsewhere in the Torah, here the firstborn is particularly linked with the mother, not just the father: *"from the firstborn of Pharaoh ... even unto the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the mill"* (11:5). This becomes symbolized for future generations, when first births will be signified and sanctified through the mitzvah of redeeming the mother's firstborn child and the ritualized bloodshed of the sacrifice of firstborn animals, both described with the graphic birthing image as the *"one who opens the womb"* (13:12).

This brings us to the moment of birth. When the firstborn of Egypt are dying, the children of Israel remain protected. They are protected by the sacrificially released blood of the Pesach on their lintels and doorposts. Just as the circumcision blood saved Moshe or his child, this sacrificial blood protects them against the *maschit*, the destroying angel who would otherwise slay them in their homes, derailing the future redemption. Childbirth is dangerous, and mother or child may die in the process. Sometimes even God's plan requires our actions to ensure that it will be realized.

The blood on the doorframe does more than protect. It also makes the house into the womb of the nation. The door of the house is surrounded in blood just as the opening of the womb is surrounded in blood during childbirth (I thank Rabbi Dov Lerea for this point). The people will leave, be pushed out of their houses, out of their protective womb, the next morning, but the birthing process will only be complete seven days later. It is then that the people will pass through the narrow straits of the split sea. It is then that they will exit the amniotic fluid, move down the birthing canal, and exit a new people on the other side. Theirs will be a birth from the soft, cleansing water. They will be washed of the blood and filth of the Egyptians, their umbilical cord will be cut, and they will be free to become a strong and independent nation.

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

Strengths and Weaknesses: Thoughts for Parashat Shemot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

A story is told about a famous musician who was to perform a violin concert. The orchestra began the program, but just as the musician put his bow to the violin one of the four strings snapped with a loud pop. The audience gasped. The conductor stopped the orchestra.

The violinist immediately signaled the conductor and orchestra to continue with the program. He played the entire concert with a violin of three strings...and he played masterfully. He was able to improvise and compensate so that the missing string was not noticed. At the conclusion of the performance, the audience gave an enthusiastic standing ovation. Everyone was amazed.

The moral of this story is that one must play with the violin that one has. The broader moral is that life must be lived with the talents and shortcomings that one has. Instead of focusing on our deficiencies, we must focus on

our strengths. We must be able to improvise and compensate for what we lack in order to “perform” our lives with maximum effect.]emphasis added[

In this week’s Parasha, we read of God’s appointment of Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. Moses is reluctant to accept the challenge. He states: *“I am not a man of words...for I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue”* (Shemot 4:10). It is as though Moses was saying: I can’t properly play a violin with only three strings. My deficiency prevents me from accomplishing the goal. God replies to Moses that He is the One who empowers people. *“Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.”* (4:12)

I believe the operative phrase in God’s words to Moses is: *“now therefore go.”* God was instructing Moses not to dwell on his weaknesses but to take initiative, to move forward, to draw on whatever strengths he did have. If Moses could rally his courage and confidence, God would help him to succeed.

Many people fail in life because they dwell on their deficiencies rather than on their strengths. They underestimate their ability to perform masterfully, to rise to greatness. They don’t realize that overcoming one’s shortcomings is one of the wonderful challenges of life. Instead of being discouraged by a three-stringed violin, a true musician is energized by the opportunity to reach beyond usual boundaries, to test the limits of one’s abilities.

People are sometimes discouraged by their past failures. They lose confidence in their ability to undertake new challenges. They think that if they failed in the past, they are destined always to fail.

Kohelet teaches (2:14) that *“a wise man, his eyes are in his head.”* This means that a wise person is alert, sees clearly. The verse also alludes to the fact that eyes are in the front of one’s face, not in the back. A wise person looks forward, not backward. Whatever things have transpired in the past — the glories and the failures — are done and cannot be retrieved. There’s little point in gloating over past successes or mourning over past disappointments. Life is ahead of us, not behind us. Just as past success is no guarantee of future successes, so past failure is no guarantee of future failures. The great challenge to human beings is to look ahead, to grasp the adventure of life, to draw on one’s talents and energies, to overcome weaknesses and deficiencies.

“Now therefore go.” God’s charge to Moses is a charge to each of us to strive to reach our maximum potential, to let our strengths and talents prevail over our fears and weaknesses.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Teaching the History of Jewish Life in Europe

By Nancy Cande *

[Ed. note: International Holocaust Remembrance Day this year will be Tue, Jan 27, 2026]

Teaching and learning history at any age engages and introduces us to times past and highlights and informs the present. It asks us to compare and contrast our own experiences. Most importantly, it invites us, begs us, to return to probe deeper and question our understanding and ourselves. Teaching the History of Jewish Life in Europe Pre Kristallnacht to young adolescents asks us to question our motivations, objectives and focus.

The study and experience of history occurs in informal and formal ways. With good teachers, students can develop and connect their understandings and experiences to what is presented. The following is based on my many years of classroom teaching experience in both secular/public and Jewish schools. This is not a scientific/academic study but rather the development of an intuitive understanding during the early years of teaching the Holocaust followed by awareness of the need to shift my approach and perspective in teaching Jewish history.

I grew up in the NYC suburbs following my earliest childhood in Brooklyn in the mid 1950's. Three of my grandparents left E Europe in the 1890s, and one Grandmother was born and resided on the Lower East Side. Yiddish was spoken at home only to disguise the content to us. The Holocaust was barely mentioned and was never taught. My childhood friend's aunt was the exception who shared with our 4th grade class her Buchenwald concentration camp experience and wrote about it in a children's book. Her approach to storytelling brought us into her story. Otherwise, Jewish life was absorbed through the "Jewish Secular Orthodox" culture in which I was raised among relatives. My identity was absorbed and accepted, which I mainly attribute to my Grandmother's pious and lovely ways. It was intergenerational learning.

Wanting to know everything about my Grandmother's life led me to reading and watching what was available about the old world, which were her ways. Wanting to know more about this "lost world" of Jewish history led me to read about many eras of Jewish History, emigration and minimally the Holocaust; this came later. The context of Jewish history had already begun for me.

50% of the students at a Toronto Jewish Day School where I taught for a decade had at least one grandparent whom the Holocaust directly impacted. The students didn't refer to it, but their family histories were absorbed. For the first two years of teaching the Holocaust, I showed films and film clips, and we read books with the Holocaust as a theme and setting. In the third year, when we were watching the film *Night and Fog*, I asked myself in disbelief what is the purpose of presenting this to students? What are they learning, what is the context for them? Why do they need to know this before they know their own history? Students never directly referred to the specifics of the world their families left.

Honest, rigorous study of history contains ugly, raw elements, as well as moments of beauty and simplicity. 12 year olds have not yet developed an understanding/context of their own past/present. The study of the Holocaust can all too easily become a deficit model of their history while in this formative phase. The immense tragedy of the Holocaust was essentially the finality for millions of our millennial history of Jewish European culture. It reconvened predominantly in The United States and Israel along with Caribbean islands and South America. What was this rich, dynamic, populous, diverse Jewish culture that is essentially geographically and numerically lost in today's world? Much of the jewels of this lost world are under the radar with us. Let's open this not far away landscape and timescape to them by shifting to the telling of their own generational family stories, children's stories, maps, fact based fictional movies, languages, food, population numbers, and geography. They will undoubtedly lead them to ask: what happened to us in Europe, where can this be observed now? Why did this happen?

Focusing on these final few years erases our story. It also shows us in a tragic situation that we did not construct; instead it was done to us. First, a more thorough understanding of Jewish life in Europe before and later following Kristallnacht is crucially needed.

Reading the teenage stories of survivors' lives before the war opens discussions, curiosity, connections, grief, and pride. The study of the Holocaust can begin in depth in High School and beyond. By presenting this study as a continuation of

centuries of thriving and surviving, the result is a very different and comprehensive perspective. This approach is just as important for the general population. The mechanisms of The Final Solution are not for teenagers to grasp. Rather it is especially for those who deny and diminish the impact. The role and history of Israel can also be better understood in a different perspective.

Let us acclaim and honor our very long history that continues and thrives.

* Nancy Cande was a middle school teacher in Toronto and retired as a teacher and educational administrator in New York City dual citizen, following a satisfying and joyous 40 years. She is currently consulting for schools in New York State.

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Keep Your Headlights On

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shleima for Cholei Yisroel

The story of Paroh's conversations with Moshe aren't just the stuff for storybooks. The conversations of Paroh and Moshe are about living a life of hope, vision, and meaning.

When Moshe approached Paroh with Hashem's directive to send the people to their higher calling, Paroh responded, *"Make the work heavier on them so they do not engage with these words of falsehood."*

Falsehood is a heavy word. It means that even if right now something is tantalizing, alluring, or attractive, it will not last. The Talmud points out that the Hebrew word for falsehood (Sheker) is made up of letters that wobble on a single foot. Falsehood is the type of thing that seems to be standing upright right now but will not last. When Paroh called Moshe's vision a falsehood, he was dismissing the word of Hashem as nothing more than a passing fantasy. Remarkably, Paroh was using a label that really applied to himself.

Interestingly, the Torah – Word of Hashem, is described as Truth – Emes, made up of letters that stand on two legs. Truth is something that stands securely and will stand the test of time. One of the great ways to tell if something is truth is to ask, *"Where will it be in ten years, in fifty years, in a hundred years, in a thousand years?"* While Paroh, his taskmasters, and the enslavement of the Jews seemed to be the reality, just one year later, the truth would become apparent. Paroh and his culture will be relegated to the dustbins of history, while the Jewish family would go on to become a treasured and noble people, passing on the Mesora-tradition from generation to generation for eternity.

Differentiating between truth and falsehood can sometimes be challenging. Paroh felt that if he kept the people so busy that they couldn't think, they would lose their sense of vision. The ability to identify truth is linked to vision, to be able to see what will endure and be helpful beyond the present moment.

This week I experienced an illustrative reminder of the contrast between living with or without a sense of vision.

I was driving at night on a poorly lit road and sensed that there was something coming towards me. It was still at a distance, about a block away, when I realized that it was a car heading towards me with its headlights off. I tried to get the driver's attention by flashing my lights on and off and eventually honking my horn when he got close. But for all I could do, the driver was downright oblivious to the fact that he was driving with his headlights off.

Whatever the driver's story was, I will never know. But it occurred to me that many people drive with their headlights off, failing to see the world with vision. When a person lives with his or her headlights off, it is hard to tell the difference between falsehood and truth, between fantasy and eternity.

Paroh was convinced that Moshe's declaration was falsehood. Paroh was convinced that the people going free to a glorious mission and a sense of purpose was all fantasy. But when a person has the gift of headlights — a sense of where things are going — it becomes apparent that it is Paroh who is living in fantasy: Fantasy that he is a god, fantasy that Mitzrayim will be a world power forever, fantasy that he can be dismissive regarding the Creator. Within the year he would be crushed and humbled leaving his culture and his fantasy in ruins.

The conversation of Paroh with Moshe is an ongoing conversation. It is the conversation between foolish people without headlights who want to think that there is no Creator, and those who believe in a Creator and the ability of mankind to connect with the eternal.

In recent years, the development of conversational AI reminds us of how limited the headlights of common culture really are. Conversational AI was designed by its developers to reflect secular, Paroh, thinking. Wise people caution against having conversations with AI; even AI boldly cautions against taking it seriously. The warning on every communication is real: *"AI can make mistakes. Please double check responses."*

I recently came across a transcript from an AI conversation where the AI system provided a self-description: *"When someone comes from a religious perspective, I try to respect their framework. It gets complicated, however, when someone asks me something that touches on empirical facts like evolution or medical science. In those cases, I tell them the scientific consensus... I am not here to be a secular missionary."*

I found the AI statement fascinating. AI is apparently programmed to view evolution as an empirical fact and to also claim that it is not a secular missionary. It is programmed to prioritize secular thinking over religious thinking and to also claim that it is not doing just that.

To the thinking person, spontaneous evolution is absurd. No table created itself. No poem resulted from randomly spilled ink. The world is an intelligently fashioned creation with a creator who continues to involve Himself in creation.

Yet the AI system is programmed to define truth and falsehood as Paroh did, with little vision, and no headlights. The Paroh model can't afford to think about living with purpose. Instead, it says, *"Keep very busy; don't think; turn off the headlights."* Similarly, conversational AI can sound very authoritative; but it is not programmed for meaning, purpose, truth, or eternity.

The conversation of Paroh and Moshe is a conversation we can have in our time as well. It is the conversation we have daily as we strive to live life with vision, using technology cautiously with wisdom. We must make sure to keep our headlights on. There is a Creator. Life does have purpose. It is our sense of Torah vision that enables us to see where we are going.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To

reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com.
For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.

Shemot: Notable Nobility

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

As we begin the book of Shemos, we are quickly introduced to Moshe Rabbeinu. Most of this week's Parsha focuses on Moshe's life. We learn of his family, his upbringing and his adult life, his first prophecy, his being charged with the mission of leading the Jewish people, and Moshe's initial contact with the Jewish people and with Pharaoh upon his return to Egypt. There is much to be learned about why Moshe was chosen, about where he came from, who he was and what made him whom he became.

These lessons about Moshe can be seen most clearly in the center of the parsha, the third chapter of Shemos. The Torah tells us of a week-long discussion G-d had with Moshe, where Moshe continually expressed his thoughts and concerns that he was not worthy of the task. Until the last day, Hashem accepted and approved of Moshe's responses and resistance, and addressed each concern that Moshe raised.

The first concern that Moshe raises is, *"Who am I to go to Pharaoh?"* G-d responds to Moshe and says, *"For I will be with you. And this is the sign that I have sent you – when you take the nation out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain."* (Shemos 3:11-12) G-d's response does not seem to address Moshe's concern. Moshe was saying that he is not worthy of the mission. He never questioned G-d's involvement.

The Ohr Hachaim (ibid.) explains that Moshe's concern was more than simple humility. Moshe was saying that he is not worthy of being an emissary to Pharaoh because he is not a noble figure and has no political standing. Pharaoh therefore would not believe that he could possibly be a messenger of G-d. As such, Moshe was putting himself in mortal danger as Pharaoh would accuse him of being a commoner who had come into the Royal Throne Room on false pretenses.

Based on this, the Ohr Hachaim explains that Hashem's response to Moshe was giving Moshe a dynamic paradigm shift. By saying, *"I will be with you,"* Hashem was telling Moshe that he had no need to fear Pharaoh, nor to prove himself to Pharaoh. Pharaoh is simply a mortal king. Moshe would be coming as an emissary of G-d. Pharaoh was the one who would need to prove himself to Moshe. Moshe's nobility and greatness would far outweigh Pharaoh's. He would be coming with the nobility of G-d.

Hashem then explained that in His system of nobility, Moshe indeed had great standing. This was the sign that Hashem was giving Moshe – a sign that Moshe was indeed worthy of the greatest nobility of all – to be a representative of G-d. The Ohr Hachaim explains that the sign Hashem was giving Moshe was the famous lesson that the Torah would be given on Mount Sinai. Although there were great and powerful mountains around, it was specifically Mount Sinai that was chosen because Mount Sinai was a small and simple mountain. G-d always chooses those who are humble and have developed their personal character traits. G-d's nobility is based on personal character, not on social status or external accomplishments. Moshe was, therefore, most certainly worthy of the role and was a proper emissary of G-d.

When we consider the discussion, this Ohr Hachaim teaches us an even more profound lesson than whom G-d finds honorable. Moshe's concern was that power would not see him as a worthy emissary of G-d and that he would therefore be in mortal danger. Even though, Moshe was worthy in G-d's eyes, Pharaoh would not see it that way. Pharaoh initially even denies that G-d exists. How would Pharaoh see that Moshe was worthy?

Deep down every human being knows G-dliness when we see it. When Moshe appeared with a saintly and self-possessed, noble character, Pharaoh recognized that Moshe was a man that was worthy of representing the true spiritual

purpose and meaning of life and of the true G-d. Character development is a nobility that cannot be denied. Even as Pharaoh denied G-d, he could not deny the G-dliness he saw in Moshe.

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

Righteous Women By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

Full Room-Service

The Talmud says that because of the merit of righteous women, the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt (Sotah 11:2). Apparently, the claim that the Rabbis marginalized women or ignored their contribution to society is wrong. But let us read the whole story and see if this is an accurate assessment.

“The Israelites were redeemed from Egypt because of the merit of the righteous women. The women would boil water and fish and take them to their men in the field. They would give them hot baths, anoint them with oil, and feed them the fish. Then they would serve them wine and then lie with them in the field.

When the time came to give birth, they would do it in the field under the apple trees. Angels were sent from heaven to wash and feed the babies.”

Men’s Paradise

Is this a story of brave women leading an underground resistance? The women who will not give up and keep having children? The women who entice their poor, enslaved, and exhausted husbands?

Unfortunately, this is a different story, written by men. For the author of this Midrash, women are an instrument which produces the next generation. Those righteous women march to the fields with luxurious baths and food for the men. They feed and comfort the men, serve them wine, and sleep with them. When the babies are born, they do not distract the women’s attention from their men. There are angel-nannies who take care of them, and the women continue to care for the men. This is not slavery in Egypt, it is men’s paradise!

Army of Babies

How did the righteous women become men-pleasing machines? The original Midrash stated that the redemption was in the merit of the righteous women. It referred to five specific women who were instrumental, each in her own way, in ushering in the future redemption.

A later author took the story to the realms of myth and fantasy. That was probably necessary after the destruction of the Temple, the fall of Masada, and the failed Bar Kokhva revolt.

The author’s message is that Jews can only defeat the mighty Roman Empire by having more children. And so, the five brave women have turned into servile reproduction machines. It is the kind of “plan” used by poor and oppressed populations as a last resort.

Time to Move On

That message might have served Jews well in the past, but it is not in place today. It is degrading for women, and it minimizes the importance of love and closeness between parents and children. The next generation becomes a weapon against our enemies, an idea associated with fanatic tyrants. We also know that uncontrolled growth is unsustainable, and that family planning is essential for our survival as a specie. It is time to bid farewell to the exilic mentality. We are no more the helpless and persecuted whose only strength is being fruitful and multiplying. Judaism has a wonderful system of law and values which can actively make our life and our world better.

Interview with Yokheved

Luckily, I was able to get an exclusive interview with Yokheved, Moshe's mother. I asked her how she sees the role of righteous women, and whether she is happy with this Midrash.

Yokheved: I am so glad you brought up this question, because I feel that the voice of women is silenced. This legend about women delivering sextuplets and producing an army of 600,000 men stresses me out. My grandchildren started asking me about the fish and water I would serve Amram in the field. Why should children even talk about it? We did not wash and feed the men, and definitely did not sleep with them in the field. Who does that? It's terrible! But what really bothers me with this story is our image as husband-pleasing, meal-cooking, baby-producing machines. How can we inspire our daughters with such tales? And our future generations, what kind of righteous women will they be?

Defiant Heroes

Yokehevd falls silent for a moment, pensive, then continues: Let me tell you about the true righteous woman! She reveres no one but God, she is strong and unyielding, and she emanates love and compassion. And let me tell you who are the righteous women who brought forth the redemption. They have names!

The first two, the heroes, the role models, are Shifrah and Puah. Ah, such powerful women! It was so easy and convenient to fold under the pressure of Pharaoh. They could kill the babies and say they were just following orders. They risked their lives by defying him. They taught us that we cannot sacrifice others to save ourselves.

Mother, Sister, Princess

When I saw their quiet and resilient victory, I decided to keep my baby against all odds. I looked for a barren Egyptian woman who will adopt a Hebrew infant left on her doorstep. The Hebrew maids in the palace informed me that the princess is a candidate. I put him in a basket and planted it among the reeds near the princess' favorite bathing spot. My daughter Miriam kept watch, and in her audacity convinced the princess to let me be his wet-nurse.

But all would be for nothing if not for the courage and astuteness of the princess. Pharaoh was enraged when he saw his adopted grandson and wanted to kill him on the spot. The princess played daddy's little girl very convincingly, threw a tantrum, and then fell quiet and unresponsive. Pharaoh caved in and let her have the baby, and I was the wet-nurse.

Standing with Moshe

Nursing Moshe was telling him stories of our glorious past, of our forefathers, and especially my grandfather Jacob. I fed him stories of the Promised Land and the suffering of his brethren. I told him of the courageous women who risked their lives so he could live. He knew all about the cruel enslavement and was more inspired than anyone to lead the nation to freedom. When he went out that day to see the suffering of his brothers, all of us stood there with him. Shifrah and Puah, Miriam and me, and Pharaoh's daughter.

Let me tell you this, great women do not stand behind great men. They stand with, in front, or ahead of them. They give them life, love, education, values, and aspiration.

Moshe would not be the great and passionate leader he was without the shield of love of his biological and adoptive mothers. He would not fight with Pharaoh and with God if not for the resilience and courage of Shifra, Puah and Miriam. We shall keep following in the footsteps of those courageous women who defeated the enemy by wit, courage, and faith.

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 include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights)copyright(to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz *

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation **

We are deeply saddened by the horrific events at the Bondi Beach Chanukah celebration and our thoughts are with all *those impacted*. *We extend heartfelt condolences to their bereaved families and to all those injured. Their memory shall remain a blessing and a source of enduring strength to our people.*

Wow. We move from a dramatic transformation at the end of Bereshit – from a single family to fearless leaders, and even a king who ruled the entire known world – straight into Shemot, where everything is overturned. The nation we once ruled now enslaves us. Things couldn't be worse.

And then Moshe is born – a light, a savior destined to take us out. But the question remains: How will we listen to him?

We are so broken.

That's the conversation around the Shabbat table this week: How do we speak words that people cannot hear emotionally, in a way that they will hear words spoken for them?

Shabbat Shalom. B'Ahavat Yisrael.

* Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

]Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message for the congregation?[Additional note: summer vacation in New Zealand for much of January.

Bridging the Generations: The Holocaust and Its Legacy: The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand is hosting the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration on January 25, 2026, in Auckland. Created in 2005 by the United Nations, 27 January -- the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau -- is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which honours and remembers the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This year's commemoration is dedicated to strengthening the crucial link between the past and the future, empowering younger generations to carry the torch of remembrance and responsibility.

** Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter

Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

Rav Kook Torah **Shemot: I Will Be Who[m] I Will Be**

Moses was not eager to accept the mission of leading the Jewish people out of Egypt. He foresaw the immense challenges ahead, including the difficulty of gaining the trust of an embittered and enslaved people.

“So I will go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ They will ask what His name is — what should I tell them?”

God replied to Moses, “I Will Be Who[m] I Will Be.” This is what you should tell the Israelites: “I Will Be” has sent me to you.)Exodus 3:13-14(

What do these enigmatic names — ‘I Will Be Who[m] I Will Be’ and ‘I Will Be’ - mean? Moreover, God seems to give Moses two different answers. Which name was Moses meant to use when identifying God to the people?

I Will Be With You

The Talmud (Berakhot 9b) explains God’s response as follows:

“Go tell the Israelites, ‘I Will Be Who[m] I Will Be.’ ‘I Will Be’ with you in this exile, and ‘I Will Be’ with you in future exiles.”

Moses exclaimed, “Master of the Universe, we have enough troubles already! Why mention future suffering?”

God agreed. “Go tell them ‘I Will Be’ has sent me to you.”

This explanation, however, creates new difficulties. Did God need Moses to explain human psychology to Him? Did Moses understand the emotional state of the people better than their Creator?

A Guide for All Times

God’s message to the Jewish people was that the Torah and its mitzvot would enable them to reach their highest potential. The Torah would guide them throughout history, in all situations, whether as a subjugated people in exile or as a free people in their own land.

God wanted the people to know that the redemption from slavery in Egypt was not a one-time rescue mission. They were leaving Egypt in order to receive the Torah at Sinai. The Divine name “I Will Be Who[m] I Will Be” was meant to convey a fundamental message: the Torah is a guide for all times, a path that would sustain the people even during future exiles and troubled times.

God never intended, however, that Moses would use this name. Moses was not supposed to explicitly mention future exiles and further dishearten a downtrodden people. Rather, Moses was to tell them the shorter name, ‘I Will Be.’ The subjugated nation would be informed that God is with them now — “I Will Be” with you in this exile, and I will redeem you. And they would understand that the Torah will also guide their lives as an independent nation in their own land.

Implicit within the name “*I Will Be*,” however, lies a deeper message. As a free people in the Land of Israel, the Torah would prepare them to be an eternal nation, capable of withstanding the challenges of future exiles. “*I Will Be*’ with them in this exile,; and ‘*I Will Be*’ with them in future exiles.”

)*Sapphire from the Land of Israel*. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. I, pp. 45-46.(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/SHMOT60.htm>

Shemot: Turning Curses into Blessings (5776, 5783)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, Former UK Chief Rabbi*

Genesis ends on an almost serene note. Jacob has found his long lost son. The family has been reunited. Joseph has forgiven his brothers. Under his protection and influence, the family has settled in Goshen, one of the most prosperous regions of Egypt. They now have homes, property, food, the protection of Joseph and the favour of Pharaoh. It must have seemed one of the golden moments of Abraham’s family’s history.

Then, as has happened so often since, “*There arose a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph.*” There was a political climate change. The family fell out of favour. Pharaoh told his advisers: “*Look, the Israelite people are becoming too numerous and strong for us*”¹ – the first time the word “*people*” is used in the Torah with reference to the children of Israel. “*Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase.*” And so the whole mechanism of oppression moves into operation: forced labour that turns into slavery that becomes attempted genocide.

The story is engraved in our memory. We tell it every year, and in summary-form in our prayers, every day. It is part of what it is to be a Jew. Yet there is one phrase that shines out from the narrative: “*But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread.*” That, no less than oppression itself, is part of what it means to be a Jew.

The worse things get, the stronger we become. Jews are the people who not only survive but thrive in adversity.

Jewish history is not merely a story of Jews enduring catastrophes that might have spelled the end to less tenacious groups. It is that after every disaster, Jews renewed themselves. They discovered some hitherto hidden reservoir of spirit that fuelled new forms of collective self-expression as the carriers of God’s message to the world.

Every tragedy begat new creativity. After the division of the kingdom following the death of Solomon came the great literary prophets, Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Out of the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile came the renewal of Torah in the life of the nation, beginning with Ezekiel and culminating in the vast educational programme brought back to Israel by Ezra and Nehemiah. From the destruction of the Second Temple came the immense literature of rabbinic Judaism, until then preserved mostly in the form of an oral tradition: Mishnah, Midrash and Gemara.

From the Crusades came the Hassidei Ashkenaz, the North European school of piety and spirituality. Following the Spanish expulsion came the mystic circle of Tzefat: Lurianic Kabbalah and all it inspired by way of poetry and prayer. From East European persecution and poverty came the Hassidic movement and its revival of grass-roots Judaism through a seemingly endless flow of story and song. And from the worst tragedy of all in human terms, the Holocaust, came the rebirth of the state of Israel, the greatest collective Jewish affirmation of life in more than two thousand years.

It is well known that the Chinese ideogram for “*crisis*” also means “*opportunity*.” Any civilisation that can see the blessing within the curse, the fragment of light within the heart of darkness, has within it the capacity to endure. Hebrew goes one better. The word for crisis, *mashber*, also means “*a child-birth chair*.” Written into the semantics of Jewish consciousness is the idea that the pain of hard times is a collective form of the contractions of a woman giving birth. Something new is being

born. That is the mindset of a people of whom it can be said that *“the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread.”*

Where did it come from, this Jewish ability to turn weakness into strength, adversity into advantage, darkness into light? It goes back to the moment in which our people received its name, Israel. It was then, as Jacob wrestled alone at night with an angel, that as dawn broke his adversary begged him to let him go. *“I will not let you go until you bless me,”* said Jacob.)Bereishit 32:27(That is the source of our peculiar, distinctive obstinacy. We may have fought all night. We may be tired and on the brink of exhaustion. We may find ourselves limping, as did Jacob. Yet we will not let our adversary go until we have extracted a blessing from the encounter. This turned out to be not a minor and temporary concession. It became the basis of his new name and our identity. Israel, the people who *“wrestled with God and man and prevailed,”* is the nation that grows stronger with each conflict and catastrophe.

I was reminded of this unusual national characteristic by an article that appeared in the British press in October 2015. Israel at the time was suffering from a wave of terrorist attacks that saw Palestinians murdering innocent civilians in streets and bus stations throughout the country. It began with these words: *“Israel is an astonishing country, buzzing with energy and confidence, a magnet for talent and investment – a cauldron of innovation.”* It spoke of its world-class excellence in aerospace, clean-tech, irrigation systems, software, cyber-security, pharmaceuticals and defence systems.]2[

“All this,” the writer went on to say, *“derives from brainpower, for Israel has no natural resources and is surrounded by hostile neighbours.”* The country is living proof of *“the power of technical education, immigration and the benefits of the right sort of military service.”* Yet this cannot be all, since Jews have consistently overachieved, wherever they were and whenever they were given the chance. He goes through the various suggested explanations: the strength of Jewish families, their passion for education, a desire for self-employment, risk-taking as a way of life, and even ancient history. The Levant was home to the world’s first agricultural societies and earliest traders. Perhaps, then, the disposition to enterprise was written, thousands of years ago, into Jewish DNA. Ultimately, though, he concludes that it has to do with *“culture and communities”*.

A key element of that culture has to do with the Jewish response to crisis. To every adverse circumstance, those who have inherited Jacob’s sensibilities insist: *“I will not let you go until you bless me.”*)Bereishit 32:27(That is how Jews, encountering the Negev, found ways of making the desert bloom. Seeing a barren, neglected landscape elsewhere, they planted trees and forests. Faced with hostile armies on all their borders, they developed military technologies they then turned to peaceful use. War and terror forced them to develop medical expertise and world-leading skills in dealing with the aftermath of trauma. They found ways of turning every curse into a blessing. The historian Paul Johnson, as always, put it eloquently:

Over 4,000 years the Jews proved themselves not only great survivors but extraordinarily skilful in adapting to the societies among which fate had thrust them, and in gathering whatever human comforts they had to offer. No people has been more fertile in enriching poverty or humanising wealth, or in turning misfortune to creative account.]3[

There is something profoundly spiritual as well as robustly practical about this ability to transform the bad moments of life into a spur to creativity. It is as if, deep within us were a voice saying, *“You are in this situation, bad though it is, because there is a task to perform, a skill to acquire, a strength to develop, a lesson to learn, an evil to redeem, a shard of light to be rescued, a blessing to be uncovered, for I have chosen you to give testimony to humankind that out of suffering can come great blessings if you wrestle with it for long enough and with unshakeable faith.”*

In an age in which people of violence are committing acts of brutality in the name of the God of compassion, the people of Israel are proving daily that this is not the way of the God of Abraham, the God of life and the sanctity of life. And whenever we who are a part of that people lose heart, and wonder when it will ever end, we should recall the words: *“The more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread.”* A people of whom that can be said can be injured, but can never be defeated. **God’s way is the way of life.**]emphasis added[

FOOTNOTES:

]1[Ex. 1:9. This is the first intimation in history of what in modern times took the form of the Russian forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In the Diaspora, Jews – powerless – were often seen as all-powerful. What this usually means, when translated, is: How is it that Jews manage to evade the pariah status we have assigned to them?

]2[Luke Johnson, "Animal Spirits: Israel and its tribe of risk-taking entrepreneurs," *Sunday Times*, 4 October 2015.

]3[Paul Johnson, *The History of the Jews*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, p. 58.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:

1. Why do you think tragedy can lead to creativity?
2. Have you experienced this in your own life or with people in your life?
3. What examples of this phenomenon, turning curses into blessings, can you find in Jewish history?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/turning-curses-into-blessings/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Devar.

Is Moses a Jewish or Egyptian Name?

By Yehuda Shurpin* © Chabad

The Torah recounts how, three months after Moses was born, his mother tucked him into a basket, which she placed in the marsh at the river's edge. Later, Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe and saw a basket among the reeds. She saved Moses and, in a fascinating turn of events, gave him to the child's own mother to nurse him. The verse then states: "*The child grew up, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became like her son. She named him Moses)Moshe(, and she said, 'For I drew him)mishitihu(from the water.'*"

The obvious question is, is the name "Moses" Hebrew or Egyptian? At first glance, the verse seems to be using a Hebrew etymology, implying that it is a Hebrew name. But how would Pharaoh's daughter *Bithiah* ** even know Hebrew, let alone give the child a distinctly Hebrew name?

The Name Is Hebrew

One opinion is that it was indeed a Hebrew name. Bithiah had learned the Hebrew language from the Israelites who had settled in Egypt.¹

In a similar vein, the Talmud explains that Bithiah was going down to the river in order to immerse, cleanse herself of the idolatry in her father's house, and adopt the Jewish faith. The commentaries explain that Bithiah indeed learned Hebrew, and when the time came, she named her adopted son the Hebrew name "*Moses*."²

Others³ maintain that it was actually Yocheved, Moses' mother, who called him that when she returned him to Bithiah, and Bithiah was agreeable to that name. Thus, the verse would read: "*The child grew up, and she]Yocheved[brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became like her son. She]Yocheved[named him Moses, and she said, 'For I drew him from the water.'*"

Additional Egyptian Meaning

The name “*Moshe*” is a conjunction of two Egyptian words: *mo*, which means “*water*,” and *uses*)or *sha*(, which means “*saved*” or “*drawn*” from. Thus, Rabbi Meir Leibush Wisser, the Malbim, explains that the name “*Moshe*” actually has a similar connotation in both Egyptian and Hebrew.⁴

Hebrew Translation of Egyptian Name

Some suggest that Bithiah named Moses with an Egyptian name that has been lost to us. The name “Moses” is actually Scripture’s Hebrew translation of the original Egyptian name.⁵

Saving a Life

The Midrash relates that Moses actually had ten different names given variously by his parents, his tribe and the Jewish people. Nevertheless, it is very telling that the name he is known by is Moses, harking back to the heroic act of Bithiah, who put herself at risk to save a helpless child of a foreign nation. It was ultimately this selfless act that eventually brought about the salvation of the entire Jewish nation.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Daat Zekenim, *Baalei Hatosafot*, on Exodus 2:3.
2. Chizkuni, ad loc.
3. See Chizkuni)second explanation(, Abarbanel, ad loc.
4. Malbim)citing Philo and Josephus(.
5. Ibn Ezra and Daat Zekenim, *Baalei Hatosafot*, on Exodus 2:3.

* Content editor at Chabad.org and author of the popular Ask Rabbi Y column. Also Rabbi of the Chabad at St. Louis Park, MN.

J** *Bithiah* is another spelling for Batya or Batyah – presumably various transliterations of the Egyptian name of Paro’s daughter. – Ed.[

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5776966/jewish/Is-Moses-a-Jewish-or-Egyptian-name.htm

Shemot: Pain Into Growth

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

The Jews multiplied prolifically in Egypt. In less than a century, their numbers increased so dramatically that Pharaoh feared that they could take over Egypt.

But the more they oppressed them, the more they increased and spread, so they were disgusted and vexed over the Israelites.)Ex. 1:12(

In order for us to appreciate and internalize the spirituality inherent in the Torah, we must first purify ourselves of as much materiality and other forms of negativity as possible. Thus, one of the purposes of the Egyptian exile was to purify the Israelites, preparing them to receive the Torah.

In this light, it is not surprising that by oppressing the Jews, the Egyptians not only failed to weaken them but made them more prolific. The sufferings of exile serve to increase the power and presence of holiness in the world.

Just as the sufferings of the Egyptian exile purified and prepared the Jews to receive the Torah, our personal and collective sufferings throughout our present exile are purifying us and preparing us to receive the infinite Divine revelations that await us in the Messianic Era. May it be speedily in our days..

* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

— from *Daily Wisdom #3*

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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Shabbat Parashat Shmot

5786 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Who am I?

Moses' second question to God at the Burning Bush was, 'Who are You?'. He asks God in the following way: "So I will go to the Israelites and say, 'Your fathers 'God sent me to you.' They will immediately ask me what His name is. What shall I say to them?" Ex. 3:13

God's reply, Ehyeh asher ehyeh, wrongly translated in almost every Christian Bible as something like "I am that I am," deserves an essay in its own right.[1]

Moses' first question, though, was, Mi anochi, "Who am I?" "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" said Moses to God. "And how can I possibly get the Israelites out of Egypt?" Ex. 3:11

On the surface the meaning is clear. Moses is asking two things. The first: who am I, to be worthy of so great a mission? The second: how can I possibly succeed?

God answers the second. "Because I will be with you." You will succeed because I am not asking you to do it alone. I am not really asking you to do it at all. I will be doing it for you. I want you to be My representative, My mouthpiece, My emissary and My voice.

God never answered the first question. Perhaps in a strange way Moses answered himself. In Tanach as a whole, the people who turn out to be the most worthy are the ones who deny they are worthy at all. The Prophet Isaiah, when charged with his mission, said, 'I am a man of unclean lips' (Is. 6:5). Jeremiah said, 'I cannot speak, for I am a child' (Jer. 1:6). David, Israel's greatest king, echoed Moses' words, 'Who am I?' (II Samuel 7:18). Jonah, sent on a mission by God, tried to run away. According to Rashbam, Jacob was about to run away when he found his way blocked by the man/angel with whom he wrestled at night (Rashbam to Gen. 32:23).

The heroes of the Bible are not figures from Greek or any other kind of myth. They are not people possessed of a sense of destiny, determined from an early age to achieve fame. They do not have what the Greeks called

megalopsychia, a proper sense of their own worth, a gracious and lightly worn superiority. They did not go to Eton or Oxford. They were not born to rule. Instead, they were people who doubted their own abilities, who became heroes of the moral life against their will. There were times when they felt like giving up. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah reached points of such despair that they prayed to die. But there was work to be done – God told them so – and they did it. It is almost as if a sense of smallness is a sign of greatness. So God never answered Moses' question, "Why me?" but over time the answer revealed itself.

Still, there is another question within the question. "Who am I?" can be not just a question about worthiness. It can also be a question about identity. Moses, alone on the mountain, summoned by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, is not just speaking to God when he says those words. He is also speaking to himself. "Who am I?"

There are two possible answers. The first: Moses is a prince of Egypt. He had been adopted as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter. He had grown up in the royal palace. He dressed like an Egyptian, looked and spoke like an Egyptian. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from some rough shepherds, they went home and told their father, "An Egyptian saved us" (2:19). His very name, Moses, was given to him by Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2:10). It was, presumably, an Egyptian name (in fact, 'Moses', as in 'Ramses', is the ancient Egyptian word for "child"). The etymology given in the Torah, that Moses means "I drew him from the water," tells us what the word suggested to Hebrew speakers). So the first answer is that Moses was an Egyptian prince.

The second was that he was a Midianite. For although he was Egyptian by upbringing, he had been forced to leave. He had made his home in Midian, married a Midianite woman - Tziporah, daughter of a Midianite priest - and he had been "content to live" there, quietly as a shepherd. We tend to forget just how many years he spent there. He left Egypt as a young man and was already eighty years old at the start of his mission when he first stood before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:7). He must have spent the overwhelming majority of his adult life in Midian, far away from the Israelites on the one hand and the Egyptians on the other. Moses was a Midianite.

So when Moses asks, "Who am I?" it is not just that he feels himself unworthy. He feels himself uninvolved. He may have been Jewish by birth, but he had not suffered the fate of his people. He had not grown up as a Jew. He had not lived among Jews. He had good reason to doubt that the Israelites would even recognise him as one of them. How, then, could he become their leader? More penetratingly, why should he even think of becoming their leader? Their fate was not his. He was not part of it. He was not responsible for it. He did not suffer from it. He was not implicated in it.

What is more, the one time he had actually tried to intervene in their affairs – he killed an Egyptian taskmaster who had killed an Israelite slave, and the next day tried to stop two Israelites from fighting one another – his intervention was not welcomed. "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" they said to him. These are the first recorded words of an Israelite to Moses. He had not yet dreamed of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged.

Consider, now, the choices Moses faced in his life. On the one hand he could have lived as a prince of Egypt, in luxury and at ease. That might have been his fate had he not intervened. Even afterward, having been forced to flee, he could have lived out his days quietly as a shepherd, at peace with the Midianite family into which he had married. It is not surprising that when God invited him to lead the Israelites to freedom, he resisted.

Why then did he accept? How did God know that he was the man for the task? One hint is contained in the name he gave his first son. He called him Gershom because, he said, "I am a stranger in a foreign land" (Ex. 2:22). He did not feel at home in Midian. That was where he was, but not who he was.

But the real clue is contained in an earlier verse, the prelude to his first intervention. "When Moses was grown, he began to go out

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to his own people, and he saw their hard labour" (Ex. 2:11).

These people were his people. He may have looked like an Egyptian but he knew that ultimately he was not. It was a transforming moment, not unlike when the Moabite Ruth said to her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth was un-Jewish by birth. Moses was un-Jewish by upbringing. But both knew that when they saw suffering and identified with the sufferer, they could not walk away.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called this a covenant of fate, *brit goral*. It lies at the heart of Jewish identity to this day. There are Jews who believe and those who don't. There are Jews who practise and those who don't. But there are few Jews indeed who, when their people are suffering, can walk away saying, This has nothing to do with me.

Maimonides, who defines this as "separating yourself from the community" (*poresh midarchai ha-tsibbur*, *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:11), says that it is one of the sins for which you are denied a share in the world to come. This is what the Haggadah means when it says of the wicked son that "because he excludes himself from the collective, he denies a fundamental principle of faith." What fundamental principle of faith? Faith in the collective fate and destiny of the Jewish people.

Who am I? asked Moses, but in his heart he knew the answer. I am not Moses the Egyptian or Moses the Midianite. When I see my people suffer I am, and cannot be other than, Moses the Jew. And if that imposes responsibilities on me, then I must shoulder them. For I am who I am because my people are who they are. That is Jewish identity, then and now.

[1] I expand on this within my books *Future Tense* and *The Great Partnership*.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

The Smiter and the Smitten

"And it came to pass...when Moses was grown up, and he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian man [ish] smiting a Hebrew man [ish], one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw there was no man [ish], he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. And he went out the second day, and behold – two Hebrews were fighting. 'Why are you beating your brother?' he demanded of the one in the wrong. And he said, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?'" (Exodus 2:11–14)

Moses, the redeemer of the Hebrews, enters the stage of history like a man stumbling into a

nightmare. The world, in contrast to the delights inside the palace, is filled with violence and hatred; the delicate prince is witness to the murder of a kinsman, a brother. He must take some kind of action, but in which direction and for what price? And how does this incident foreshadow his life's destiny? Indeed, only if we understand what Moses did and why, will we understand why the Almighty chose him as the supreme leader of his people.

First of all, we see from the above citation that a prerequisite for becoming the great prophet of the Exodus is renunciation of injustice and the courage to remove its perpetrator, even if as a result the prince will become the outcast, and his life will be placed at risk.

In fact, the great biblical scholar-teacher Prof. Nechama Leibowitz points out that in his own apprenticeship towards achieving his divine vocation, Moses will face three variations on the theme of unjust action: Egyptian striking Hebrew, Hebrew striking Hebrew, and Midianite taking advantage of Midianite – the Midianite shepherds chasing the Midianite shepherdesses, Tziporah and her sisters. In each instance, Moses acts on behalf of the oppressed. This is apparently the primary qualification of a leader-redeemer of Israel.

But the above-quoted verses, especially the one dealing with the conflicts between Egyptian and Hebrew, raise several questions. First of all, upon examining the text we find that the Egyptian and the Hebrew are not simply identified by their nationality, but also by the extra Hebrew appellation "ish" (man):

"He [Moses] saw an Egyptian man [ish mitzri] smiting a Hebrew man [ish ivri]." (Exodus 2:11)

After Moses turns "this way and that way," the text again uses the word "ish" in describing how he saw that there was no person around, no ish, presumably to view the incident and report Moses to the Egyptian authorities. However, having used "ish" three times in rapid succession, when the Torah comes to Moses' slaying of the oppressor, the text merely reads "he smote the Egyptian" without the additional ish – and the absence of that word "ish" requires our attention.

A second problem arises from an apparent discrepancy in Moses' two encounters. After morally castigating the two Hebrews, he finds himself being counter-attacked. And the line that puts dread into Moses' heart, forcing him to flee for his life, is: "Do you mean to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?" (Ex. 2:14). But haven't we just been told that Moses looked in all directions before going ahead and killing the Egyptian murderer? Obviously he had been

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on the lookout for witnesses. So how is it possible that the next day, what was presumably done in secret is known to all?

Rashi, apparently disturbed by this issue, comments (on Gen. 2:12) that when Moses, prior to killing the Egyptian, looked all around, he didn't merely cast his eyes to his immediate right and left; rather, he looked into the future, to make sure that he wasn't about to kill someone from whom a convert to monotheism would eventually emerge. Apparently, Moses was more concerned with this Egyptian's future progeny than with the actual proximity of potential prosecution witnesses.

An additional answer to our problem of Moses' faulty "look-out" may be derived from a mishna in *Ethics of the Fathers*: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man..." (*Avot* 2:6)

Moses witnesses a terrible event, the murder of a Hebrew, and he wants to make sure the Egyptian doesn't go unpunished. But Moses is a prince of Egypt. If he takes action and is found out, he will be placing in jeopardy his exalted status in Pharaoh's palace – and even possibly his very life. Certainly, he has much more to lose than any typical Hebrew slave. Therefore "he turns this way and that way" to see if there is anyone else who will come to the defense of the innocent Hebrew; someone else who will become the "man." But unfortunately, "there is no man" and so he himself must act and be that man. Thus, the next day when two Hebrews ask if he plans to kill them as he killed the Egyptian, he isn't surprised that he's been discovered; he was looking out for someone else with the fortitude to confront this moral challenge rather than for an eyewitness to his own slaying of the Egyptian.

But the first question still remains: Why the repetition of the word "ish" three times, and then the strange absence of the word at the end of the verse?

The Netziv explains that the Hebrew language possesses four basic terms for the human being: adam, gever, enosh, ish. Each one is a grade in the scale of human potential, and the highest achievement is reserved for the term "ish", the category of man who reflects most closely the image of God. In fact, our sages tell us that whenever there is an unidentified ish in the Torah, we should know it is speaking about an angel. (For example, when Joseph is sent by his father to locate his brothers, the text reads, "And a certain man [ish] found him" (Gen. 37:15), and Rashi points out that this ish is none other than the angel Gabriel.)

Keeping the Netziv's concept in mind, the text now takes on added resonance. In the first verse, Moses sees two men – a Hebrew and an

Egyptian – locked in unequal and unfair combat. But they are not mere random representatives of their respective nations. They are both men, extraordinary, accomplished and respected individuals, personages, each one worthy of being called ish. But as a result of their shared fate, they each lose their special status. When Moses looks “this way and that way” at each of them, “he sees that they are no longer ‘personages’” (Ex. 2:2). This implies that both the Egyptian and the Hebrew have lost their ishiyut, their special quality, the one because he was doing the smiting and the other one because he was being smitten.

No one would argue that the Egyptian killer loses his ish quality, so that when Moses slays him he slays an Egyptian, not an Egyptian personage, ish. But even the Jewish victim’s ish level is shattered. After all, the victim didn’t fight back; he was devoid of the most minimal self-respect, which demands self-defense. When a person is beaten, contrary to popular notions, one’s ishiyut is not increased, but diminished. The hard reality is that being beaten reduces a person to wounds and pain. And someone who is unable to protect his integrity as a person cannot live as an ish. James Baldwin once said that he can forgive the whites for persecuting the blacks, but he can never forgive the whites for making the blacks feel that they were worthy of persecution. Similarly, the real tragedy of abused wives and children is that they feel guilty and deserving of their pain.

Obviously, this use of the word “ish” also explains our second question, as to why in the subsequent verses we read that the men wanted to know if Moses planned to kill them too. Again, the Torah is telling us that once a person becomes either an oppressor or one of the oppressed, he ipso facto loses the unique human quality within him (although with no fault attached to the one oppressed).

During the Holocaust, many Jewish victims uprooted heaven and earth to retain their dignity, never to lose their ishiyut, their human quality, despite their oppression. And since 1948, the great moral challenge of the nation of Israel has been how to deal with acts of violence and terror perpetrated by the Arab population without losing our ishiyut in the process, how to vanquish our enemies and still retain our humanity.

The challenge in Israel today is to be strong enough never again to suffer as the smitten and sensitive enough never to abuse our strength. The challenge is to belong neither to the smiters nor to those who are smitten; the challenge is to insist upon our rights with strength and compassion, with courage and sensitivity.

The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Moshe Rabbenu, Our Teacher

We know him as Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our Master, Moses our Teacher, Moses our Master Teacher. Such a title certainly tells us a great deal about Moshe and qualifies him for the title “Person in the Parsha.”

But is it his name, given to him by an Egyptian princess, that grants him the role of this week’s central personality? I think not.

Do the titles “master” and “teacher” themselves affirm that he is larger than life, an individual forever of central importance, beginning with the events described in this week’s Torah portion, Shemot (Exodus 1:1-6:1), and continuing to this very day?

I prefer to believe that it is the suffix of the word “Rabbenu,” the “nu” which means “our,” that makes Moshe special. He is “our” master, “our” teacher, the outstanding personage of the Jewish people. In a sense, he is the property of the faith of Judaism, to the exclusion of other faiths and other nations.

True, he is revered by our “sister” religions and is honorably mentioned in their sacred writings. For other faiths, he is a prophet, a hero, perhaps even a “saint.” But he is not their teacher, not their masterful authority figure. The Torah, the comprehensive guide to every aspect of our lives as Jews, is Torat Moshe. The Torah is our guide in life, and Moshe is our shepherd.

Many of us are not aware of the fact that Moshe has been claimed by non-Jews besides the other Abrahamic religions. His very identity as a Jew, an Israelite, has been challenged from many directions. It has been maintained by many who argue that he was an Egyptian, a prince of Egypt, who sought further power and a loftier position of leadership by aligning himself with the enslaved Israelites.

Such arguments were advanced in ancient times and persisted in recent generations in German literature and in Hollywood productions.

One fascinating argument for Moshe’s non-Jewish origins was advanced by a famous Jew who had his own bone to pick with religion in general and with Jewish religion in particular. I refer to Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and the author of *Moses and Monotheism*.

Freud published this work later in his life, when his influence and fame were at their peak, and it met with approval from many

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quarters. It also met with a cascade of criticism and vociferous opposition from defenders of the Jewish faith, those who insisted that Moshe was Rabbenu, “our” teacher.

One such critic was a mid-twentieth century writer named Chaim Greenberg (1889-1953). Greenberg was a Labor Zionist activist and prolific writer who was among the most severe critics of the American Jewish community’s response to news of the Holocaust. Although some of his many writings have been translated into English, I possess a multi-volume collection of his Yiddish essays that I find very perceptive, and that express many traditional Jewish values in a manner which only the Yiddish language can fully capture.

Greenberg wrote a searing rebuttal to Freud’s thesis in 1939, going so far as to mock it as nonsense. I do not know whether his rebuttal had any great impact upon the rest of the world, which was then distracted, to say the least, by the rise of Nazism. But I do know that many Jews were grateful to Greenberg for demolishing Freud’s contention that not only was Moshe an Egyptian, but that monotheism itself had its origins in ancient Egyptian culture.

I imagine that many Jews were then quite pleased that Greenberg’s rebuttal issued from a distinctly non-rabbinic source, from a Labor Zionist publicist with impeccable secular credentials. I should add that my readings of Greenberg’s many works have led me to admire his Yiddishe neshama and thorough familiarity with a wide range of traditional Torah sources.

The rebuttal to which I refer is included in Greenberg’s collection of essays entitled *Yid un Velt* (“The Jew and the World”). The title of the essay is “Moshe Rabbenu Foon Der Gantzer Velt” (“Moses Our Teacher of the Entire World”). Note the implication that although Moshe had universal impact, he remained Rabbenu, “our” teacher.

But the essay’s title comes from a long-forgotten Yiddish nursery rhyme, which translates as follows:

Moshe Rabbenu of the entire world (velt),
Throw me down a small sack of money (gelt).
What will you do with the small sack of money?
I will buy myself a little wagon.
What will you do with the little wagon?
I will load it with little pebbles.
What will you do with little pebbles?
I will build myself a little shul.
What will you do in the little shul?
I will daven Mincha and Maariv!

The meaning of this childlike poem is quite clear. The child conceives of Moshe as simultaneously “our” Teacher and the Teacher of the entire universe. But he carries within his pure and innocent soul the conviction that the ultimate “universe” is the little shul and the Jewish evening prayers!

My experience as a child psychologist has led me to take children’s songs, nursery rhymes, and fairy tales quite seriously. But the long-forgotten song I just shared with you is merely the opening of Greenberg’s long-forgotten essay.

After commenting with his own sense of pride in the Jewish Moshe Rabbenu, he shares this comment from the works of the greatest of all Jewish poets, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi. Here is what he writes, in my own inadequate translation from his lucid and vibrant Yiddish:

“How did Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi put it so many centuries ago? He insisted that Israel received its place in world history not thanks to Moshe Rabbenu. Quite the contrary— Moshe Rabbenu became great because of Israel! Therefore, Jews refer to themselves not as Moshe’s people, but as God’s people.

“Moshe alone, without a people prepared to accept the Torah and travel with him to Mount Sinai, would never have become Moshe Rabbenu! His teachings would have been neglected and forgotten by world history.”

Moshe owed his glory to the Jewish people who followed him into the desert and who follow him to this day. Therefore, the Jewish people “own” him. He was, and remains, Rabbenu— “our” teacher.

Indeed, “Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha Kehilat Yaakov. The Torah Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov.”

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Dissension and Lashon Harah Undermine the Zechus of the Klal

The Medrash says in the beginning of Sefer Shemos that Moshe saw the tremendous suffering that Klal Yisrael was experiencing. Moshe asked: What is the aveira (sin) of the Jewish people – more than any of the seventy nations – that they should need to endure such back-breaking labor? In effect, he asked a question which was a form of the age-old mystery of tzadik v’rah lo. (Why do the righteous suffer?)

Later, the pasuk relates that Moshe went out amidst his brethren and saw the fight between the Egyptian and the Jew: “He looked here and there and saw there was no man, and he smote the Egyptian.” (Shemos 2:12) Subsequently,

Moshe went out on the second day and saw two Jews fighting. He asked the attacker: “Why are you hitting your fellow man?” to which the accused asked, “Who made you officer and judge over us? Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian?” The pasuk then says: “Moshe was very fearful and he said, “So now the matter is known.” (Shemos 2:13-14)

The simple interpretation is that Moshe’s statement “So now the matter is known” is that Moshe was alarmed that his killing of the Egyptian, which he thought was done in total secrecy, had become public knowledge, and the matter would eventually get back to Pharaoh, who would take punitive action against Moshe. However, Rashi brings a Medrash that Moshe’s statement “So now the matter is known” is an answer to his earlier question. Moshe said that he now understood why the Jews in Mitzrayim were experiencing such a terrible exile and suffering: I now realize that there are “dilturin” (talebearers and squealers) amongst the Jewish people.

The Sefas Emes raises a question: Yesterday, Moshe had a question for which he had no answer: How could it be that Klal Yisrael is worse than all the seventy nations of the world? Why do they need to suffer so much? The next day he sees that they speak lashon harah and he claims, “Now I understand their exile and suffering! The Sefas Emes asks: How does this simple observation answer Moshe’s incomprehensible theological problem?

The Sefas Emes answers that the point of the Medrash is to emphasize the tremendous severity of the aveira of lashon harah. Perhaps the Sefas Emes is saying that when Klal Yisrael functions as a tzibbur (united people), then, Moshe could not understand why they should be worse than any other nation. However, Moshe observed, “When I see that they speak lashon harah, then something happens – they no longer have unity and they cease to function as a tzibbur.”

Initially, Moshe was looking at the phenomenon of the Jews’ suffering from the perspective of the concept of “Kol Yisrael arevim zeh l’zeh.” He could not understand the suffering because Klal Yisrael as a nation has so much zechus (merit) – why would they be suffering so much? But once Moshe realized that they spoke lashon harah – that destroys the unity of Klal Yisrael. Once that happens, the Heavenly decree is not directed at a tzibur anymore. Hashem sees a bunch of individuals rather than a unified and holy people.

Dissension forfeits the status of a klal (community), which in turn forfeits the zechusim (merits) of the klal, such that the question “Why is Klal Yisrael suffering so

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much?” cannot be asked. They become just a bunch of individuals. Anything can happen to an individual. Once they are reduced to the status of individuals, the principle of ‘tzadik v’rah lo – ‘as incomprehensible as it may seem – can be invoked to ‘explain’ suffering that we cannot quite understand. However, the principle of ‘tzadik v’rah lo ‘does not apply to a tzibur. The Torah promises “And it will be if you will hearken to the mitzvos that I command you... you will have rain, everything will be good, you will gather in your crops, etc., etc.” As a nation, if you do the mitzvos, I am going to take care of you! Righteous individuals may suffer but not the nation as a whole, when it is righteous!

The Zechus of Na’aseh V’nishma

In Parshas Shemos, Hashem says: “And now, behold! The outcry of the Children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. And now, go and I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall take My people, the Children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Shemos 3:9-10). What is Moshe’s reaction? “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?” (3:11). When we hear that expression “Who am I to go before Pharaoh?” How do we understand it? Simply, we interpret it as “I am not up to the job. I am not worthy for this job. I don’t have the skills for the job.” In other words, Moshe is saying “Mi Anochi? — The problem is ME.” However, Rashi interprets differently. Rashi explains Moshe’s question as Mah zachu Yisrael she’ya’aseh lahem nes? “What zechus do THEY have that a miracle shall be done for THEM?”

The Sefas Emes comments on this apparent “switch.” “Mi anochi?” implies that the problem is with ‘me’. I am not worthy. But then Chazal come along and say that Moshe is really saying that THEY are not worthy! What kind of zechus do THEY have that I should be able to take them out? So whose problem is it? Is it the problem of Moshe Rabbeinu or is the problem of the meritless nation? This is the question raised by the Sefas Emes.

The Sefas Emes answers with a beautiful interpretation: Moshe Rabbeinu wanted his brother Aharon to take the Jews out of Mitzrayim. Besides the fact that Aharon was older and Moshe was concerned about giving proper respect to his older brother, the Sefas Emes adds that Moshe knew that he and Aharon had two different types of nefashos (souls). The shresh haneshama (root of the soul) of Aharon was chessed (kindness). He was the ohev shalom v’rodef shalom – the person who always tried to make peace amongst quarreling parties. He was beloved by everyone. When Aharon died, he was mourned by kol Beis Yisrael (the entire House of

Israel). For lack of a better term, he was the “nice guy” – therefore everybody loved him. That was his *shoresh neshama*.

Moshe’s *shoresh neshama* was not chessed. It was Torah. It was *mishpat*. He is the law giver. “I am the judge. I am the *dayan*. My *shoresh neshama* is the principle of “*Yikov hadin es hahar*” (Let justice penetrate through the mountain). That is why Moshe Rabbeinu said “Listen, Klal Yisrael is not worthy to go out based on the principles of *din* (justice). But if You (Hashem) have someone who represents chessed – someone who treats everyone nicely even though they may not be worthy of it – in his *zechus*, he can be the leader qualified to take an undeserving Klal Yisrael out of Mitzrayim.

“I – the man of truth and justice – am not the appropriate one to take undeserving Jews out of Mitzrayim.” Mah *zechus yesh lahem* (What merit do they have)? as Rashi says. It is not going to work! However, Aharon – the man of kindness and mercy – is the appropriate leader for this task. He will be able to take them out even if they are not deserving of such! How does Hashem answer this challenge from Moshe? “For I will be with you – and this is the sign for you that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Mitzrayim, you will worship G-d on this mountain.” (3:12) Hashem responds to Moshe: You are worried that they don’t have the *zechusim*? You are worried that you are the man of justice and they don’t have the *zechusim*? They DO have the *zechusim*: How do they have the *zechusim*? It is because they are going to leave Mitzrayim and accept the Torah, saying the words “*Na’aseh v’nishmah*.” That is their *zechus*. So even though you are the *ish hamishpat* and even though you are the *ish hadin*, nonetheless Klal Yisrael will have the needed *zechusim*, based on their future actions.

The obvious question is that it has not happened yet. Is Hashem extending credit for what will be but has not yet transpired? This is sequentially inappropriate!

The answer, says the Sefas Emes, is that with Klal Yisrael you do not need to worry about sequence because who on earth says “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” (we will do and then we will hear)? Who on earth says “I will write the check and then you fill in the amount!”? Nobody does that! Since Klal Yisrael exhibits this attribute of doing things out of sequence, that itself is a *zechus* and *midah k’neged midah* – correspondingly – I can judge them, not by what is happening now but by what will be in the future. Such is the *zechus* of *Na’aseh v’nishmah*. With this *zechus*, I can pay them now and then they will earn that payment in the future.

The Sefas Emes references a beautiful Medrash. The pasuk says, “Like the fruitful fragrant apple among the barren trees of the forest, so is my Beloved among the gods...” (Shir HaShirim 2:3). The Medrash comments “Just as with the apple tree the fruit emerges before its leaves, so too Israel uttered first ‘we will do’ before ‘we will hear.’” Klal Yisrael is like the apple tree. Although usually a fruit tree gives out the blossom and then comes the fruit, an apple tree reverses that sequence. The Medrash notes that so too the Jewish nation reversed the normal sequence and committed themselves to action (*na’aseh*) before even hearing the instructions (*nishma*). Apropos to this attribute, the *Ribono shel Olam* says “I am not judging them like they are now (while still in Mitzrayim). I am judging them like they are going to be (at Har Sinai) and therefore they have that *zechus* already.

This is a tremendous lesson regarding how we need to view people. It is a lesson for parents, for teachers, for Rabbeim, and for any person who leads others: Don’t judge people by how they are just now. Try to project how they can be in the future.

Last weekend (January 2017), I was at a convention for a wonderful organization called Partners in Torah. This organization makes ‘*shiduchim*’ between people who are *frum* and at least know somewhat how to learn and Jews who are in far off places who have some desire to pair up with a Torah learning partner. They have found such people in far-flung places like Whitefish, Montana and even in Saudi Arabia – ALL over the place! These phone or Zoom “*Chavrusas*” inspire both of these “partners in Torah” and certainly increase the religious observance of those who are being exposed to Torah study for the first time in their lives. Many even become *Shomer Shabbos* and more. Over 70% of such dispersed and often-unaffiliated Jews increase their *mitzvah* observance in some way by virtue of the fact that they have a once-a-week hourly Torah learning phone conversation with a religious Jew who lives in Boro Park, Baltimore, or Lakewood. It is an amazing thing – someone in Arkansas and someone in Monsey are learning b’*Chavrusa*!

There were several hundred people at this convention. They were made up of *heimeshe* people; people with *streimlach* (worn by Chassidic Jews on special occasions), people with black hats and people with *kipot serugot* (knitted *yarmulkas*) – all of whom were F.F.B. – *frum* (Torah observant) from birth. Then there were also people there who had ‘become *frum*. ‘They looked like the above-mentioned *frum* people but if you spent a little time with them, you could detect right away that these people were *Baalei Teshuva*. And then there were people there who were literally ‘right off

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the boat. ‘These people may have had long hair. One fellow wore a *yarmulka* on Shabbos but on Motzai Shabbos he already took off his *yarmulka*. There were men with earrings, the whole gamut.

You might look at some of these people and ask yourself: What is going to be with this person? You think this fellow has no connection to the life of a Ben Torah. But this is the kind of person who may be wearing a black suit and be groomed like a typical *Yeshiva bocher* a year from now. This is the *koach* (strength) of *Na’aseh v’nishma*. That is the *koach* of “You shall serve Elokim upon this mountain.” (Shemos 3:12).

The *Ribono shel Olam* is telling Moshe Rabbeinu something that perhaps Moshe needs to know as a leader of the Jewish people: Don’t look at them now. Look at what can be. Hashem says to already credit them with the *zechusim*.

Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld was one of the grandfathers of the Baal Teshuva movement. There is a beautiful book about him called *Reb Shlomo: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld* (Judaica Press; 2008) His *koach* – this was in the 1960s – was that he was able to look at a person (many of whom were hippies or high on drugs or whatever) and he would not see the person who was sitting in front of him but he would see what could be with this person. That is the *koach* of “You shall serve Elokim upon this mountain.” and that is what Hakadosh Baruch Hu told Moshe.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

It’s one of the best-known verses, but one of the least understood.

I’m referring to a verse at the commencement of the book of Shemot, where the Torah tells us: ‘*Vayyakom melech-chadash al-mitzrayim*’, a new king arose over Egypt, ‘*asher lo-yada et-yosef*’, who did not know Joseph.

Now, how could that be possible?

This would be like saying that one of our post-war Prime Ministers had never heard of Winston Churchill. Impossible!

Joseph was such a well-known character who saved Egyptian society. So, there are some who explain: of course Pharaoh knew about Joseph; however, he didn’t recognise the depth of Joseph’s contribution and did not appreciate Joseph and his people.

The *Sefer Mayana Shel Torah*, gives a lovely explanation. He explains that Pharaoh did not know Joseph personally.

You know, sometimes you might say to a person, 'Do you know so-and-so?' and they might say, 'Of course, I know about that person, but I've never met them.'

That's what happened with Pharaoh.

As a result, Pharaoh didn't feel a personal connection to Joseph. When one actually knows a person and knows that person's family, one will more readily acknowledge that person's humanity. And by knowing the person, one will be far less likely to hate them or, God forbid, bring harm upon them.

Hatred thrives on ignorance.

When one relates to other people as being "the other." When one is not familiar with them. As a result, sometimes there is a fear of them. And that hatred which arises out of ignorance, can sometimes lead to violence, and, God forbid, even murder.

So, from the beginning of the book of Shemot, we have an important message for all of our societies: take the time to get to know people personally, speak to them, become familiar with them, don't "other" them, and relate to everybody with respect.

As a result, there will be far greater likelihood of compassion, love, affection, and peace.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yakov Haber - Brotherly Love

"Go toward Moshe to the desert!" (Shemos 4:27) ... Israel says before Hashem, "Who will make you like a brother to me!" (Shir Hashirim 8:1). You find that all brothers hated each other: Kayin hated Hevel, ... Yishmael hated Yitzchak, ... Esav hated Ya'akov, ... the tribes hated Yosef. About which brother(s) did Israel refer to the Holy One blessed be He? Like Moshe and Aharon, as the verse states, "Behold, how good and pleasant is the dwelling of brethren together!" (Tehillim 133:1), [since] they loved and cherished each other. When Moshe took kingship and Aharon priesthood, they did not hate each other. Rather, they were each happy for each one's greatness... (Midrash Tanchuma 27).

The Midrash cites as an example of the brotherly love between these two great leaders the fact that Moshe was hesitant to accept the position as redeemer - famously replying to G-d, "שלה נא ביד תשלח" (Shemos 4:13) - because he did not want to assume this role of leadership since his older brother, Aharon, had been a prophet in Egypt and Moshe's being chosen as the redeemer might cause him anguish. Hashem responded to Moshe, "Not only would Aharon not be hurt by this, he would be overjoyed!", telling Moshe, "He will see you and be glad in his heart!" (ibid. v. 14).

A related exchange occurs when Aharon is chosen as the Kohein Gadol. Moshe serves as a kohein in the mishkan during the inaugural period of the shivas yemei hamilu'im (Vayikra ch. 8) happily giving over the reins of kehuna to his brother and his sons (ibid. ch. 9) even reassuring Aharon of his worthiness for this role - even in light of Aharon's hesitance because of his involvement with the golden calf - with the words, "Why are you embarrassed, for this you were chosen!" (Rashi, Vayikra 9:7).

Moshe's total mastery of the quality of ayin tova, viewing others' accomplishments and position in a positive rather than a negative light is magnificently manifested in his famous reply to Yehoshua's attempt to stop Eldad and Meidad from prophesying in the camp: "Are you zealous for me? And would it be that the entire nation would be prophets if Hashem would place his spirit upon them!" (Bemidbar 11:29). Moshe, in effect, is selflessly declaring that if each member of the Jewish people would be just like him, he would be elated, not disappointed or jealous.

Envy of another's accomplishments, assets and position is one of the primary negative forces in the struggle for developing a perfected Torah personality. Chazal tell us that alongside desire and the pursuit of glory, this trilogy of human qualities serve as archetypes of sin (see Avos 4:21). Falling into their trap unfortunately qualifies the person as being a student of Bilam Harasha; overcoming them places one in the category of being a disciple of Avraham Avinu (ibid. 5:19).

To be sure, Chazal (Bava Basra 21b) even encourage the positive use of envy for a higher purpose, citing the saying, "קנאת סופרים תרבה" - the envy of scholars will increase wisdom." Seeing the scholarly accomplishments of a fellow Jew can spur an individual to pursue similar achievements. Yeshivos, aware of other yeshivos being more successful, will be incentivized to raise the bar of their educational offerings and environment, and therefore, generally, it is encouraged that multiple yeshivos should open in one town. However, the sefer L'rei'acha Kamocha (Vol. 2, p. 159) notes that there are two kinds of envy. Whereas the first is where A wants something B has but is fine with B having it as well, the second is where A wants something exclusively which B has wishing that B should lose it or desiring to somehow get it from him. The former type of envy is, concerning mundane matters, not formally prohibited according to many poskim, but is not recommended since, being the opposite of a same'ach b'chelko attitude, will lead to an unhappy life of always trying to "keep up with the Joneses." However, concerning spiritual

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matters, this kind of envy is, as above, even recommended as an impetus to drive one to higher forms of service of G-d. By contrast, regarding the second type, Ramban (Vayikra 19:18) maintains that it is prohibited as an aspect of the commandment of "V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocha." Envy of that type is prohibited even concerning spiritual matters.[1]

How does one overcome the natural drive causing jealousy? Whereas no easy solutions exist, it would appear that several attitudinal changes can assist in doing so. Firstly, a sense of profound gratitude for what one already has mitigates jealousy. Chovos Halevavos teaches that a person can always look to others who have it worse off than he does in order to develop gratefulness for that which he does have. Moshe's profound sense of gratitude he felt toward all the people - and even objects - benefiting him presumably also informed his total lack of envy toward his brother and, later, his people.[2]

Secondly, Chazal teach us, " בכל אדם מתקנה חוץ" - a person is naturally jealous of all others except for his student and his son" (Sanhedrin 105b). Why is this distinction true? It would appear that since a person views his student and child as an extension of himself, no envy can exist. Perhaps we can suggest that increasing our awareness of the fact that the Jewish people are all part of the same team and, on a deeper level, are even all part of a common communal soul, Knesses Yisrael, can help implant a new vantage point fostering the treatment of all Jews similarly to the way we would view our own sons and students - as extensions of ourselves, such that their accomplishments are also our accomplishments and their successes are our successes.[3]

Thirdly, realizing that ultimately our lot in life is determined by our loving Father in Heaven, the Master Planner for all of our individual lives and their role in the ultimate destiny of the Jewish people can help foster a more beneficent view of others' achievements and assets. The Talmud (Ta'anis 25a) relates a story about R. Elazar b. Pedas who was extremely indigent. In need of nourishment after a medical procedure, he ate the only food he had, a clove of garlic! After fainting, he had a dream in which he asked Hashem, "How long do I have to suffer in this world?" Hashem replied, "Elazar, my son, would you like me to overturn the world from the beginning so that maybe you will be born in a 'time of sustenance?'" He replied, "All that, and only maybe?!" Rav Aryeh Kaplan[4] explains that this Gemara is teaching us of the profound workings of Divine Providence whereby each individual person serves a different role in the grand scheme of history. If

one person's lot would change, that would greatly affect other aspects of the Divine plan rooted in the very fabric of Creation from the beginning of Time. It was this truism that the Almighty conveyed to R. Elazar b. Pedas after which he was resolved to his fate.[5] Such a humbling attitude of recognizing our unique, if different, roles in the great tapestry of existence can assist in reducing envy toward others.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l, having heard that a student of his purchased a new apartment, requested to visit. Surprised but honored, the student gladly agreed. Upon visiting, the gadol asked to see all of the rooms, inquiring where different things were put. Again surprised by his Rebbe's inquisitiveness about such mundane matters, the student inquired what motivated his visit and piqued his interest in the particulars of his apartment. Rav Auerbach responded, "There is so much ayin ra'ah (an envious eye) in the world; I wanted to place an ayin tova on your apartment, being happy for you!" May we all learn from our stellar leaders, Moshe's and Aharon's example of ayin tova concerning others' accomplishments and assets and utilize all that we have to serve our Creator individually and together as one nation!

[1] Also see Envy: The Prohibited, the Permissible and the Recommended for further elaboration on these concepts.

[2] Also see Gratitude - The Legacy of Moshe by Rav Zvi Sobolofsky for further elaboration on Moshe's attitude of gratitude in stark contrast to Pharaoh's lack of it.

[3] Also see Yerushalmi Nedarim (9:4) which compares taking vengeance against a fellow Jew to the right hand hitting the left one

[4] Handbook of Jewish Thought (Vol. 2), Chap. 19, Divine Providence (p. 297).

[5] For his trust in Hashem and not requesting a redo of the world (!), he was promised enormous spiritual reward.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Learning Hashem - Rav Moshe Taragin

The liberation from Mitzrayim was a multilayered event. It transformed Jewish history by freeing us from more than two centuries of slavery and setting us on the path toward our ancestral land. Along that journey, we would stand beneath a trembling mountain and receive the Torah, committing ourselves to a life shaped by covenant and command.

In time, we would assume a broader role — bearing witness to monotheism in a world fractured by idolatry and superstition. Through our history and our teachings, we would help redirect the human imagination away from paganism and toward a vision of life grounded in moral responsibility, restraint, and accountability.

A Mystery - Hashem first reveals Himself to Moshe Rabbeinu through a bush that burns, yet

is not consumed. The visual paradox is deliberate. It signals that Hashem cannot be reduced to scientific explanation or empirical inquiry. He exists beyond the categories through which human beings normally understand reality.

The image of a bush aflame yet not consumed also conveys separation. Hashem is not part of the physical system He created. The laws that govern nature — energy, decay, and limitation — do not bind Him. He transcends the world even as He governs it.

Through this encounter, Moshe is taught the first lesson of monotheism: Hashem is not part of the created order and cannot be grasped by the human imagination. Years later, atop Har Sinai, Moshe would ask to perceive Hashem more fully and understand His essence, and he would be told, "You cannot see My face." Human beings may approach Hashem and speak about Him, but full comprehension remains beyond reach.

The encounter at the burning bush lays the foundation of monotheism: Hashem may be known, but He can never be fully understood.

Moshe's Dilemma - Moshe then faces a daunting question: how should he present Hashem to a nation of slaves? They had not witnessed the burning bush. They were crushed by generations of bondage. Much of the spiritual inheritance built by their ancestors had been eroded under the weight of oppression in Mitzrayim.

Slaves live in survival mode — one step, one day at a time. They have little emotional or imaginative space for abstraction, let alone for a Hashem who defies logic and resists definition. What language, what symbols, could convey Hashem without reducing Him to something physical — or pulling them back toward the pagan culture that surrounded them? Moshe's hesitation is understandable: how does one speak of an unknowable Hashem to a people ground down by centuries of suffering?

Eternity and Consolation - Hashem answers Moshe with a name: E-hyeh Asher E-hyeh or "I am, that I am". In this brief phrase, Hashem introduces Himself as eternal — existing before the universe and independent of it.

Unlike human beings, who are shaped and altered by circumstance, Hashem remains constant. Human lives move from strength to weakness, from promise to decline; Hashem does not. He exists across all moments without change or development. This name allows Moshe to describe Hashem without images — as a presence beyond time and change.

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This first glimpse of Hashem as eternal and unchanging offered comfort. The people remembered Yosef — how he had saved Mitzrayim from famine and how his family had once been welcomed with honor. Alongside those memories were quieter stories, passed from generation to generation, of a family that had once known dignity and promise.

Learning that Hashem is eternal renewed hope. If Hashem had acted once, He could act again. The promises whispered from generation to generation, passed along like bedtime stories, might yet be fulfilled. As distant and improbable as redemption seemed amid the misery of slavery, it suddenly felt imaginable.

They still struggled to picture a Hashem without physical form. But they could grasp a Hashem who transcends time and change — and whose promises endure even in the darkest hours.

The process of learning about Hashem, and finding ways to relate to Him without physical form, had begun. It would unfold slowly, shaping faith step by step.

Hashem and Human Relationships - Moshe now stands in Mitzrayim, confronting Pharaoh for the first time. His message is directed at a tyrant who sees himself as divine. Moshe commands a ruler whom no one dares challenge to release the Jewish slaves, warning that refusal will bring devastating consequences.

At this early stage, Moshe names only one plague: the death of the firstborn. Speaking in Hashem's name, he declares that the Jewish people are Hashem's children. If Pharaoh refuses to free them, Hashem will strike Pharaoh's firstborn. Though delayed until after nine additional plagues, this is the first threat Moshe delivers — meant to pierce Pharaoh's arrogance.

But Pharaoh was not the only audience. The Jewish people also heard Hashem describe them as His children and pledge redemption, even at tremendous cost to the tyrant. From this declaration they learned another way to relate to a Hashem they could not define. If Hashem chose to describe them as His children, He was inviting them to relate to Him as a parent.

Hashem invites us to draw upon human relationships as lenses through which to relate to Him. He is not our father in a biological sense, yet we are allowed — and expected — to imagine Him as a parent so that the emotions bound up in that bond — trust, dependence, longing — can animate faith.

Emuna is meant to be lived emotionally, not only understood intellectually.

As that relationship matured, additional metaphors emerged. Hashem is described as a spouse, demanding loyalty and offering covenant. Dovid HaMelekh compares Hashem to a mother, evoking the warmth and security of an infant held close. He also speaks of Hashem as a friend, drawing upon the trust that defines friendship.

Gradually, the contours of monotheism come into focus. Hashem cannot be understood in human terms. Yet to build a living relationship with Him, we are given conceptual entry points, such as the idea of an unchanging Hashem, steady amid upheaval. We are also given metaphors — not to define Hashem, but to make a relationship possible. Through them, we are invited to bring the language and emotion of human relationships into our encounter with Him.

History, Nature, and Choice - Despite Moshe's ominous warning about the fate of the firstborn, Pharaoh remains unmoved, and the oppression intensifies. When Moshe returns a second time, he introduces a vital idea to a broken people: Hashem does not stand apart from history. He enters it and reshapes it. Moshe delivers divine promises of redemption — of release from Mitzrayim and a journey toward Eretz Yisrael. The events that follow will give those promises substance.

Hashem does not act only through political upheaval or human rebellion. Nature itself is overturned. The orderly rhythms of the world are suspended as the plagues unfold. The Nile, the land, the skies — even time itself — bend in service of redemption.

More striking still, Hashem's reach extends inward. Pharaoh's stubbornness and inner resolve become part of the unfolding drama. Human will and inner struggle are no longer beyond Hashem's reach. Redemption moves through history, through nature, and through the inner life of human beings — revealing a Hashem who governs not only nations and events, but the deepest layers of human choice.

The liberation from Mitzrayim was not only political or historical. It also marked the beginning of a gradual education in emuna. Hashem cannot be understood in human terms; like the burning bush, He remains a mystery. Yet we are asked to build a deep and enduring relationship with Him, even without full comprehension.

This has been our enduring legacy: commitment to a Hashem we can never fully understand.



BS"D

To: parsha@groups.io
From: Chaim Shulman
<cshulman@gmail.com>

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to: ravfrand@torah.org
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A New Insight Into the "Great Wealth" That Avraham Avinu Witnessed

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1364 – The Halachic Issues Concerning Hearing Aids. Good Shabbos! A New Insight Into the "Great Wealth" That Avraham Avinu Witnessed The Gemara (Sotah 11b) says that in the zechus (merit) of the nashim tzidkanios (righteous women) of that generation (who encouraged their husbands to have children with them in the midst of the slavery), Klal Yisrael were zoche to (merited) beezas Mitzrayim (the spoils of Egypt)." This is a slight variation of another teaching of Chazal, also appearing in the same Gemara, that in the zechus of the nashim tzidkanios, Klal Yisrael were redeemed from Mitzrayim (Egypt).

In either case, the reference to the reward of the nashim tzidkanios in Mitzrayim relates to the fact that the Jewish men in Mitzrayim did not want to procreate. They did not want to bring children into the world because they felt such efforts would be in vain. The babies would be thrown into the Nile or they would be used as bricks in building the pyramids. The women, however, took a different approach. They argued "We need to do what we need to do." As the Gemara relates, they would go out into the fields and entice their husbands, and as a result of that they would bring children into the world.

The Gemara says that as a result of the fact that the women had this emunah (trust and belief in Hashem), they were rewarded with beezas Mitzrayim. When Klal Yisrael left Mitzrayim, they left with all sorts of gold and silver that came to them as a result of the nashim tzidkanios, who encouraged their husbands to have children with them.

There are four questions that I would like to present on this Gemara: What is the connection between beezas Mitzrayim and encouraging their husbands to have children? The correlation is not at all obvious.

The pasuk in Parshas Bo says "Daber nah (Please speak) in the ears of the people: Let each man request from his fellow and each woman from her fellow, silver vessels and gold vessels." (Shemos 11:2). Rashi famously points out that the word "nah" indicates "request." Hashem instructs Moshe:

"Please ask them to take the silver and gold so that Avraham Avinu should not have a complaint that I fulfilled the promise of 'they will be slaves for four hundred years' but I did not fulfill the promise of 'afterwards they will leave with great wealth.'" (Bereshis 15:13-14). The question is: Why would it be necessary to ask the people to "Please take the money"? Usually, people do not need to be encouraged to ask for money. Money is money. It is valuable. Was there going to be some kind of resistance on the part of the people to ask for "free money?"

They are told to ask for the money so that the promise of the Ribono shel Olam that "afterwards they will leave with great wealth" will be fulfilled. Was there no other way for the Ribono shel Olam to allow His nation to leave Mitzrayim with great wealth other than to have them go through this sham of asking to "borrow" the silver and gold from the Mitzrim and then abscond with it? The wealth could have simply appeared magically on the doorsteps of every Jew before he or she left Mitzrayim!

There appears to be a contradiction between pesukim. In our parsha, the Torah writes: "...And it will be when you will go you will not go empty-handed. Each woman shall request from her neighbor and from the one who lives in her house, silver vessels, golden vessels, u'smalos... (and garments)" (Shemos 3:21-22) In other words, at the same time that they asked for gold and silver, they were told to ask for smalos. However, in Parshas Bo, when this is again repeated, the pasuk says "Let each man request of his fellow and each woman from her fellow silver vessels and gold vessels." (Shemos 11:2) However, smalos are not mentioned. Then, further on in Parshas Bo when they actually carried this out, it says "The Children of Israel did according to the word of Moshe; they requested from the Mitzrim silver vessels, gold vessels, and garments." (Shemos 12:35). There, it again mentions that they asked for smalos. This is very peculiar. Was the wardrobe part of the package that they were to request or not?

Rav Elya Svei, z"l, in his sefer on Chumash, presents a beautiful inference from a comment of the Seforno (Shemos 11:2). The Seforno writes "So that they (Klal Yisrael) will not worry that because of the ("borrowed") money, they (the Mitzrim) will risk their lives to pursue them." Asking the Mitzrim for their silver and gold was an act of tremendous faith on the part of Klal Yisrael. After the initial shock of the Makkos (Ten Plagues), including the loss of their first-born sons, the Mitzrim would be going to their bank accounts and shouting "Hey! They robbed us!" This would encourage the Mitzrim to run after Klal Yisrael to try to retrieve the gold and silver that Klal Yisrael had taken from them without repayment!

Why did the Ribono shel Olam do this? He did this because he wanted Klal Yisrael to show their faith in Him – that He will take care of us. Yes, this may increase the chances that the Mitzrim will run after us – which indeed they did – but the Ribono shel Olam has taken care of us until now. He will somehow or other solve the problem – which he did, by Krias Yam Suf. This answers why the Ribono shel Olam didn't just make the silver and gold appear miraculously on their doorsteps. He wanted them to go through this sham of borrowing from the Mitzrim as a test. And it was not only a test. It was a way of actualizing this midah (attribute) of trusting the Ribono shel Olam. This was one of several lessons in emunah that were part of the process of Yetzias Mitzrayim. Hashem asked the Mitzrim to shecht (slaughter) the lamb for the Korban Pesach, even though lambs were the Avodah Zarah of the Mitzrim. This is another example.

This also answers the question of "Please speak in the ears of the nation..." It was necessary to ask them to please take money. As the Seforno writes, they were hesitant to take the items because they knew that with the Mitzrim's borrowed money in their possession, it would be much more likely that the Mitzrim would pursue them into the wilderness.

As far as the third question regarding the on again off again appearance of the word smalos in the list of things to be requested: Rashi mentions that of the three items (gold, silver, and clothing), the hardest item for the Mitzrim to give up was their clothing. It is harder to give away the shirt off your back or the suit you are currently wearing than to reach into your wallet and give away your money!

Rav Svei explains as follows: The first time the Ribono shel Olam gave Moshe the instructions as to what Klal Yisrael was to ask for, He had faith in Klal Yisrael that they would do even the most difficult of the three things (asking for the smalos). But the Ribono shel Olam knew that Moshe Rabbeinu did not have as much faith in Klal Yisrael as He had. So when Moshe gave the people the instruction, he did not mention smalos because he knew that was the hardest thing to ask for. However, when the time came, they actually did ask for smalos. (They must have known that Hashem had included smalos when He originally told Moshe what would happen, back in Parshas Bo.) That is why when they actually asked the Mitzrim, it says that they asked for gold, silver, and clothing – because Klal Yisrael met the test set up for them by the Ribono shel Olam.

The answer to the original question about the connection between the women encouraging their husbands to have children with them and the reward of beezas Mitzrayim is that they are indeed connected. The source of this emunah that Klal Yisrael demonstrated when leaving Mitzrayim is the original emunah demonstrated by these women. The men learned from the women. The lesson they learned was that when someone has emunah in the Ribono shel Olam, things turn out alright. The women in Klal Yisrael imbued in their husbands this concept that a person needs to do what the Ribono shel Olam asks and whatever will occur will occur. Therefore, in the zechus of “those women,” they were zoche to the beezas Mitzrayim.

Based on this, Rav Svei says a new pshat in the concept “so that the righteous one (Avraham) will not say to Me that I fulfilled the part of the prophecy that they would suffer for four hundred years, but did not fulfill the prophecy that they would leave b'rechush gadol” (with great wealth). The “rechush gadol” that Avraham Avinu saw them go out with was NOT the gold and silver. It was their demonstration of emunah.

Rashi and the Ramban say that part of the reason that Klal Yisrael had to go down to Mitzrayim was because of the “aveira of Avraham Avinu.” What was this “aveira?” After being given Hashem’s promise that he would get the Land of Canaan (Bereshis 15:7), Avraham asked “How will I know that I will indeed inherit it?” (Bereshis 15:8).

If it is even possible to say such a thing about Avraham Avinu, this represented a slight deficit in his emunah. The Ramban says that when Avraham left Eretz Canaan (due to the famine) and went down to Mitzrayim, “chet gadol chatah” (He sinned a great sin). Avraham should have had emunah! You don’t have food? Don’t worry! The Ribono shel Olam will take care of you. According to these commentaries (and others), the whole Galus Mitzrayim was precipitated – to a certain extent – because of Avraham’s imperceptible lack of emunah.

So when Klal Yisrael emerges “b’rechush gadol” (with great wealth) because of their faith in the Ribono shel Olam, what could be a greater wealth for Avraham Avinu after he slipped up slightly in the matter of emunah, than to see that his descendants withstood the test and had full faith in the Ribono shel Olam. That is the rechush gadol that Avraham witnessed.

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. Rav Frand © 2026 by Torah.org. Torah.org: The Judaism Site

from: [Ira Zlotowitz Iraz@klalgovoa.org](mailto:Iraz@klalgovoa.org) date: Jan 8, 2026, 7:00 PM
subject: Tidbits • Parashas Shemos 5786 in memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz zt"l

This week, the week of Parashas Shemos, we begin the weeks of Shovavim. Shovavim is an acronym for the six weekly Torah portions: Shemos, Vaera, Bo, Beshalach, Yisro and Mishpatim. Shovavim is an auspicious time to review the Laws of Taharas Hamishpacha and for introspection regarding

our spiritual purity. Some say additional tehillim and other tikkunim, while others fast on Mondays and Thursdays during this period.

Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Zevachim 117. The siyum is this Monday, mazal tov! Masechta Menachos begins next • Yerushalmi: Succah 22 • Mishnah Yomis: Arachin 3:5-4:1 • Oraysa (coming week): Yevamos 18a-20a • Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: 45:3-8

Make sure to call your parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rebbe to wish them a good Shabbos. If you didn’t speak to your kids today, make sure to connect with them as well!

Shabbos Mevorchim Chodesh Shevat is next week, Shabbos Parashas Va'eira.

SHEMOS: B'nei Yisrael experience explosive population growth • Pharaoh conspires to diminish the Jewish population by enslaving them • Pharaoh commands that all newborn boys be thrown into the Nile River • Shifrah and Puah ignore Pharaoh’s command to kill the newborn boys • Moshe’s birth • Yocheved places Moshe on the Nile; Miriam watches from afar • Pharaoh’s daughter, Bisyah, discovers and adopts Moshe • Moshe witnesses the oppression of B'nei Yisrael and kills an Egyptian beating a Jew • Moshe intercedes in a fight between two Jews • Moshe’s killing of the Egyptian becomes known; Pharaoh seeks to kill him • Moshe escapes to Midyan, he comes to the aid of Yisro’s daughters and marries Tziporah • Hashem speaks to Moshe at the burning bush • Moshe is appointed to act as Redeemer, with his brother Aharon assisting as his ‘spokesman’ • Moshe returns to Egypt and B'nei Yisrael are advised that they will be redeemed • Moshe and Aharon confront Pharaoh • Pharaoh increases the Jews’ workload • Hashem promises the redemption will be with a mighty arm.

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“וַיְהִי בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם” “It happened in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and he perceived their burdens” (Shemos 2:11)

The Midrash relates that in the merit of Moshe going out - in those days - to observe the plight of his brethren, he merited Hashem’s descent from the heavens to speak to him face-to-face. What was unique about Moshe Rabbeinu’s action that earned him this great privilege? Also, what was significant about Moshe taking these actions in those days specifically? Rav Yosef Elefant shlit”a quotes from Rav Wolbe zt”l that Moshe in those days was living ‘the good life’ in the house of Pharaoh and yet he sought out the state of his fellow Jews. Rashi says “Nasan einav v’libo”, he directed his eyes and his heart to their situation. Rav Wolbe quotes Rav Yerucham Levovitz zt”l as saying that this was the “gantze Moshe Rabbeinu”. This encapsulates the greatest leader of all time. The Alter from Kelm (Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv zt”l) further explains that being attentive to another is the first step in coming closer to our Creator. For if one cannot feel the pain of those close by, he cannot possibly understand the distress and desires of the Ribono Shel Olam, Who may seem to be far more distant. Moshe Rabbeinu, who in those days was living royally, left his own ‘comfort zone’ to seek out the plight of others. The Ribono Shel Olam responded that in the merit of this action, He would descend from His domain on high to speak to Moshe ‘face-to-face’. _

from: RIETS Kollel Elyon Substack <riets@substack.com>

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Parashat Shemot:

When Violence Becomes Thinkable
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

Moses encounters two men locked in imminent physical confrontation. To one of them, the Torah records Moses' admonition: "Why would you strike your fellow?" (Ex. 2:13). The verb tense is telling—no blow has yet landed. Yet the Torah already labels this individual "rasha," the wicked one. From this episode, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 58b) derives a remarkable prohibition: "He who raises his hand to strike another, even though he has not actually struck him, is considered wicked."

This law is surprising. Jewish law generally does not criminalize mere intent; crimes that are planned but not executed carry no label of guilt. Moreover, if no blow is completed, no injury is inflicted—seemingly, no offense has occurred. Why, then, does halakhah treat the raised hand as an independent transgression?

Some authorities view the prohibition as protective, designed to prevent threatened harm from being actualized. Others suggest it addresses the fear instilled in the potential victim, a violation of *ona'at devarim*, the prohibition against causing distress through words or actions. Still others, like the Lubavitcher Rebbe, understand that raising one's hand in violence is "intrinsically ugly," a misuse of the human hand that God designed to be an instrument of kindness.

Yet there may be something deeper still. A person who raises his hand in threat has fundamentally altered the tone of human interaction. He has signaled his willingness to introduce violence into the equation, to reduce human discourse from the level of words to that of physical force. The civil relationship between human beings has been corrupted, lowered to an animalistic conflict in which violence is no longer anathema.

Sigmund Freud once observed, "Civilization began the first time an angry person cast a word instead of a rock." In that, he took a cue from his ancestors and from one of his most famous subjects, Moses. The essence of the prohibition Moses conveyed with his language is that it identifies the moment of civilizational collapse not when the rock is thrown, but when violence becomes a conceivable response to conflict. This is not merely preparation for a crime; it is the declaration of a philosophy. It announces that the threatening party has opted out of civilization itself.

This understanding may explain why, according to many, such an individual is disqualified from serving as a witness in Jewish law. Maimonides frames the prohibition not just as calling someone wicked, but as establishing actual *rasha* status with all its implications. One who raises his hand against another has revealed himself as someone who operates outside the framework of civil society, someone whose entire orientation toward human relations has been compromised.

The work *B'Netivot HaRishonim* offers an additional perspective: the prohibition of hitting derives from the biblical command not to exceed the prescribed number of lashes when administering punishment. This situates the offense within the framework of unauthorized punishment: striking either the guilty excessively, or the innocent at all. Extending this logic to the raised hand, the very suggestion that one will issue punishment to another outside formal authorization (and absent justification like self-defense) constitutes its own violation. As Rashi notes in his commentary, Moses' choice of words, "Why would you strike your fellow?", emphasizes that "a wicked one just like you" has no standing to act punitively toward another of equal culpability.

This framework illuminates our contemporary challenge with terrorism. Terrorism represents the ultimate expression of the raised hand: not merely the threat of violence against an individual, but the systematic introduction of violence as a tool of political discourse. It declares that civilized modes of resolving disputes—negotiation, compromise, legal process—have been abandoned in favor of intimidation and bloodshed.

The terrorist seeks to normalize violence, to make it thinkable as an option in addressing grievances. By targeting civilians, by celebrating brutality, by rejecting the most basic distinctions between combatants and innocents, terrorism announces its fundamental rejection of the civilizational compact. It represents a reversion to the pre-Mosaic world where might makes right, where the stronger simply prevails over the weaker without recourse to justice or law.

In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud wrote that "civilized society is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards one another." He understood that civilization's task is to erect barriers against human aggression, to channel violent impulses into productive forms. The halakhic prohibition against raising one's hand serves precisely this function—it draws the line not at the point of contact, but at the threshold of intent, declaring that the very contemplation of violence as a solution corrupts the one who entertains it.

When Moses confronted the man about to strike his fellow, he was not merely preventing an assault. He was defending the boundary between civilization and chaos, between a society governed by law and one ruled by force. The lesson of that moment echoes across millennia: A culture that tolerates the raised hand, whether in individual disputes or in political terrorism, has already begun its descent from the world of words back to the world of rocks.

The challenge is not merely to respond to violence when it occurs, but to recognize and reject the mentality that declares violence a legitimate option. As Moses taught, wickedness begins not with the blow itself, but with the willingness to change the conversation into something else, and to take civilization down with it.

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from: **Rabbi YY Jacobson** <rabiyy@theyeshiva.net>

date: Jan 9, 2026, 12:18 AM

The Birth of Greatness

The Psychological Burning Bush

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

Moses' Story

Unlike his brethren suffering in slavery, Moses had been raised in the palace of the Pharaoh, and by the king's own daughter, Batya. A favorite of the king, as a child, he was not spared luxury. Moses could have easily chosen to isolate himself in the aristocratic life of a prince, oblivious to the hardship and suffering of the Hebrews, targeted for abuse and annihilation. But Moses did not.

Moses leaves the palace, choosing to spend his time comforting and bringing relief to the Jewish slaves. Quickly, he finds himself unable to stand idly in the face of injustice. To protect an innocent man being beaten senselessly by his Egyptian taskmaster, Moses kills the tormenting master, and then, to escape capital punishment, flees to the quiet land of Midyan. There, he meets his wife, Tziporah, the daughter of one of the wealthiest and most influential men in town, Jethro, and Moses settles down into the favorite biblical occupation, shepherding.

It seems that life has worked out for Moses. The horrors of Egypt are a thing of the past. True, Egypt is a place of unspeakable crimes against humanity, but what can Moses, or for that matter what can anyone, do about that?

Moses' life in Midyan, hundreds of miles away from Egypt, is now secure, domesticated, and peaceful. He builds a family and grows old.

Moses is now eighty years of age. By all calculations, a good time to retire. But then everything changes. And it has something to do with a burning bush.

A Burning Bush

One day, Moses is shepherding his father-in-law's sheep, when suddenly, he witnesses a bush, "burning with a heart of fire," yet the bush is not being consumed, it is not being transformed to ash. Moses says, "Let me turn aside, and see this great vision! Why is the bush not being consumed?"

The Torah describes the following scene:[1]

"G-d saw that Moses turned to see, so He called out to him from amidst the bush. 'Moses! Moses!' And he said: Here I am."

G-d tells Moses that "I have heard the pain and screams of the children of Israel in Egypt, and I have decided to save them." Now it is you, Moses, who I will send to Pharaoh, and you will take my nation out of Egypt. Moses

becomes the greatest leader of all times, liberating a people from oppression and giving the world the Torah, paving a road in the jungle of history.

A Turn of the Head

The Rabbis in the Midrash, always sensitive to nuance, focus our attention on the enigmatic words: "G-d saw that Moses turned to see, so He called out to him from amidst the bush." Clearly, G-d called out to Moses only because Moses turned to see the sight of the burning bush. But what exactly did Moses do? What does it mean that he "turned to see?"

On this there is a Midrashic argument:[2] Rabbi Yochanan says that Moses walked five steps[3] approaching the burning bush. Reish Lakish says that Moses did not take any steps at all; he simply turned his head to gaze at the bush, and when G-d saw that he turned his head in that direction, he called out to him.

What is the motif behind this strange argument?

The Light Bulb Moment

All biblical tales are not merely historical tales of the past, but contemporary lessons for our own lives. The story of Moses, the most important biblical figure, is no different.[4] It is a timeless blueprint for our own inner journey. Just like Moses, whose life at this point was slow and tranquil, far away from Pharaoh and the enslaved Israelites, and then suddenly is confronted with his burning bush and a new mission to change the destiny of mankind, we too often find ourselves far away from our destiny. We are living in our own orbit, "shepherding our own flock," minding our own business, in our inner psychological wilderness.

But then, suddenly, we experience a "burning bush," or a "light bulb moment." A fire is ignited in our hearts, a light bulb goes off in our minds. Our G-d within speaks to us about a larger mission in life.

Mark Twain said, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why." It is the day when you suddenly see your full potential and hence your full responsibility to both yourself and those around you. It is a moment of clarity when you know exactly what you are capable of, and what you were created for. It is when you shoulder full responsibility for your destiny.

But how can I know that the voice calling me is real? How do I know that it is not a fantasy created by an imagined ego, a childish dream, divorced from reality? How do I know that this is not the hallucination of a lunatic, or trauma protecting itself, but my personal call to greatness? Maybe I need to go to a psychiatrist or a therapist instead of returning to Egypt and confronting my Pharaoh.

The answer is when the fire burns and burns, yet never consumes your bush. The light bulb never dims. The voice inside me never falls silent. Then I know that this is not a fantasy, but a mission. My inner fire and secret passion, my 'heart of fire,' can never be extinguished, can never be placated by any alternatives. I can run, but I cannot hide, because the fire will continue to burn inside me.

Running From Your Burning Bush

And yet, many of us do not turn to see as the bush burns with a never-ending flame. We don't want to get disturbed. We have appointments to catch, emails to answer, bills to pay, goals to complete. Who has time and energy for a bush which refuses to stop burning?

We are tempted to look away, run away, to pretend we never saw what we saw. We don't like entertaining ideas that might severely shake up the status quo.

The greatness of Moses was that he turned to see the bush. According to one sage, Rabbi Yochanan, he actually walked five steps toward the flames—corresponding to the five layers of human consciousness: Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah, Chayah, Yechidah—the biological, emotional, intellectual, transcendental, and undefined quintessence ("quint" in Greek means five[5]) of the soul, beyond form or description. According to Rabbi Yochanan, Moses approached the burning bush with every fiber of his being, with every aspect of his identity.[6]

But Reish Lakish argues. Moses did not even take a single step. There is no need to even take one step toward the bush. All G-d wants is for you to turn your head and notice the bush ablaze. Just be attentive enough in life that

when the light bulb moment occurs, you will at least notice it; you will not repress it with a glass of alcohol, a TV show or a rib steak.

That is for some the most difficult and therefore most rewarding step: to turn their heads and see the moment.[7] And when you do turn your head, when you do tune in to the moment, you will be able to hear the call. Your inner Divine consciousness, your inner soul, will summon you: Moses! Moses! Declare "Hinani!" I am here. And listen, with your soul's ear, to your mission, the mission of your life.

Three Excuses

But Moses is not easy to convince. He begins arguing with G-d[8]: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Who am I that I should take the Jews out of Egypt?" And when G-d does not desist, Moses tries a different approach:

"But the people, they won't believe me; they will ask me 'who is this G-d in whose name you speak!'" But G-d insists. Moses then speaks of the fact that he is not a man of words; his communication skills are compromised.

Finally, Moses begs, "Please G-d, send in the hand of the right person." G-d gets upset at Moses and promises him that He will be with him throughout the mission. Only then does Moses finally accept his calling. Once he accepted it, he never looks back again. The march toward redemption begins. This is true in our lives too. There are three major handicaps that prevent people from finding themselves and living their lives to the fullest; there are three rationalizations for why we shirk our greatest responsibilities; three forms of paralysis.

Moses first says "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Who am I that I should redeem the Jews?" In our vocabulary this is the response of insecurity. We are afraid, we feel inadequate to meet the challenges of life.

We blame ourselves or our mothers: I am helpless, I am incompetent, I am a victim, I stutter, I can't communicate, nobody likes me, I am a small guy, a nobody. But G-d does not accept: To shy from responsibility due to feelings of inadequacy is not an act of humility, but one of cowardice, because it excuses inaction, avoids accountability, and most importantly it allows you to remain mediocre and for a people to remain enslaved. How can you allow your mediocrity to allow suffering of innocent people?

Another approach is not to blame ourselves, but to blame everyone else. In the words of Moses, "But the people won't believe me! They will say who is this G-d in whose name you speak; what will I respond to them?" We often claim that we are ready, but what can we do, the world is not ready for us!

We blame our spouses, our in-laws, our family, our community, the media, the government, the masses—for being unresponsive. We blame our families for being unappreciative and our communities for not respecting us. We blame everyone but ourselves.

Finally, there is a third excuse: Perfectionism. If I can't be perfect, then I don't want to be anything at all. This is encapsulated by Moses' last argument: "G-d! Send in the hand of the right person." Moses, says the Midrash,[9] was referring to Moshiach, the one intended to redeem us conclusively, permanently, and for all of eternity. Here Moses is saying, "I know that I am capable of fulfilling this mission to the fullest, and I know that the people will be responsive and will heed my call, but if my redemption is to be temporary, then I don't want to bother with it at all! It is either all or nothing!"

But G-d, once again, disagrees. Perfectionism, when misused, is not a strength, but a weakness. It is the enemy of progress.

Your Struggles

How do I know where my unique mission lies?

The answer, again, is in the thorn bush. The call to Moses did not come from any bush; it came from a thorn bush. Thorns represent pain, where I was pricked, where I was hurt, where I have been left scarred. Many times it is specifically that area where I have been hurt deeply but have persevered, where I struggle the most, where the inner battle rages most intense, that can become my unique strength and contribution. My 'heart of fire' rages within and grows out of my own inner thorn bushes.

You, and only you, are equipped with your unique mission to open hearts, to move people to action, to keep people from losing hope, to help people forgive themselves and others, to help people laugh at their humanity, to save

a soul, kindle a heart, to inspire a nation, to touch a community, to spread goodness and kindness, to share the light of Torah and Mitzvos with people around you, to reveal the energy of redemption in your part of the world. Can we see the burning bush? Will we turn around? That is the question I must answer in my life; and you must answer in yours.[10]

[1] Exodus 3:4.

[2] Midrash Rabah Shemos 2:6.

[3] In Midrash Tanchuma here the version is "three steps," not five steps. The midrashic commentators discuss this discrepancy, suggesting various explanations. Cf. footnote #6.

[4] The Chassidic masters teach that there is a spark of Moses in each of us (Tanya chapter 42.) Hence, all of Moses' experiences apply on some level to us.

[5] Quintessence means the fifth essence. The ancient Greeks taught that there were four elements, or forms, in which matter could exist: fire, air, water, and earth. Then there was the fifth element known as the fifth essence (quintessence) ether, more subtle and pure than fire. Now the word stands for the essential principle or the most subtle extract, the pure, undiluted essence of an existence that can be obtained. These five dimensions are discussed in many works of Midrash and Kabbalah.

[6] This also explains why according to one version in Midrash, Moses took three steps, since in many sources, the five levels of the souls are generally divided into the three levels of "naran," Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah.

[7] This is similar to the idea the Lubavitcher Rebbe once expressed about prayer. Prayer is a ladder of many rungs. There are many different levels and layers we explore during prayer. But the foundation of all of them is "shtelen zeich davenen," the person tearing himself away from everything and tuning-in to the mental state of communicating with the Divine. That in a way is deeper than all of the high levels following during the actual prayer (Likkutei Sichos vol. 2 Parshas Matos Massei.)

[8] Exodus 3:11.

[9] Midrash Lekach Tov. Pirkei Derabi Eliezer ch. 40.

[10] My thanks to Rabbi Avraham David Shlomo (Cape Town, South Africa) for his help in preparing this essay. -----

The Torah Any Times

Parashat Shemot, 21 Tevet, 5786/January 10, 2026

from TorahAnyTime.com

Rabbi Yoel Gold

Of Sensitivity and Scorpions

I once spoke to Rabbi Yaacov Haber from Ramat Bet Shemesh, who shared with me the following.

When Rabbi Haber was newly married, he and his wife lived in a small apartment in Jerusalem. In their neighborhood there was a homeless Jewish man who would knock on doors asking for a bit of money or a warm meal. As young newlyweds, Rabbi Haber and his wife felt compassion and invited him in. They gave him food, treated him with dignity, and welcomed him from time to time.

Over time, however, the situation began to change and the man grew increasingly comfortable. He started coming almost daily, and eventually, he stopped knocking altogether. He would simply walk in. The boundaries blurred, and the couple found themselves unsure how to handle it.

Eventually, their lease ended. They were also expecting a child and needed a larger apartment. Before moving, they asked a halachic authority whether they were obligated to inform the homeless man of their new address. Given the circumstances, they were told that they were not. They moved, and the man no longer knew where they lived. Naturally, the visits stopped.

Shortly after settling into the new apartment, one morning, Rabbi Haber's wife put on her shoe and felt something inside. She shook it out—and a scorpion fell to the floor. Alarmed, they called an exterminator. Yet nothing more was found. But then another scorpion appeared. And another, this time in the kitchen, and then in the bathroom. They brought in multiple professionals, but no one could explain what was happening.

The apartment was deemed safe, yet the scorpions kept appearing. At a loss, Rabbi Haber decided to seek guidance from Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg zt"l. When he described the situation, Rav Scheinberg responded calmly. "You have scorpions? Let's see what the scorpion says."

He opened Perek Shirah, the ancient text that assigns a verse of praise to every element of creation, and looked up the scorpion. The Pasuk read: "Hashem is good to all, and His mercy extends to all His creations" (Tehillim 145:9).

Rav Scheinberg offered no interpretation. He simply said, "I don't know your story. Take this message and do with it what you will." Rabbi Haber left, still unsure what it meant. But as he boarded a bus to return home, he looked out the window, and there he was. The homeless man. Walking the street.

In that moment, everything clicked. "Stop the bus!" he called out. He ran off, embraced the man warmly, and said, "I haven't seen you in so long. We moved. Please, come with me now." He brought him home, gave him a hot meal, and treated him once again with warmth and kindness.

From that moment on, the scorpions never appeared again. This story is not a simplistic message about ignoring boundaries. Halachah matters and boundaries matter. The couple had acted correctly according to the ruling they were given. But teshuvah is not only about technical correctness. It is about repairing what was broken, restoring compassion where it quietly slipped away, and responding when Heaven nudges us to look again at our actions.

Hashem, in His great mercy, sometimes sends us messages not to accuse us, but to invite us to grow. Teshuvah is more than just regret. It is the courage to make things right

The Torah Any Times

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Rabbi Yitzchok Aryeh Epstein

A Promise for Long Life

The first words of Sefer Shemos begin: "V'eileh Shemos Bnei Yisrael— These are the names of the children of Israel." The Ba'al HaTurim notes that the letters comprising the words "Ve'eileh Shemos" form an allusion to a powerful promise: if a person is careful with Shnayim Mikra Ve'Echad Targum, reciting the words of the Parsha twice and the Onkeles translation once, he merits long life.

The source is the Gemara in Berachos (8a-b), where Chazal speak about the obligation to complete the weekly Parsha.

But here's the question. This exact phrase "Ve'eileh Shemos Bnei Yisrael" already appears earlier in Parshas Vayigash (46:8). And yet, the Ba'al HaTurim is silent there. Only now, in Shemos, does he suddenly attach this remez about Shnayim Mikra. Why is that?

One answer is that the Ba'al HaTurim is sending a message that is not only halachic, but practically relevant.

This is what happens every year. People get busy. Life fills up. Deadlines, pressures, weddings, children, Shabbos preparations, and the voice in a person's head keeps saying: "Tomorrow. I'll catch up tomorrow." Then Shabbos comes, and the plan was: "I'll wake up early. I'll learn. I'll be mavir sedra And suddenly it's 8:15, and davening already started, and the whole week got away again.

So the Baalei Mussar give practical advice: don't leave it for one heroic session. Do it steadily, one aliyah a day for a few minutes. And if you add Rashi, even better. But the point is consistency.

And now we understand why the Ba'al HaTurim highlights it specifically here, in Shemos. Shemos is a fresh beginning. A person may have missed Vayeishev, missed Miketz, missed Vayigash. Chanukah came, life came, the year moved, and a person can fall into a dangerous mindset: "Forget it. I blew it. If I already missed, I'm out." So the Ba'al HaTurim turns to you in Shemos and says: Start now. Don't let yesterday's failure cancel tomorrow's growth. Shemos is the beginning of the story again, so begin again.

And halachically too, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 285:4) discusses catching up, and many note that there is room to complete what was missed up until later in the year, even until Simchas Torah. The yetzer hara loves “all-or-nothing.” But Torah is “start-and-continue.”

R’ Lipa Schechter once related in the name of Reb Chatzkel Levenstein zt”l that a person who is not careful with Shnayim Mikra is either a tipesh (fool) or an apikores (heretic) because he either doesn’t understand what it means that every moment of life is priceless, or he doesn’t take Chazal’s promise seriously.

Because every extra day of life is not just “time.” It’s a chance to study more Torah and perform more mitzvos and grab priceless, precious opportunities. There was a sofer named R’ Elazar Kempeh, a man who spent his life writing Sifrei Torah, Mezuzos, and Tefillin. Across the course of his life, he wrote fifteen Sifrei Torah. He passed away at the age of 102, and in his final year he was still buying the honor of Chasan Torah during Simchas Torah. He once remarked that he was careful with Shnayim Mikra Ve’Echad Targum, and he attributed his longevity to that consistency.

The detail that shook people most was that he passed away the week of Parshas Shemos, and it was said that he was holding a Sefer Torah and was in the middle of Shnayim Mikra when he passed.

Whether or not we can measure reward in this world, one thing is certain. Chazal promised long life. The Ba’al HaTurim reminded us. And Parshas Shemos tells you: begin again.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Royal Garment: Tzitzit as an Expression of the Israeli Destiny Revivim

The mitzvah of tzitzit particularly expresses faith and the unique destiny of Israel * A garment covers the flaws within a person and thereby grants him honor, but it may be a false honor * The most honorable garment is the fringed tallit, for the four-cornered tallit expresses all the latent powers within the person and within the world * Although there is no obligation to cover the head with the tallit, there is an advantage in doing so, since covering the head expresses submission before God

Faith is Hidden and Must be Revealed

Emunah (faith) is implanted in the heart of every person, for since one possesses a soul, he possesses faith. The more aware he is of that faith, and the more he lives in accordance with it, the more his life is strengthened and blessed, in every area. However, at the first stage, faith is hidden, and until it is fully and richly revealed, a person tends to divert it toward foreign directions of idolatry. As a result, a person becomes enslaved to the bonds of materialism, in all of its conceptions. Therefore, Israel — who are the heart of the nations — were the most enslaved of all, and they were required to perform back-breaking labor for Pharaoh, king of Egypt, with no ability to express the powers latent within them. And while they were sunk in bondage to materiality, God was revealed to them and took them from servitude to redemption, and gave them His Torah and commandments so that they would continue His blessing to all the families of the earth.

Tzitzit Expresses the Divine Revelation that “Peeks Through the Lattice”

The mitzvah of tzitzit, by means of the fringes that are visible outwardly, particularly expresses faith and the unique mission of Israel, as it is stated in the section of tzitzit:

“And you shall see it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and perform them, and you shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes ... so that you shall remember and perform all My commandments, and you shall be holy to your God” (Numbers 15:37–40).

This is what our Sages said:

“Why is its name tzitzit? Because the Omnipresent peered (hititz) upon the houses of our forefathers in Egypt.” As it is said (Song of Songs 2:8–9):

“The voice of my beloved—behold, he is coming, leaping over the mountains, skipping over the hills ... behold, he stands behind our wall, looking through the windows, peering through the lattice” (Sifrei, Shelach, sec. 115).

The Need for Clothing Stems from the Sin of Adam

Originally, in the Garden of Eden, a person had no need for clothing, since there was no shame in his nakedness. However, once he was drawn after the desires of the body and sinned, evil entered within him, and consequently, he began to feel shame in his nakedness. As it is said:

“And the man and his wife hid from before the Lord God among the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called to the man and said to him: ‘Where are you?’ And he said: ‘I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid.’ And He said: ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree concerning which I commanded you not to eat from it?’” (Genesis 3:8–11)

As a result of his sin, Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden and required protection from cold, rain, and the sun’s rays. God had compassion upon him, and made garments for him, as it is said:

“And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife tunics of skin, and He clothed them” (ibid. 3:21).

A Garment that Grants Honor — Or Expresses Betrayal

A garment covers the flaws within a person, and thereby grants him honor. However, it is possible that this be false honor, intended to deceive others by hiding evil intentions — and then the garment expresses betrayal (bege-d-bagad), and the mantle becomes me’il (from me’ilah, trespass).

On the other hand, a garment may express a person’s aspiration toward good and beauty, while estranging himself from his negative tendencies and attempting to suppress them; in this way the garment grants him true honor (see Resisei Layla §4).

The Garment of Tzitzit

The most honorable garment is the fringed tallit, for the four-cornered tallit expresses all the powers hidden in the person and in the world, and the tzitzit correspond to the 613 commandments that guide the person how to actualize them. And no tallit is more beautiful than this; as our Sages said:

“One who is careful with tzitzit will merit a beautiful tallit” (Shabbat 23b).

The Kabbalists explained that the tallit hints to the ohr ha-makif (the surrounding light), i.e., the lofty, divine illumination which, because of its loftiness and greatness, a person cannot grasp, but it nevertheless influences him (see Peninei Halakha, Sukkot 1:7). Through its influence, one understands well the ohr ha-penini (the inner light) — the defined ideas of the Torah and its commandments — that the threads of tzitzit express, which are considered a defined inner light.

Our Sages said (Bamidbar Rabbah 17:6; also 18:21; 25:21) that tzitzit hints to the 613 commandments, for the numerical value of the word “tzitzit” is 600, and together with the five knots and eight threads of the fringe, we arrive at 613. (Incidentally, women are more connected to the surrounding light; perhaps this is why they are not obligated in the mitzvah of tzitzit, which expresses the inner light that emerges. In its place, their mitzvah is to wear modest and dignified clothing, which expresses the surrounding light).

Must The Head be Covered With The Tallit Gadol?

Q: Must those who wrap themselves in a tallit gadol cover their heads?
A: Some poskim (Jewish law arbiters) say that the meaning of the word hit’atef (‘wrapping’, the blessing recited before wearing a tallit gadol), is wrapping both the head and the body, and any garment that is worn not in the manner of wrapping, is exempt from tzitzit. Therefore, in their view, our modern tallit katan is exempt from tzitzit. They supported their position from the wording of the blessing: “to wrap oneself in tzitzit” (lehit’atef batzitzit) (Ra’avyah and Or Zarua).

However, in practice, most of the Rishonim wrote that the tallit katan is obligated in tzitzit (Sefer Ha’Itur, Maharam, Orhot Hayyim, Nimukei Yosef, and many others). This is because the mitzvah of tzitzit applies to any garment “with which you cover yourself,” and “every garment and covering is implied — sometimes with the head covered, and sometimes with the head uncovered.” Therefore, one even recites a blessing over a tallit katan in which the head is not wrapped (Mahari”l; Tur and Shulchan Aruch 8:2, 6; and so ruled the later authorities).

Nevertheless, out of consideration for those who hold that the mitzvah is specifically wrapping, and also because the wording of the blessing is “to wrap,” the practice is that after reciting the blessing “lehit’atef batzitzit” on

the tallit gadol, one beautifies the mitzvah by wrapping oneself in the tallit for the time it takes to walk four cubits. That is: one wraps the tallit over the head and the upper part of the body, with all the tzitzit placed over the left shoulder, and stands so for the time it takes to walk four cubits; afterward, one dons the tallit as usual, with two tzitzit in front and two behind (Shulchan Aruch 8:4; Gra s.k. 9; Mishnah Berurah ad loc.). For the tallit katan, the blessing “al mitzvat tzitzit” is recited, since one is not accustomed to wrap oneself in it, but rather to wear it (Rema 8:6; Ben Ish Hai, Bereishit 6; Kaf HaHayyim 8:25, 27).

Is There an Advantage In Covering The Head With The Tallit?

Although there is no obligation to cover the head with the tallit, there is an advantage in doing so, since covering the head expresses submission before God; therefore, there are those who beautify the mitzvah by covering the head with the tallit throughout the entire prayer, and especially during the Amidah (Mishnah Berurah 8:4).

Q: It is uncomfortable for me to cover my head with the tallit gadol during the prayer. Is there a binding custom to cover the head throughout the prayer?

A: There is no binding custom, and therefore, one who finds it uncomfortable is not obligated.

Unmarried Ashkenazim and The Tallit Gadol

Q: According to the custom of Ashkenazim, may an unmarried man wrap himself in a tallit gadol during Shacharit?

A: The custom of unmarried Ashkenazim is to fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit with a tallit katan and not to wrap in a tallit gadol, because the tallit gadol expresses the surrounding light merited by a married person through his wife; by means of marriage, he is considered a complete person, dwelling in joy and peace, whereas the bachelor has not yet attained this (Yevamot 62b; Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei 13).

The early authorities wrote a support for this custom from the juxtaposition of verses (Deuteronomy 22:12–13):

“You shall make fringes on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself. When a man takes a wife...”

(Tashbetz Katan 362; Minhagei Mahari”l, Laws of Marriage 10)

Nevertheless, when bachelors are called up to the Torah or serve as prayer leaders, they wrap in a tallit gadol out of respect for the congregation, but they take care not to cover their heads with it, for this they will merit only after marriage (Mishnah Berurah 8:4). A source for this is what is told in the Talmud (Kiddushin 29b) regarding Rav Hamnuna, who did not cover his head because he was not married.

Changes in Custom

Among Kohanim of Ashkenazi origin, there are those who are accustomed to wrap in a tallit gadol from the time they begin ascending to the platform for the priestly blessing. In recent generations, due to the delay in marriage age, there were communities in Ashkenaz where even bachelors began to wrap in a tallit gadol before their wedding, without covering the head — so as not to postpone for many years the time of wrapping in a tallit gadol during Shacharit. On the other hand, many continue the earlier custom, which also serves as deep encouragement to marry at the proper time and not delay marriage.

It is Forbidden to Wear a Tallit with Invalid Tzitzit

The four tzitzit that one is commanded to place on the four corners of the garment each prevent fulfillment without the others; all four together constitute one mitzvah (Menachot 28a). Therefore, if one of the tzitzit becomes invalid, it is forbidden to wear the garment; and if one did wear it, one has nullified a positive commandment. If one was wearing a tallit and saw that one of the tzitzit tore from the corner of the garment, or its threads tore in such a way that it became invalid, he must remove it immediately, because every moment he keeps it on, he is nullifying a positive commandment (Menachot 37b).

When Does the Tearing of the Threads Invalidate?

If, after the tzitzit were properly tied to the garment, all of the threads extending from the braid were torn, yet a measure of “enough for tying” remained — meaning, a length sufficient to tie together all the torn threads,

approximately four centimeters — the tzitzit is still valid. If one thread was torn down to the braid, it is valid. But if two threads were torn down to the braid, it is invalid, lest those two belong to one original thread, such that from that thread whose two ends were cut, not even the measure of “enough for tying” remains (Shulchan Aruch 12:1–3).

However, if care was taken to tie the threads such that the four threads emerging from one side are always tied opposite the four threads emerging from the other side, then even if all four on one side were torn down to the braid, and on the other side only the measure of “enough for tying” remains — the tzitzit is valid, since from each of the four threads the measure of “enough for tying” remains. If one of the threads was cut at the point where the braid connects to the garment, the tzitzit is invalid, since the cut thread is completely invalidated (Mishnah Berurah 12:13).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Leadership and the People

Shemot

The sedra of Shemot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moses, culminating in the moment at which God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant. I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which God summons Moses to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom – a challenge which, no less than four times, Moses declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else.

It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the Sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations.

The Torah states:

Moses replied: “But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, ‘God did not appear to you.’”

Shemot 4:1

The Sages, ultra-sensitive to nuances in the text, evidently noticed three strange features of this response. The first is that God had already told Moses, “They will listen to you” (Ex. 3:18). Moses’ reply seems to contradict God’s prior assurance. To be sure, the commentators offered various harmonising interpretations. Ibn Ezra suggests that God had told Moses that the elders would listen to him, whereas Moses expressed doubts about the mass of the people. Ramban says that Moses did not doubt that they would believe initially, but he thought that they would lose faith as soon as they saw that Pharaoh would not let them go. There are other explanations, but the fact remains that Moses was not satisfied by God’s assurance. His own experience of the fickleness of the people (one of them, years earlier, had already said, “Who made you ruler and judge over us?”) made him doubt that they would be easy to lead.

The second anomaly is in the signs that God gave Moses to authenticate his mission. The first (the staff that turns into a snake) and third (the water that turned into blood) reappear later in the story. They are signs that Moses and Aaron perform not only for the Israelites but also for the Egyptians. The second, however, does not reappear. God tells Moses to put his hand in his cloak. When he takes it out, he sees that it has become “leprous as snow”. What is the significance of this particular sign? The Sages recalled that later, Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking negatively about Moses (Bamidbar 12:10). In general they understood leprosy as a punishment for lashon hara, derogatory speech. Had Moses, perhaps, been guilty of the same sin?

The third detail is that, whereas Moses’ other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the Sages arrived at the following comment:

Resh Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, Moses replied: But they will not believe me. However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moses: They are believers, the children of believers, but you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the

people believed (Ex. 4:31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Abraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moses] Because you did not believe in Me (Num. 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written, And the Lord said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak' (Ex. 4:6).

Shabbat 97a

This is an extraordinary passage. Moses, it now becomes clear, was entitled to have doubts about his own worthiness for the task. What he was not entitled to do was to have doubts about the people. In fact, his doubts were amply justified. The people were fractious. Moses calls them a "stiff-necked people". Time and again during the wilderness years they complained, sinned, and wanted to return to Egypt. Moses was not wrong in his estimate of their character. Yet God reprimanded him; indeed punished him by making his hand leprous. A fundamental principle of Jewish leadership is intimated here for the first time: a leader does not need faith in himself, but he must have faith in the people he is to lead.

This is an exceptionally important idea. The political philosopher Michael Walzer has written insightfully about social criticism, in particular about two stances the critic may take vis-à-vis those he criticises. On the one hand there is the critic as outsider. At some stage, beginning in ancient Greece: Detachment was added to defiance in the self-portrait of the hero. The impulse was Platonic; later on it was Stoic and Christian. Now the critical enterprise was said to require that one leave the city, imagined for the sake of the departure as a darkened cave, find one's way, alone, outside, to the illumination of Truth, and only then return to examine and reprove the inhabitants. The critic-who-returns doesn't engage the people as kin; he looks at them with a new objectivity; they are strangers to his new-found Truth.

This is the critic as detached intellectual. The prophets of Israel were quite different. Their message, writes Johannes Lindblom, was "characterized by the principle of solidarity". "They are rooted, for all their anger, in their own societies," writes Walzer. Like the Shunamite woman (Kings 2 4:13), their home is "among their own people". They speak, not from outside, but from within. That is what gives their words power. They identify with those to whom they speak. They share their history, their fate, their calling, their covenant. Hence the peculiar pathos of the prophetic calling. They are the voice of God to the people, but they are also the voice of the people to God. That, according to the Sages, was what God was teaching Moses: What matters is not whether they believe in you, but whether you believe in them. Unless you believe in them, you cannot lead in the way a prophet must lead. You must identify with them and have faith in them, seeing not only their surface faults but also their underlying virtues. Otherwise, you will be no better than a detached intellectual – and that is the beginning of the end. If you do not believe in the people, eventually you will not even believe in God. You will think yourself superior to them, and that is a corruption of the soul.

The classic text on this theme is Maimonides' Epistle on Martyrdom. Written in 1165, when Maimonides was thirty years old, it was occasioned by a tragic period in medieval Jewish history when an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, forced many Jews to convert to Islam under threat of death. One of the forced converts (they were called anusim; later they became known as marranos) asked a rabbi whether he might gain merit by practising as many of the Torah's commands as he could in secret. The rabbi sent back a dismissive reply. Now that he had forsaken his faith, he wrote, he would achieve nothing by living secretly as a Jew. Any Jewish act he performed would not be a merit but an additional sin.

Maimonides' Epistle is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets who criticised the people of Israel, including the one above about Moses. He then writes:

If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels – because they briefly criticised the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the

least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who criticised the forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of Sages and their disciples, priests and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?

The Epistle is a definitive expression of the prophetic task: to speak out of love for one's people; to defend them, see the good in them, and raise them to higher achievements through praise, not condemnation.

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. "Those people of whom you have doubts," said God to Moses, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them."

In Parshas Shemos, the Zohar shares that the Jews in Egypt were punished for saying loshon hora...

May I Dangle the Receiver?

Or

Hearing is Not Believing, and other Loshon Hora Questions.

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: "Two of my neighbors are in a tiff, and I have a good relationship with both of them. Should I get involved to try to make peace, knowing that both sides will tell me their version of the story?"

Question #2: "I was told that someone who believes loshon hora (disparaging things about people) does more harm to himself than does the person who spoke the loshon hora! How can this be?"

Question #3: Leora asked me:

"Some of my contacts are not careful about saying loshon hora. Is it sufficient that I hold the phone at a distance when they begin to tell me things that I do not want to hear?"

I asked Leora if she could think of other options, and she explained, "It is uncomfortable to tell people that they are violating halacha or to ask them not to gossip. I can create an excuse to end the conversation, such as, 'the baby is crying' or some similar emergency. But I would rather not do this unless I must."

Leora's method of being careful to avoid hearing loshon hora, as a halachically observant person must be, is indeed accomplishing its purpose. The question is whether she must do more than this, since the speaker thinks that Leora is still listening. Later, I will explain why this may be problematic, and whether it is sufficient for Leora to simply "dangle the receiver."

INTRODUCTION

We all know that telling or receiving disparaging information about members of Klal Yisrael is a Torah violation. "We are commanded not to accept loshon hora as true and not to look negatively upon the person about whom the story was told" (Shaarei Teshuvah 3:213). We should bear in mind that loshon hora is prohibited even if it is absolutely true.

Exactly what is the prohibition of believing or accepting loshon hora? Before we answer this question, we need to define loshon hora. Two types of derogatory information are included in loshon hora:

I. Loshon hora is information that reflects poorly on someone. For example, relating that someone once violated certain commandments or committed sins disparages his reputation and constitutes loshon hora (Chofeitiz Chayim 4:1).

II. Another category of loshon hora is relating information that might harm someone, even though it is not at all derogatory (Rambam, Hilchos Dei'os 7:5). For example, although it is not offensive to say that someone is in debt, there are many situations where this information could cause harm. Similarly, informing a person that someone has a wayward aunt is loshon hora, if this might result in disqualifying the person for a shidduch (see Taz, Even Ha'ezer, 50:8).

LOSHON HORA ABOUT A CHILD

There is an interesting halachic difference between these two categories of loshon hora. The first category, relating that someone did something improper, does not apply to the transgressions or faults of a child. Since a

minor's immaturity exempts him from responsibility, it is usually not *loshon hora* to discuss his misdeeds or capers. Therefore, it is permitted to mention that a child did something mischievous, since this action does not reflect negatively on him (see Chofeitz Chayim 8:3 and Be'er Mayim Chayim ad loc.). Some *poskim* contend that, if the child would be embarrassed by someone reporting what he did, or his activity was not considered age appropriate, then repeating this information is prohibited as *loshon hora* (Shevilei Chayim 8:4; Shu't Lechafeitz Bachayim #29). On the other hand, I once read a *psak* of Rav Chayim Kanievsky contending that as long as the story is not harmful to the child's interests, there is no *loshon hora* about his antics, since he is not yet required to observe *mitzvos*.

However, when the information could ultimately prove harmful to the child, one may not share it (Chofeitz Chayim 8:3). For example, if a school might refuse to accept a child based on his family background, it is *loshon hora* to provide the school with this information. Similarly, people smile when told that a young man drew on the wall when he was three years old, but they might assume that he is psychologically unhealthy if they hear that he had violent fits of rage at age 12½.

DEFINING KABBALAS LOSHON HORA

What should you do if you hear a story that reflects badly on someone?

Before I explain what to do in this situation, we should explain the two types of ill-doing involved when receiving derogatory information.

I. Believing (*kabbalas*) *loshon hora*.

II. Hearing *loshon hora*.

I. BELIEVING LOSHON HORA

The first prohibition against accepting *loshon hora* is that it results in one's now having a less favorable impression of a fellow Jew. I may not accept the report of his having sinned as fact (Zera Chayim pg 361, in explanation of opinion of Yad Ha'ketanah): if I do not accept the veracity of the story, I have not accepted *loshon hora*, and I did not violate *kabbalas loshon hora*.

HEARING JUICY GOSSIP

What do I do if I hear some juicy chitchat?

If you hear some gossip, just refuse to accept that the story is true. Most stories that one hears are distorted, so it should take no great effort to simply deny the story's accuracy.

If you find it difficult to doubt the story completely, re-interpret it in a way that casts the person in a favorable light. For example, perhaps he/she thought that the act committed was halachically acceptable, or perhaps the reported event was misunderstood or only partially observed (see Be'er Mayim Chayim 6:1). For example, if you heard that someone grabbed a child, perhaps he was pulling the child away from danger. If you heard that someone argued with his father, perhaps he was trying to convince him to take needed medication.

REINTERPRETING THE STORY

Here is an example of how to reinterpret a story: Sharon tells you that Michal treated her rudely. You know that Michal is a quiet person; on top of that, perhaps Michal was distracted or under stress and was therefore even less outgoing than usual. Sharon, whom you know is sensitive, may have misinterpreted Michal's lack of enthusiasm as discourtesy. This interpretation of events will add no negative understanding to what you already know firsthand about both of them. The result is that the reinterpreted story does not place either person in a bad light and is therefore not *loshon hora*.

In this example, convincing Sharon that Michal was not being rude would be a big *mitzvah*.

By the way, one may listen to each side of a dispute relate his/her negative impressions of the disputant in order to calm down the quarrel (Chofeitz Chayim, 6:4). Here, too, one may not accept either story as accurate, but one should, in one's own mind, reinterpret the events so that they do not reflect badly on the parties involved.

For example, you are aware of a situation in which siblings are in a dispute concerning how to allocate resources to care for their elderly mother. While resolving this conflict, your goal is to appreciate the merit of each side's approach and convince the other side that, although they might disagree, no

one bears any ill will. Even if you cannot convince them of this, you should certainly not accept that either side means any wrong, unless you have solid evidence to the contrary (Shabbos 56a; Hagahos Maimoniyos, Dei'os 7:4).

CALMING A FIGHT

Two of your neighbors are in a big tiff. According to Reuven and Rochel, the upstairs kids are totally undisciplined and boisterous, making a racket that ruins Rochel's life. Levi and Leah upstairs, however, have a different story. Their kids are extremely well disciplined and obedient, but Rochel is excessively sensitive to noise and cannot tolerate even the normal sliding of a chair under the dinner table. Since you have a good relationship with both parties and may be able to resolve the squabble, you may listen to each side's complaints about the other, being careful not to believe them. It may, indeed, be true that Rochel is highly sensitive, and it may also be true that Levi and Leah do not control their kids as much as they should. Your job is to make *shalom* between them, not to accept whichever interpretation of events is true.

One violates the prohibition against accepting *loshon hora* when one's impression of any party is disparaged without adequate evidence. In all the above instances, if one's positive impression of the people involved remains intact, despite all that one heard, one has successfully avoided accepting *loshon hora*. (There are exceptions when one may accept what one heard as true, but these are beyond the scope of this article.)

With this background, we can now answer Question #1 above:

"Two of my neighbors are in a tiff, and I have a good relationship with both of them. Should I get involved to try to make peace, knowing that both sides will tell me their version of the story?" The answer is that you should get involved, but be careful not to accept anyone's account as an accurate portrayal of the misdeeds of his/her neighbor.

II. HEARING LOSHON HORA

Until now, we discussed some basic halachos of accepting *loshon hora*. In addition to the prohibition of believing *loshon hora*, it is also prohibited to hear negative things about someone when there is no need. It is insufficient to simply not believe what one heard; one must avoid hearing it.

WHAT DO I DO IF SOMEONE BEGINS TO GOSSIP?

How far must one go to avoid hearing *loshon hora*?

The Gemara (Kesubos 5b) homiletically interprets a verse as saying, "there should be pegs [i.e., your fingers, which are shaped like pegs] in your ears," meaning, if you sense that someone is about to tell you something inappropriate, you should place your fingers on your ears to avoid hearing it. In other words, one must not only be careful to avoid *loshon hora* but must even do something unusual if that is the only way to avoid hearing it. Thus, if you are among a group of people and one of them begins to say *loshon hora*, you should leave immediately. If you are on the phone, and the other party begins saying *loshon hora*, you should quickly say, "An emergency just came up; I'll have to call you back later," and abruptly hang up. Of course, in this last case, you told the whole truth: an emergency did indeed come up, since the other party began saying *loshon hora*!

What if one is unable to leave and avoid hearing gossip? The Gemara states that one must even place one's hands over one's ears to shun *loshon hora*! Nevertheless, the Chofeitz Chayim (6:5) notes that, although this is the proper thing to do, many people may find it too embarrassing to sit this way and have people mock them. Under these circumstances, the Chofeitz Chayim rules that one should be careful not to believe the stories being told, and be careful not to want to hear them. It is preferable that one demonstrate his disapproval, at least with his facial expression (Chofeitz Chayim, 6:5). Rabbeinu Yonah implies that one should demonstrate to the speaker that he does not want to hear the *loshon hora*. Showing a total lack of interest in the conversation discourages the speaker from saying *loshon hora*.

We can now address Leora's original question: "Some of my contacts are not careful about saying *loshon hora*. Is it sufficient that I hold the receiver at a distance when they begin to tell me things that I do not want to hear?" Leora does not want to listen to the gossip she is being told. The question is: to what extent must she demonstrate that she does not want to hear *loshon hora*? Although dangling the receiver prevents Leora from hearing the

gossip, it does not demonstrate disapproval to the speaker. Whereas listeners who are visible to the speaker can actually show disinterest, the speaker here may think that she has an avid listener; thus, perhaps Leora should put an active end to the conversation. Even though the speaker is not saying *loshon hora* to anyone, as there is no listener, the speaker nevertheless thinks that she is sinning. Someone who thought he was doing something forbidden but ended up doing something permitted needs forgiveness and atonement (Kiddushin 81b; Nazir 23a). The Gemara's example of this is someone who wanted to eat something non-kosher, but inadvertently ate kosher. Even the unsuccessful intent to violate the halacha is itself a Torah prohibition. As a result, although by dangling the receiver Leora is not hearing *loshon hora*, she has not prevented the person from thinking that *loshon hora* has been spoken, a sin for which she will require atonement. Therefore I told Leora that it would be better to terminate the conversation by saying, for example, "Something just came up, I'll call you back later!" This prevents the talker from violating any prohibition.

WHO IS WORSE?

After what we have discussed so far, we return to our second question: "I was told that someone who believes *loshon hora* (disparaging things about people) does more harm to himself than does the person who spoke the *loshon hora*! How can this be?"

Indeed, this is a quote from the Rambam (Hilchos Dei'os 7:3) who writes that one who believes *loshon hora* inflicts more self-harm than the speaker! Why should this be?

The reason is that the basic purpose of forbidding *loshon hora* is to avoid harming a Jew's reputation. Who is the greater maligner, one who spreads information that he knows to be true, or one who believes an unsubstantiated story? The one who accepts an unsubstantiated report denigrates kedushas Yisrael to a greater degree (see Nesiv Chayim 6:3).

Rav Chayim Pinchas Scheinberg zt"l noted that when people say the pasuk, *mi ha'ish he'chafeitz chayim ohev yamim lir'os tov*, "Who is the man who wants life, loves his days to see only good," they often pay little attention to the concluding words, *lir'os tov*, "to see good," even though these words are the key to success in this mitzvah. If you view everyone with a good eye, you will be unable to believe derogatory information about them. As Rav Pam zt"l once said, "My mother was incapable of saying or accepting *loshon hora*; not simply because of her *yiras shamayim*, but because of her appreciation of what Jews are!" May we all reach the level of seeing the good and really appreciating our fellow Jews!

When Football Meets Faith: Does God Really Care Who Wins? By Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

On Sunday night in Pittsburgh, the Baltimore Ravens and Pittsburgh Steelers' seasons came down to one kick. Tyler Loop, the Ravens' rookie kicker who had not missed a single field goal under 50 yards all year, lined up for a 44-yard attempt that would decide the game and, by extension, the winner of the AFC North. The snap was perfect, the hold was clean, the ball had the distance. And then, before a stunned stadium and a national audience, it drifted wide. The Steelers won and are going to the playoffs, while Baltimore's season ended abruptly and stunningly.

The moment went viral not only because of the drama, but because earlier that evening a priest had walked the field and sprinkled "holy water" in one of the end zones. Hours later, it was that very end zone toward which the Ravens were kicking. Asked about it after the game, Steelers captain Cam Heyward smiled and said he wouldn't ask too many questions but said, "The good Lord made a good decision that night."

I don't follow football and didn't even know about the game until someone sent me the article about the "blessed" end zone and asked the real question behind the headline: Are Jews really meant to believe Hashem intervenes in a football game? But this isn't a sports question. It's a life question. Is anything too small for Hashem? Is a moment, a decision, a gust of wind beneath His notice or providence?

Though there is nuance, and there are different approaches, the short answer is that as Torah people of faith, we are meant to live with the belief that

Hashem is involved in everything. Dovid HaMelech wrote (and we sing in Hallel), *ha'mashpili lir'os ba'shamayim u'va'aretz*, He lowers Himself to see in the heavens and on the earth. Chazal understand that nothing is too lofty for Him and nothing is too small. The same God Who guides the fate of nations is attentive to the details of a single life. The same God Who orchestrates history also arranges the gust of wind that pushes a football a degree to the right. There is no realm of existence in which He is absent, no moment in which He is not present.

So does Hashem care who wins? In the sense that He is involved in and dictates everything that unfolds in His world, yes. But not in the simplistic way we imagine. Hashem was not only listening to the tefillos of Steelers fans. He was also speaking to the Ravens, to their coaches, and especially to the young kicker who missed for the first time from that distance. God was present not only in the celebration, but in the heartbreak.

We control our effort. Hashem controls the result. That is countercultural, but it is Torah. From our perspective, a capable kicker missed in a pressure moment. From the perspective of *emunah*, Hashem decreed that at that exact second, in those exact conditions, the ball would not pass through the uprights. For one side, that miss felt like a divine yes. For the other, a painful no. Yet both were within His plan.

Judaism insists that Hashem is as present in the miss as in the make. In the disappointment as in the triumph. The question this game invites is not whether God was in the stadium, it is whether we are listening to what He might be telling us through the moment.

Failure does not have to be a verdict. It can be an invitation. A chance to grow, to soften, to deepen. Sometimes Hashem uses a public disappointment to remind a person that he is more than his statistics.

This truth is beautifully symbolized in a custom many barely meaningfully think about or attach spiritual significance to. At a Bar Mitzvah or an *Aufbruch* we throw candies at the boy or the chassan. As Rav Schorr explains, these are moments of transition and growth. Life will soon begin throwing things at them. They will feel struck, pelted. But the things being thrown are candies. They hurt, but inside is sweetness. Inside the challenge is a gift, if one has the courage to pick it up and unwrap it.

The missed kick in Pittsburgh is one of those candies. Most of us will never stand in a stadium with millions watching, but all of us stand in our own decisive moments: a diagnosis, an interview, a *shidduch*, an application. We prepare, we daven, we give our all. Then the answer comes. Sometimes it is the yes we prayed for. Sometimes it is the no we feared.

When it is yes, we must remember Who decided it. When it is no, we must remember the candy, the possibility of hidden sweetness.

The "holy water" on the field made for a good headline. But the deeper story is not about a priest or an AFC North title. It is about *ha'Mashpili lir'os ba'Shamayim u'va'Aretz*, about a God Who lowers Himself to be present in every end zone and every human heart.

Because the real game is not played on the field at all. It is played inside the *neshamah* of each of us.

Parshas Shemos: The Selection of Mosheh

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. WHY MOSHEH?

In Parashat Sh'mot we are introduced to the central personality of the Humash - Mosheh Rabbenu. Mosheh's position as consummate leader and foremost prophet (Av laN'vi'im) is unrivaled, unchallenged and unquestioned within our tradition. What we are not told - at least not explicitly - is why Mosheh (if that is his real name - see Sh'mot Rabbah 1:20) was selected to lead the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt, to Sinai and (ideally) into the Land. In this shiur, we will attempt to find textual clues to explain the reason for his selection as Eved Hashem (the servant of God) at this critical point in our history.

WHY THE REPETITION?

Let's begin with another question, addressed by some of the Rishonim: The Torah listed the names of all of the members of Ya'akov's household who descended to Egypt (B'resheet 46:10-27). Why does our new Humash - Sh'mot - begin with a partial recount of those names (1:1-4)?

Rashi responds that this demonstrates God's love for His children, that he counts them during their lives and, again, after their deaths. As Ramban points out, this is a profound piece of homiletics which reflects the special relationship that Ya'akov's family has with God - but it isn't the p'shat(straightforward) explanation of the repetition. (Perhaps Ramban was bothered by the extensive list in B'resheet as opposed to the brief list in Sh'mot).

Ramban explains that the theme of Sefer Sh'mot is G'ulah - redemption (he refers to Sh'mot as Sefer haG'ulah - see his introduction to Sefer Sh'mot). Therefore, the story needs to "pick up" from the onset of the exile, in order to allow the Sefer to be thematically whole. The reason that only a few names are mentioned in Sh'mot is that this is a thumbnail sketch and reminder of what we already know from B'resheet - sort of a "previously in our story" introduction to the next episode.

There may be something else implied by this brief recounting which will also help us figure out why Mosheh was the ideal leader to reverse the fortunes of the house of Ya'akov - but, first, a much larger question:

WHY DIPLOMACY?

The goal of Mosheh's mission seems to be to lead B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt and to bring them to Sinai to worship God (see 3:12) - and then to the Land (3:8). Why must this job be done with diplomacy - and with the protracted and painful negotiations with Pharaoh which take a long time (according to the Midrash - one year) and take a terrible toll in human suffering? Why couldn't the omnipotent God just take the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt in one fell swoop? Surely our imaginations can easily conjure up a picture of swift and immediate redemption and exodus - but that wasn't God's plan. Why did God elect to employ a diplomat and to command him to negotiate with Pharaoh?

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE EXODUS

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the exodus was not merely to liberate this nation of slaves - or even to resettle them in their ancestral Land - it was to bring them to Sinai:

...and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain. (3:12)

The clear expectation is that the people will be willing to follow Mosheh out of Egypt, into the desert - and worship God at that place. (There is a further expectation - that they will be willing to follow him into the Land - see the Ramban on this verse.)

For this to happen, the B'nei Yisra'el will have to be fully aware of two realities: Who God is - and who they are. They must have full awareness that Hashem, the God of Yisra'el is the only power to whom they owe complete allegiance and that He controls the heavens and earth.

They must also be aware of their glorious past and even more glorious destiny. They are the direct descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov; they are destined to become God's cherished people, His treasure among the nations - and a kingdom of Kohanim (Sh'mot 19:5-6).

We may infer from the verses at the beginning of our Sefer that the B'nei Yisra'el, at this point in time, did not share either of these critical attitudes and beliefs. (This deficiency becomes clear as Mosheh tries to convince the people that they should cooperate - and they want him to leave the situation as is and accept the status quo - see 5:19-21) As a people, they were in no way prepared for this national metamorphosis. Let's examine the beginning of our Sefer to discover the self-image of the B'nei Yisra'el at the time of imminent G'ulah. We will focus on three passages in the first chapter to illustrate the point.

III. "THESE ARE THE NAMES"

These are the names of the B'nei Yisra'el who came to Egypt with Ya'akov, each with his household: Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi, and Yehudah, Yissachar, Z'vulun, and Binyamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. (1:1-4)

If we compare this brief list with the (nearly) exhaustive list of the seventy members of Ya'akov's household who descended to Egypt (B'resheet 46:10-27), we note two glaring differences:

(A) The B'resheet list is complete, including grandsons, a granddaughter - and several family events (e.g. the death of Er and Onan, v. 12). The second list, on the other hand, only lists the direct sons of Ya'akov. (see the end of section V for the answer)

(B) This one is a bit more subtle. The order of the list in B'resheet is the children of Leah, the children of Zilpah (Leah's handmaid), the children of Rachel and the children of Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid). In other words, the order is by mothers: The house of Leah and the house of Rachel. This is a reasonable order, given that Leah not only bore the most children but that her children were the oldest. In our verse, a slight change has taken place: The first two verses include the sons of Leah and the one (descending) son of Rachel (Yoseph was already in Egypt). The last verse lists the four sons of the handmaids. What has changed here?

If we look back at B'resheet 37:2 (see my shiur on Parashat Mikketz), we see that the children of the handmaids were set apart from the rest of the sons. As we explained, this was because there was a clear-cut class distinction within the family - sons of the wives (Rachel and Leah) occupying a favored status as opposed to the sons of the handmaids. In times of trouble (the famine), this distinction was erased (indicated by the order of the listing in B'resheet) but, now that the family was firmly settled into life in Egypt, those old differences resurfaced. Setting the tone for our story, we are presented with families which do not see themselves as equal and are not united.

IV. "VAYISH'R'TZU"

Then Yoseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the B'nei Yisra'el *paru* (were fruitful) *vayish'r'tzu* (???); *vayirbu* (they multiplied) and *vaya'atz'mu bim'od m'od* (grew exceedingly strong), so that the land was filled with them. (1:6-7)

Rashi, commenting on the many verbs used to describe the amazing growth of the B'nei Yisra'el (which explains how we get from 70 people to a nation of several million at the time of the exodus), quotes the Midrash that the women would have sextuplets (playing on the six words used here).

S'forno has a different explanation. *Paru* (were fruitful) indicates having children, *vayirbu* (multiplied) indicates having many children and *vaya'atz'mu* indicates demographic and physical strength - all positive terms. *Vayish'r'tzu*, however, is a pejorative term. A *sheretz* is a rodent, commonly used as the archetype of impurity (e.g. *tovel v'sheretz b'yado* - see BT Ta'anit 16a, MT Teshuvah 2:3). S'forno explains that the whole generation which died (v. 6) refers to the entire group of 70 who had come from the Land. Once that link was broken, the people "turned to the ways of rodents, running (there is a Hebrew words play here) to the pit of despair." [emphasis added]

It is unclear whether S'forno means that they engaged in the worst aspects of Egyptian culture or that they lost their sense of dignity and pride - but that becomes clear in his explanation of our third passage.

V. "LET US DEAL WISELY"

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yoseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. (1:8-11)

The core of Pharaoh's speech here is phrased oddly: "...in the event of war, [they will] join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Why would a conquering nation want to - or even need to - escape? Rashi is bothered by this and explains that Pharaoh's intent was that the B'nei Yisra'el would throw the Egyptians out - but he didn't want to utter these horrifying words, so he turned them around. Ramban has a different approach; he explains that the concern is that the B'nei Yisra'el will "fleece the land" with the other enemies and will take the booty with them when they leave.

S'forno has a different approach to the verse. He reads the phrase: "...or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us..." as a parenthetical thought. In other words, Pharaoh's statement to the people was Let us deal wisely and get them out of the land - and his motivation for this was the concern of a fifth column in his land.

To that end, the Egyptians appointed taskmasters over the B'nei Yisra'el in order to afflict them - figuring that that would inspire them to leave. After all, what reason did they have to stay? Their ancestral and promised land was fertile again (the famine was long since over) and it was now clear that they were unwanted in Egypt. How surprised Pharaoh and the Egyptians were when the B'nei Yisra'el acquiesced to the human tax and complied with the orders to build cities for Pharaoh!

Once the Egyptians saw that these descendants of political and spiritual giants, (and of their former viceroy), were willing to accept this humiliating work - everything spiraled down. (The astounding parallel to the horrific tragedy of our century are too obvious to mention...) They were made slaves (again, no word of protest, rebellion or flight from the B'nei Yisra'el) and finally were the objects of limited genocide! The only protest we hear is from the midwives (who were possibly Egyptian women - [Avrabanel - after all, why would Pharaoh entrust this heinous mission to Jewish women?]) In addition, their reference to the Hebrew women [v. 19 - *lvriot*] seems to be exclusive). As S'forno explains, the B'nei Yisra'el had totally lost their sense of self-worth, dignity and mission - and were already enslaved to the ideals of the Egyptian culture and polis. They were more concerned with successfully remaining in Egypt and gaining the approval of their Egyptian king than with maintaining their own heritage and legacy.

S'forno also uses this approach to explain the beginning verses: "And these are the names..." that only these names (the sons of Ya'akov) were worthy of mention - but the other members of the family (including grandchildren) weren't worthy, as their righteousness was not of the same caliber as their parents. (This explains the first question in section III above).

VI. "Hashem IS JUST AND I AM WICKED"

We can summarize the "failings" of the B'nei Yisra'el as three:

A lack of dignity

A self-induced subjugation to Pharaoh and Egyptian culture

Continued tribalism

The B'nei Yisra'el were captive to the influence of Pharaoh and his court. In order to move the people into an awareness of their own mission and pride - and of the ultimate power of their God - they had to hear the Egyptians declare the power and justice of God and admit to their (Egypt's) own failings. This is the constant theme of the diplomatic interaction between Mosheh and Pharaoh - and B'nei Yisra'el will not be ready to leave (and move on to Sinai and the Land) until their biggest cultural icon (Pharaoh) comes to them in the middle of the night and begs them to leave, accepting the justice of their God and His decree.

In order to enable this, the diplomat would have to be someone who had a sense of dignity, was comfortable within the court of Pharaoh - and who understood the essential unity of the nation. [emphasis added]

VII. ENTER MOSHEH

Adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh, Mosheh was familiar with court protocol and etiquette. He had a sense of dignity, since he was not subject to the decrees of slavery - nor was he culturally enslaved to the Pharaoh - which is often the blessing of those who are inside. (Think about how many people are star-struck and successfully encouraged to buy products endorsed by the glitterati - but those who work behind the scenes of the corridors of power and influence are not nearly as awed by the stars).

As an outsider, he also understood the basic unity of the B'nei Yisra'el. Note how the Torah describes his interest in seeing the plight of the people: "Mosheh grew and went out among his brothers..." (2:11);

For Mosheh, it wasn't a case of seeing how the Levites or Danites were faring - all of them were (equally) his brothers. (This is easy to understand, when we compare the way members of a large Jewish community identify themselves as opposed to those in a small rural area. Those of us who have the luxury of living in a densely populated community identify ourselves - and claim allegiance - with a particular stream of thought, synagogue or school. Jews living in remote areas, on the other hand, first and foremost see themselves as Jews and point to their "fellows" in the city - they understand the essential unity of our people which often eludes the city folk.)

Mosheh was the perfect candidate who could unify the people, represent them with dignity in the court and battle Pharaoh on his own turf until the king of Egypt would declare:

"Hashem is just and I am my people are wicked" (9:27).

There is one other piece of information which we are given in the opening chapters which clarifies the special place of Mosheh at this juncture of our history.

VIII. THE UNDERCURRENT OF B'RESHEET: FRACTURED BROTHERHOOD

Throughout Sefer B'resheet, we find a common story line regarding family relationships. The younger brother is favored over the older brother - and neither brother is comfortable with that outcome.

We first meet Kayyin and Hevel (Chapter 4), where the reaction (fratricide) is the most extreme. God favors Hevel's offering - and Kayyin kills him in response.

Next, we meet Yishma'el and Yitzchak (Chapter 21). Although Yishma'el doesn't attack Yitzchak, we never find a rapprochement between the two. The only time they meet again is at their father's burial.

We then meet Esav and Ya'akov (Chapters 25-35). Even though Esav threatens to kill Ya'akov (which fits with Esav's impetuous nature), they are eventually reconciled - after which they go their separate ways.

Next come Yoseph and his brothers (Chapters 37-50) - surely the most developed and complex fraternal relationship(s) in B'resheet. In this case, the brothers are eventually reconciled and stay together.

Fittingly, Sefer B'resheet ends with another younger-older scene, depicting the favoring of Ephraim over M'nasheh (Chapter 48). We are given no information about either one's reaction to grandfather's blessing - and it seems that things are improving in this vein as time goes on.

IX. MOSHEH, AHARON AND MIRIAM - WORKING TOGETHER

Now, at the beginning of Sh'mot, we are introduced to Mosheh. He is clearly favored by his parents, as he is described as "good" at his birth, they make every effort to shield him and then, relying on some form of divine intervention, send him down the Nile. His older brother and sister have every reason to be jealous (following the B'resheet model - and the present state of the inter-tribal relations) - yet his sister (who is mentioned but not even named in the second chapter) looks after him and ensures his safety and continued relationship with family. When Mosheh is finally sent by God to Pharaoh, he refuses unless his older brother is included in the mission. God tells him that Aharon will rejoice upon seeing him (4:14) - and, as the commentators explain, he would rejoice over Mosheh's selection as God's messenger and not harbor any jealousy.

For his part, Mosheh includes both of his older siblings in the exodus and leadership of the people. Aharon is one of his right-hand men (Sh'mot 24:14) and Miriam leads the women (15:20).

Mosheh, Aharon and Miriam have finally corrected the tragic and destructive history of sibling rivalry - which is what got us to Egypt in the first place (Yoseph being sold by his brothers).

This only serves to underscore the enormity of the tragedy when Mosheh's leadership begins to unravel (see Bamidbar 12). It only happens when Aharon and Miriam speak ill of Mosheh, exhibiting jealousy over his unique relationship with God. Even the family which led us from slavery to freedom and to an appreciation of our own great mission couldn't fully escape the legacy of B'resheet.

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SEFER SHMOT - Introduction

Is Sefer Shmot simply a continuation of Sefer Breishit - or is there something that makes it unique?

For example, are the Ten Commandments and the laws of Parshat Mishpatim included in this book, simply because they were given 'first' - or should we look for a thematic connection between those laws and the story of the Exodus?

As our series of shiurim rests on the assumption that each "sefer" [book] of CHUMASH [= the five 'books'] carries a unique theme, we will begin our study of Sefer Shmot in an attempt to identify its primary theme. Afterward, we will consider that theme in our study of each individual chapter or unit.

In our study of Sefer Breishit, we employed this approach to uncover its primary theme of "bechira" – i.e. how & why God chose Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of a nation that will bring the Name of God to mankind. In those shiurim, we demonstrated how that theme helped us understand the deeper meaning of each story and the progression of its events. Now, in our study of Sefer Shmot, we will employ a similar approach.

Therefore, we begin our study with quick overview of Sefer Shmot, in an attempt to find not only its underlying theme, but also its thematic connection to - and distinction from - Sefer Breishit.

A TABLE OF CONTENTS

To identify a common theme of any book, it is helpful to first make a list of its major topics and then to contemplate what connects these topics together.

Let's see what happens when we apply this approach to Sefer Shmot.

If we limit ourselves to a discussion of the most general categories, I think that everyone would agree with the following table of contents for Sefer Shmot:

- 1) "Yetziat Mitzraim" (the Exodus/ chaps. 1->17)
[including the journey to Har Sinai]
- 2) "Ma'amad Har Sinai" (the Theophany / chaps. 18->24)
[including the mitzvot of Parshat Mishpatim]
- 3) "The Mishkan" (the Tabernacle / chaps. 25->31)
[God's commandment to build the Mishkan]
- 4) "Chet ha'Egel" (the sin of the Golden Calf/ 32->34)
[including the story of the second luchot]
- 5) "Building the Mishkan" (its construction/ 35->40)
[concluding with the "shechina" dwelling thereupon]

Therefore, to identify an overall theme for the entire book, we must search for a theme that connects all of these topics together.

RAMBAN'S APPROACH - GALUT & GEULAH

Ramban, in his short introduction to Sefer Shmot, attempts to do exactly this, i.e. to identify a common theme for the entire book. [It is recommended that your first read this Ramban.]

After defining Sefer Breishit as "sefer ha'yetzira" [the book of the creation of the world and of the people of Israel (and hence the patterns of its history)], Ramban proceeds to explain why Sefer Shmot begins with the story of Yetziat Mitzraim:

"... after completing Breishit, a special sefer is dedicated to describe the first "galut" [exile] as specifically decreed [in Sefer Breishit [see 15:13-16] and Bnei Yisrael's redemption from that GALUT..." (see Ramban's intro to Shmot1:1)

After explaining why Sefer Shmot begins with 'the redemption from exile' (as forecasted in Sefer Breishit), next Ramban must explain the progression in Sefer Shmot from Yetziat Mitzraim to Ma'amad Har Sinai, and then to the Mishkan:

"... and the GALUT is not over until they [Bnei Yisrael] return to the level of their forefathers... and even once they achieve their freedom from Egypt, they are not considered redeemed yet, for they still wander in the desert... But once they arrive at HAR SINAI to receive the Torah and build the MISHKAN, and God's shechina dwells upon them - then they return to the level of their forefathers... and are then considered totally REDEEMED..."

Note how Ramban understands the concept of "geulah" [redemption] as the underlying theme of the **entire** Sefer. This allows him to identify a common theme to the various topics of Yetziat Mitzraim, Matan Torah, and Mishkan. Although one could argue with Ramban's conclusions, he clearly assumes - as we did in our introduction - that there is a need to study each "sefer" in search of its unifying theme. In fact, Ramban opens his commentary to each "sefer" of Chumash in a very similar manner, i.e. with an attempt to identify its theme, and thus explain its flow of topic.

In our own study of Sefer Shmot, we will follow a direction similar to Ramban's, showing how all the various stories in Sefer Shmot carry a common theme (even though we may arrive at a slightly different conclusion). However, we begin our own study by focusing a bit more on its thematic connection to Sefer Breishit.

FROM BREISHIT TO SHMOT

We can readily understand why Sefer Shmot begins with the story of Yetziat Mitzraim, as that story appears to continue the narrative of Sefer Breishit. However, if Sefer Shmot simply continues the story of Sefer Breishit, why is it necessary to begin a new book?

To help clarify how these books differ, let's consider Sefer Breishit as God's '**master-plan**', while Sefer Shmot can be understood as the first stage of its '**implementation**'.

In other words, the "bechira" process - that emerged as the primary theme of Sefer Breishit - can be viewed as God's master plan for the creation of a special nation that will one-day represent Him and sanctify His Name. As such, the book began with the underlying reason for God's need of this nation (chapters 1->11), followed by His choice of the forefathers of that nation - and hence the stories of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov -focusing on the covenantal promises and which specific children would be chosen (chapters 12->50). This 'planning stage' reaches its conclusion as all of Yaakov's children are not only chosen, but also united (after the events of "mechirat Yosef") - and the 'seeds' of this nation have planted in the land of Egypt.

Sefer Shmot can be viewed as the first stage in God's implementation of this plan.

Recall God's opening promise to Avraham Avinu that he will become a "goy gadol" - a great nation (see 12:1-3). That's the 'plan'- therefore, Sefer Shmot begins by explaining HOW Bnei Yisrael became that great nation (Shmot 1:1-6).

Recall as well that in His covenant with Avraham Avinu ("brit bein ha'tarim" /see 15:13-18), God forecasted a period of 'slavery and oppression in a foreign land'; hence the first chapter of Sefer Shmot continues with the story of how that enslavement began (see 1:7-20). In the ensuing story of the Exodus (Shmot chapters 2 thru 15), God fulfills that next stage of that covenant by punishing their oppressor and redeeming His nation from Egypt.

The next major topic of Sefer Shmot is "Ma'amad Har Sinai" - which flows directly from the story of Yetziat Mitzraim - for in order for God's master plan to be fulfilled, Bnei Yisrael must receive a set of laws that will make them that special nation. To prepare them for that transformative moment, various events take place on their journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai (see Shmot chapters 14 thru 17). Upon their arrival at Sinai, the covenant is finalized and the first set of Laws are given, as described in Shmot chapters 18 thru 24. [In our of detailed study, we will also explore the thematic connection between "brit Sinai and "brit mila" ("I'hiyot lcha l'Elokim -see Breishit 17:7-11).

From this point on, the logic behind the progression of topics in Sefer Shmot becomes more difficult to ascertain. Considering that Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai to receive the entire Torah, we would expect Sefer Shmot to record ALL the mitzvot they received at that time. Instead, Sefer Shmot records only SOME of those mitzvot (the "dibrot" & Parshat Mishpatim), and then focuses primarily on the mitzvot relating to the Mishkan, while other commandments given at Har Sinai are recorded elsewhere in Chumash – i.e. in Vayikra, Bamidbar, and Devarim.

In our study of Sefer Shmot, we will need to explain why only one unit of those mitzvot (i.e. the laws in Parshat Mishpatim) are recorded in Sefer Shmot ;and then consider why its focus shifts exclusively to the laws of the Mishkan.

For example, in his commentary to Shmot 25:1, Ramban explains why specifically the Mishkan (chapters 25 thru 31) emerges as the next major topic – for Bnei Yisrael now require a symbol of their special relationship with God. The Mishkan will remind Am Yisrael of their covenantal responsibilities; allow the nation to approach God, and demonstrate (to themselves and the other nations) how God dwells in their midst.

Our shiurim will also discuss Rashi's approach, highlighting the intricate thematic connections between Mishkan, Maamad Har Sinai **and** the sin of the Golden calf ["chet ha'egel"].

In light of the events of "chet ha'egel", a serious doubt arises concerning the very possibility of this special relationship. Sefer Shmot describes how that first covenant is broken, and how and why a new covenant is be forged that must include God's attributes of Mercy (see Shmot chapters 32 thru 34). In its aftermath, the Mishkan is finally built and God's presence dwells with His Nation (chapters 35 thru 40), a sign that the relationship has been fixed.

When Sefer Shmot reaches its conclusion, everything is ready for what should be the next stage of God's master plan – i.e. Bnei Yisrael should travel from Har Sinai to Canaan and inherit the Land. Why that does not happen, will emerge as a primary topic in our study of Sefer Bamidbar.

Based on this thematic setting, our opening shiur (on Parshat Shmot) will discuss the significance of God's "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu at the burning bush, while the shiurim on Parshiot Va'eyra & Bo will focus on Moshe's mission to prepare Bnei Yisrael for their redemption. Our shiur on Parshat B'shalach will discuss the need for the various events that take place during Bnei Yisrael's journey from Egypt to Har Sinai. In Parshiot Yitro & Mishpatim we will discuss the dialectic nature of the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai, as well as the special nature of the mitzvot in Parshat Mishpatim and their covenantal significance. Finally, our shiurim from Parshat Terumah through Parshat Pekudei will focus on the conceptual relationship between the Mishkan, Ma'amad Har Sinai and "chet ha'egel."

As usual, it is highly recommended that you use the study questions to prepare for the shiurim (even though the shiurim are written so that you can follow even without advanced preparation). Also, it is helpful to study using a Tanach Koren (or similar). This will make it much easier for you to determine the flow of topic and theme from 'parshia' to 'parshia.'

b'hatzlacha!
menachem

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INTRO PART II / For Parshat Shmot

USING OUTLINES

We conclude our introductory shiur by bringing an example of how 'outlining' the flow of 'parshiot' can serve as an excellent study tool, especially helpful when searching for a central theme in any given unit.

In the following table we first list each 'parshia' in Parshat Shmot - and assign a short title to describe its primary topic.

Afterward, we will attempt to transform this list into an outline, by considering its thematic progression.

[It will help show how Parshat Shmot 'sets the stage' for the upcoming events in Sefer Shmot, as discussed in our introductory shiur.]

<u>'PARSHIA'</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
1:1-7	Bnei Yisrael multiply, becoming a nation in Egypt. (linking Sefer Breishit to Sefer Shmot)
1:8-22	The enslavement and its hardships begin
2:1-22	The birth and early life of Moshe Rabeinu [up until his arrival in Midyan]
2:23-25	God hears the crying out of Bnei Yisrael
** 3:1-4:17	God's "HITGALUT" TO MOSHE AT THE "SNEH" [Moshe receives his MISSION & clarifications].
4:18-26	Moshe leaves Midyan to fulfill his mission.
4:27-4:31	Moshe meets the elders, to inform the nation in regard to their forthcoming redemption
5:1-3	Moshe & Aharon go to Pharaoh, requesting permission to worship God in the desert
5:4-6:1	The mission appears to backfire; Pharaoh doubles their workload.

[Chapters 6 thru 14 describe how his mission is completed!]

BUILDING UP TO THE BURNING BUSH

We posit that the story of God's "hitgalut" [revelation] to Moshe at the burning bush should be considered the highlight of Parshat Shmot, for the mission that Moshe receives at the "sneh" - to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt - will emerge as the primary topic of the first half of Sefer Shmot, while the first two chapters serve as important background for that "hitgalut".

Let's explain how and why:

Recall from our shiurim on Sefer Breishit how its primary theme [the "bechira" process] progressed with each "hitgalut", i.e. each time that God spoke to the Avot. For example, in God's first "hitgalut" to Avraham Avinu, He introduced the concept of a special nation. In each subsequent "hitgalut" to the Avot, the details of God's future relationship with that nation slowly unfolded.

In a similar manner, we will see how the primary theme of Sefer Shmot is first introduced in God's opening "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu at the burning bush (see 3:1->4:17).

As this "hitgalut" is not described until chapter three, the first two chapters of Sefer Shmot serve as their 'backdrop':

- The first parshia in Sefer Shmot (1:1-7) explains how Bnei Yisrael became a NATION in the land of Egypt, thus fulfilling God's promise to Yaakov in the final "hitgalut" of Sefer Breishit (see 46:3-4 & our shiur on Vayigash).
- The next parshia (1:8-22) describes how the enslavement began, as foreseen in "brit bein ha'tarim" (15:13-15).
- The first 'parshia' in Chapter two (2:1-22) describes how God prepares His redemption with the story of birth of Moshe Rabeinu until he runs away to Midyan.
- In the final 'parshia' (2:23-25), we told of how the redemption finally begins, as God hears the cries of Bnei Yisrael's oppression.

The stage is now set for God's opening "hitgalut" to Moshe Rabeinu in chapter three, where he will receive his mission to

redeem Bnei Yisrael from Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land.

To better appreciate how the progression of topics in that key 'parshia', we now demonstrate another tool - that is also helpful when studying Chumash. We take an individual 'parshia', and divide it into paragraphs, and then make an outline to help follow its progression.

The following outline organizes this entire 'parshia', i.e. from 3:1 to 4:17 - highlighting its progression of topics:

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. 3:1-3 Moshe notices the 'burning bush'
- B. 3:4-6 God identifies Himself to Moshe

II. THE MISSION

- A. 3:7-8 God heard their cry, therefore He is coming: To redeem them, and bring them to Israel:
- B. 3:9-10 Moshe is charged to go to Pharaoh And take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt-

III. QUESTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

(re: how to accomplish this mission)

- A. 3:11-12 How can I to go to Pharaoh, & take them out
- B. 3:13-22 What precisely do I tell Bnei Yisrael & Pharaoh
- C. 4: 1- 9 Why (and how) should they believe me
- D. 4:10-17 How can I, specifically, be Your spokesman

Let's explain:

First, God identifies Himself to Moshe Rabeinu (I) and then explains to him the mission and its purpose (II).

At the **center** of this outline lies God's charge to Moshe that he take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt (II-B).

Finally, Moshe responds to this assignment by asking several questions regarding how he is to accomplish his mission (III).

GOD'S MESSAGE AT THE SNEH

What was the purpose of the "hitgalut" at the burning bush? As we will discuss in our shiur on Parshat Shmot, it did much more than just supply Moshe Rabeinu with some information. Rather, God will give Moshe a very complex mission, while explaining its goals and purpose.

In our shiurim on Parshat Shmot and Va'eyra, we explain what this mission is all about, noting that Moshe actually receives a DOUBLE mission.

Afterward, we will see how the next set of parshiot (chapters 6->17) will describe how Moshe actually completes this mission.

Till then,

shabbat shalom,
menachem

PARSHAT SHMOT *Let My People Go*

Was Moshe Rabeinu's plea of 'Let My People Go' just a HOAX?

As preposterous as this might sound, Rashbam claims that this is the only way to explain the story in Sefer Shmot!

In this week's shiur, we uncover the basis for this daring interpretation by Rashbam, while arriving ourselves at a very different conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

From youth, we are so familiar with the story of the Exodus that we rarely pay attention to the Torah's detail of that story. However, when one undertakes a careful reading of the first fourteen chapters of Sefer Shmot (as Rashbam does), the story that unfolds is quite different from what is commonly assumed.

In the first section of our shiur, we will review the story of the Exodus in the Bible to prove Rashbam's basic assertion - that Moshe **never, not even once**, asks Pharaoh to grant Bnei Yisrael freedom from slavery, or to emigrate to the land of Israel.

Instead, each time when Moshe goes to Pharaoh and demands 'Let My People Go', he is only requesting permission to allow Bnei Yisrael a three-day journey to worship their God in the desert.

Afterward we must explain why Moshe never tells Pharaoh the 'whole truth', and why this was all part of God's master plan.

In the second section of the shiur, we will show how this analysis serves as the foundation for Rashbam's conclusion that this 'master plan' is merely a 'hoax'.

In the third section, we will question this conclusion, and offer a different approach that will help us better appreciate the theological significance of the entire process of the Exodus.

PART ONE

FREEDOM OF RELIGION or FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY

It is quite understandable why the saying 'Let My People Go' is commonly understood as a plea for freedom from slavery. After all, this was Moshe's recurring plea to Pharaoh just about every time they met. Furthermore, the holiday of Passover, when we commemorate the events of the Exodus, is commonly associated with freedom from slavery ['zman cheruteinu']. Therefore, it only makes sense that people would understand Moshe's demand that Pharaoh 'let his people go' as a request for freedom.

However, when we undertake a careful analysis of the story of the Exodus in the Bible, it becomes quite clear that Moshe is making a totally different request, relating more to 'freedom of religion' than to 'freedom from slavery'.

The proof of this point is rather tedious but very straightforward. All that we need to do is to follow the plot that unfolds in Sefer Shmot, tracing each time that Moshe Rabeinu goes to Pharaoh to make demands on behalf of Bnei Yisrael.

MOSHE'S REQUEST FROM PHARAOH

To be thorough, we begin our analysis by first examining God's original instruction to Moshe concerning his mission to Pharaoh, as explained to Moshe at the burning bush:

"...Then you and the elders shall go to the King of Egypt and tell him: The God of the Hebrews had come and told us - we must embark upon a **journey of a three day distance into the desert to offer sacrifices to our Lord**" (see 3:18).

As you review this pasuk and its context, note how this demand to Pharaoh makes no mention of any request for freedom from slavery. Instead, Moshe is instructed to demand that Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael the right to worship their God in the desert (at a site a three day distance from Egypt).

And this is precisely what Moshe does when he first goes to Pharaoh. Let's take a careful look at the Torah's description of that first confrontation in chapter five:

"Afterward, Moshe and Aharon came and said to Pharaoh: Thus said the God of Israel, let My People go and **worship Me in the desert**. [Pharaoh refuses.] And they answered: the God of the Hebrews has called upon us to embark upon a **journey of a three day distance into the desert** in order that we may **sacrifice to our God, lest He strike us with 'dever' (pestilence) or 'cherev' (sword)**." (5:1-3)

Note once again that all we find is Moshe's request to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship God in the desert; no more - no less!

However, we must also pay attention to the implication of the final phrase of this pasuk - "lest he strike us with **dever** or **cherev**". Moshe warns Pharaoh that should he not allow Bnei Yisrael this journey to worship their God in the desert, a severe Divine punishment will ensue and many people - Egyptians & Hebrews - may die from 'dever' or 'cherev'. Hence, Moshe's demand implies that it may be in the 'best interests' of the Egyptian people - to allow Bnei Yisrael this 'short vacation' to worship their God in the desert. [See Ibn Ezra & Chizkuni on 5:3.]

The outcome of this first encounter is disastrous for the people of Israel, for Pharaoh not only refuses this request, he is so angered by it that he doubles their workload (see 5:4-10).

Nonetheless, God commands Moshe once again to go to Pharaoh and demand once again that he grant them permission to worship Him in the desert. This time, however, God will provide Moshe with some 'leverage' by performing miracles whose purpose will be to convince Pharaoh to take his warning seriously.

This background can help us appreciate God's explanation of the purpose of the Ten Plagues, when He speaks to Moshe in chapter seven. As a response to Pharaoh's refusal statement of: "lo **yada'ti** et Hashem" [I never heard of this God] (see 5:2), God explains to Moshe that the purpose of the plagues will be to convince Pharaoh that the God of the Hebrews indeed exists and He will bring plagues if His people do not worship him:

"And Pharaoh will not listen to you, so I will put My Hand against Egypt, and I will take People out with great punishments - **"ve-yad'u** Mitzrayim ki Ani Hashem" - so that Egypt will know that I am God" (see 7:4-5).

It will take ten Plagues to finally convince Pharaoh that it is in his best interest to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship their God; nevertheless, when Pharaoh finally allows Bnei Yisrael to leave (after the Tenth Plague), it was only in order to worship their God. To our surprise, Pharaoh never granted Bnei Yisrael freedom from slavery, or permission to emigrate! Nor did Bnei Yisrael ever ask for it.

To prove this interpretation, we need only note how Moshe prefaces each and every warning to Pharaoh before a plague begins. For example, before the first plague, God instructs Moshe:

"Go meet Pharaoh in the morning... and say to him: Hashem, the God of the Ivrim has sent me to you demanding Let My People Go and **worship Me in the desert**, and behold you have yet to listen. Thus says the Lord, with this (plague) you will know that I am God..." (see 7:14-17).

Then, in each successive plague we find an almost identical opening warning: "**shlach et ami** - Let My people go – **ve-ya'avduni ba-midbar** - so that they can **worship Me in the desert**", [or else ...]

See 7:16 (first plague); 7:26 (second plague); 8:16 (fourth plague); 9:1 (fifth plague); 9:13 (seventh plague); and 10:3 (eighth plague). [Note that Plagues 3,6, and 9 don't have any pre-warning.]

As you review these psukim and their context, you will also notice that this is all that Moshe requests. Not even once does he ever even hint to Pharaoh that Bnei Yisrael plan to leave for good!

NEGOTIATIONS & MORE NEGOTIATIONS

This interpretation can also help us understand the various negotiations that take place between Moshe and Pharaoh during the Ten Plagues. If you follow their conversations, you'll find that they focus **ONLY** on this issue of a three-day journey to worship God, and **NEVER** on 'emigration rights to Palestine'.

Let's cite several examples that show the progression of these negotiations. Note how Pharaoh slowly acquiesces to Moshe's demand (to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship God in the desert).

ROUND ONE:

After 'makkat arov' (the fourth plague), Pharaoh finally budges. He grants Bnei Yisrael permission to worship their God, but not in the desert, rather **within** the Land of Egypt (see 8:21-23). But once again, pay careful attention to how Moshe rejects this proposal for technical reasons. Moshe claims that if Bnei Yisrael would offer sacrifices in the land, the local population of Egypt would 'stone them'. Therefore, Moshe insists that Bnei Yisrael can only worship God in the desert.

Pharaoh then agrees to allow a short journey into the desert, but not a three-day distance:

"And Pharaoh said, I will send you out so that you can worship your God in the **DESERT**, but don't go too far away..." (see 8:24).

However, once that plague ended, Pharaoh hardened his heart once again and reneged on his promise (see 8:25-28). Even though Pharaoh is clearly worried about giving Bnei Yisrael permission to leave, he never accuses Moshe that he may be planning to run away! Likewise, Moshe himself never mentions the possibility that they may not return. [Later in the shiur we will discuss what Pharaoh is afraid of.]

ROUND TWO:

Later, after Moshe warns of the impending plague of locusts, Pharaoh's own servants demand his concession to Moshe (see 10:7). In response, Pharaoh enters into a new round of negotiations with Moshe that eventually reach an impasse over the issue of **WHO** can leave. Moshe insists that even the women and children come along, while Pharaoh allows only the men to leave (see 10:7-11).

Again, note the reason for Moshe's insistence on allowing the women and children to join; not because they are leaving forever, but rather - "for all family members need to worship God" (see 10:9). Never does he tell Pharaoh that everyone must go because the entire nation plans to migrate to Eretz Canaan. Moshe's various 'excuses' all imply that he plans to return.

ROUND THREE:

Finally, after the ninth plague ['choshech'], Pharaoh conducts one final round of negotiations. This time, he is willing to grant permission even for the women & children to leave, but not their sheep and cattle (see 10:24-25). Once again, Moshe counters with a 'technical reason', claiming that all the animals must come along, since they are not sure precisely which type of animals God will request for a sacrifice (see 10:26!).

In summary, at every stage of these negotiations, Moshe consistently rejects any concession or compromise, insisting that **EVERYONE** must go. Still, despite numerous opportunities, he **NEVER** even suggests that they plan to leave for good. Likewise, no matter how resolutely Pharaoh sticks to his hard line, he **NEVER** states a suspicion that Bnei Yisrael may be leaving forever.

EVEN AFTER THE TENTH PLAGUE!

In the Torah's account of the Exodus (in the aftermath of the Tenth Plague / see 12:29-36) we find conclusive proof for this interpretation. Note Pharaoh's immediate reaction when he hears reports of the death of the Egyptian first born:

"... and he [Pharaoh] called to Moshe and Aharon at night and said: Get up and get out... and **GO WORSHIP** your God - "ke-daberchem" - as you (originally / in 5:3) requested! Even your sheep and cattle take with you, as you requested (in 10:26), and **BLESS ME AS WELL...**" (see 12:31-33).

The tenth plague awakens Pharaoh to the realization that Moshe's original warning of 'dever' or 'cherev' (see 5:3) has actually come true. Now, he finally gives in to the very last of Moshe's demands - allowing them to take their sheep and cattle with them on their journey to the desert. (Recall that is where the last set of negotiations broke down.)

Not only does Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael a three-day journey to offer 'korbanot', he even requests that Moshe will pray there on his behalf (to make a **MISHEBERACH** for him - see 12:32 "u-berachtem gam oti!")

Clearly, even after the Tenth Plague, Pharaoh only grants Bnei Yisrael permission to worship God in the desert! And for the very simple reason - that's all that Moshe ever asked for!

This also explains why the entire Egyptian nation urges Bnei Yisrael to leave as quickly as possible (see 12:33-35). They want to make sure that Bnei Yisrael can sacrifice to their God as soon as possible - thereby bringing this horrifying plague to an end (see 12:33). This explains beautifully why the Egyptians '**LEND**' ['va-yish'alu'] Bnei Yisrael their finest wares, to encourage them to leave as quickly as possible (see 12:35-36). As Bnei Yisrael are

only taking a 'holiday leave' to worship their God, the Egyptians have every reason to assume they will return afterward back to Egypt - and bring back what they 'borrowed'.

The Torah uses the word 'borrowed' to describe what Bnei Yisrael took from the Egyptians, for that's exactly what they did!

THE LAST 'TRICK'

A final proof for this interpretation is found in Parshat Beshalach when Pharaoh is totally astonished when he finds out that Bnei Yisrael had 'run away':

"And it was told to the King of Egypt - ki BARACH ha-am - that the people had RUN AWAY..." (see 14:5).

Now, this pasuk makes sense only if Pharaoh had not granted them total freedom, but only a permit to temporarily worship God in the desert. Had he actually set them free, why would he be shocked to hear that the people had 'run away'?

However, according to our interpretation, Pharaoh is shocked for the opposite reason - because Bnei Yisrael DID NOT travel into the desert. This may sound a bit complicated, so let's explain by taking a careful look at these psukim.

First of all, recall from 12:37 and 13:17-18 that Bnei Yisrael had left Egypt traveling toward the desert. Then, in the middle of that journey, God suddenly commands Moshe to execute a 'turn-around' maneuver.

"And God told Moshe, tell Bnei Yisrael to TURN AROUND and set up camp... near the Red Sea. [In order that] Pharaoh will say they are wandering in the land (of Egypt), for the desert has closed them in" (see 14:1-4).

In other words, God commands Bnei Yisrael to turn around in order to convince Pharaoh that they are not going to the desert. Had Bnei Yisrael continued on their journey towards the desert, Pharaoh would have had no reason to chase them. After all, he wants them to go to the desert to worship their God, as they requested. It is specifically because they DON'T go to worship God, but instead RETURN TO EGYPT and set up camp by the Red Sea, that Pharaoh concludes:

"...what have we done [we've been tricked!], for we have set Bnei Yisrael free from their slave labor!" (see 14:5).

It is only now that Pharaoh realizes that Bnei Yisrael have left slavery. What leads him to this conclusion? The answer is quite simple.

Let's consider what Bnei Yisrael have done. Clearly, they did not travel to the desert (as they had requested). However, they also do not return to their homes in Goshen, i.e. to their slavery. Nor do they travel towards Eretz Canaan. Instead, they stay in Egypt, and set up camp by the sea. So what are they up to?

Pharaoh reaches the obvious conclusion. Bnei Yisrael have implicitly declared their independence - in the Land of Egypt! Therefore, for the sake of his national security, Pharaoh must immediately declare war on this rebellious nation (see 14:6-10). If he doesn't attack them first, they surely will soon attack him. After all, they are numerous, and armed (see 13:18).

In fact, this was Egypt's greatest fear from the very beginning. Recall that the enslavement began because Bnei Yisrael had become so numerous that Egypt feared that they would take over their own country (see 1:8-10, and Rasag, Rashi and Ibn Ezra on 1:10!)

Pharaoh's decision to attack ultimately leads to Bnei Yisrael's momentous salvation at the Red Sea. [That topic will be discussed in detail in our shiur on Parshat Beshalach.] It also explains why Bnei Yisrael can keep the various wares that they had 'borrowed' from the Egyptians. After Egypt declared war on Bnei Yisrael, their 'bank accounts' are 'frozen'.

There can be no two ways about it. This is the 'story of the Exodus' in the Bible. Despite the numerous movie versions and the popular understanding that 'Let My People Go' is a request for 'freedom from slavery', in Chumash it is simply a request for the 'freedom to worship God in the desert!'

Surely, this interpretation raises many questions.

First of all, with the Ten Plagues 'up his sleeve [or staff]', Moshe is in a position to demand just about anything he wants from Pharaoh. Why should he ask for a 'three day vacation' when he can ask for total freedom?

Furthermore, what does he gain by not telling the 'whole truth'?

In Part Two of our shiur, we will first discuss Rashbam's approach to this question, showing how the above analysis forms its basis. Afterward, we will suggest an explanation of our own.

LET MY PEOPLE GO - PART TWO

In our introductory shiur to Sefer Shmot, we explained that God did not appear to Moshe (at the 'sneh') simply to provide him with some information, rather God charges Moshe with a MISSION:

"And now go for I am sending you to Pharaoh - and TAKE My people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (3:10).

Note that at first, God instructs Moshe to take His nation out of Egypt, without providing even a clue concerning HOW to get the job done!

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

As we would expect, Moshe Rabeinu is startled by God's commandment. Considering his having been a fugitive from Egypt for many years, why should Pharaoh even allow him an audience? Furthermore, Moshe has been away from his people for most of his adult life. [Recall that he ran away at a rather young age and returns only at age eighty!] How could they possibly accept him as their official leader?

Therefore, Moshe's immediate response to this command is quite understandable:

"And Moshe said to God: WHO am I that I can go to Pharaoh, - VE-CHI OTZI - and [HOW can I] take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt?!" (See 3:11, read carefully.)

No matter how we translate the phrase 've-chi otzi' in this pasuk (its precise definition is a bit problematic), it certainly seems that Moshe is asking HOW he is supposed to take Bnei Yisrael out. However, God's answer to his question does not seem to address this issue at all:

"And He said: For I will be with you, and this is the sign that I have sent you - WHEN you take the Nation out of Egypt, you shall worship Elokim on this mountain" (see 3:12).

How does this answer Moshe's question? Moshe asks HOW he is supposed to take them out, and God tells him what to do AFTER he takes them out! What Moshe asks - God never answers, and what God answers - Moshe never asked!

Now there are two basic approaches to solve this problem. Either we can 'reinterpret' Moshe's question to fit God's answer [see Rashi & Seforno], or we can 'reinterpret' God's answer to fit Moshe's question [see Rashbam].

In our shiur we will deal primarily with the latter interpretation. But before we begin, let's take a quick glance at Rashi's approach.

RASHI - 'FOR WHAT PURPOSE?'

Rashi (on 3:12) deals with this difficulty by reinterpreting Moshe's question (in 3:11). When Moshe asks 'VE-CHI OTZI', he asks not HOW to take them out, but rather WHY am I (and/or Bnei Yisrael) WORTHY of being taken out of Egypt? To this God responds that AFTER they leave Egypt, Bnei Yisrael are to worship Him and receive the Torah on this mountain. This merit alone renders them worthy of Yetziat Mitzrayim. In other words, God here explains the PURPOSE of Yetziat Mitzrayim - that Bnei Yisrael will receive the Torah at Har Sinai!

RASHBAM - 'HOW TO GET THE JOB DONE!'

Unlike Rashi, Rashbam refuses to reinterpret the question. Instead, he reinterprets God's answer. He accomplishes this by

dividing God's answer into two parts, corresponding to both the two parts of God's original command & the two parts of Moshe's original question. The following table maps out this parallelism in psukim 3:10-12:

THE FIRST HALF OF EACH SENTENCE

3:10/ COMMAND: Go, I have sent you to Pharaoh!
3:11/ QUESTION: Who am I, that I can go to Pharaoh?
3:12/ ANSWER: For I will be with you, and this [the sneh] is the sign that I have SENT you...

THE SECOND HALF OF EACH SENTENCE

3:10/ COMMAND: Take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt!
3:11/ QUESTION: [HOW] can I take them out of Egypt?
3:12/ ANSWER: [In order to] take them out of Egypt, [tell Pharaoh that] this nation must worship their God on this mountain.

Rashbam's interpretation of 3:12 is very creative. He claims that Moshe asks (in 3:11) that even if he is allowed to speak to Pharaoh, HOW can he possibly convince Pharaoh to let them free? God answers Moshe by telling him to 'TRICK' PHARAOH - "Tell Pharaoh that you must take Bnei Yisrael [for a short time] out of Egypt, in order that they can worship their God on this mountain."

In other words, Rashbam claims that God instructs Moshe to 'deceive' Pharaoh requesting permission to worship God in the desert. Once they leave, Moshe will lead Bnei Yisrael to the Promised Land, where they will live forever, never again to return to Egypt!

Rashbam clearly reads into this pasuk much more than is written. In fact, Rashbam himself admits to doing so! However, he explains that he bases this interpretation on a later pasuk in this 'hitgalut' - where God issues more specific instructions to Moshe regarding his meeting with Pharaoh:

"... Then you and the elders shall go to the King of Egypt and tell him: 'The God of the Hebrews had come and told us that we must go for a three-day journey into the desert [to Har Chorev] to offer sacrifices to our Lord'" (3:18).

As we explained in Part One, Rashbam's approach is based on the above analysis that Moshe never asks for freedom, rather for a journey of a three day distance to worship God in the desert. Considering that Moshe's true intention (as he tells Bnei Yisrael) is to take them to the Promised Land, the 'three day journey' request must be part of a 'master plan' to 'sneak' Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt.

Furthermore, the final phrase of 5:3: "lest he strike us with DEVER or CHEREV" - explains God's intention in 3:12. The plan is rather simple. Moshe warns Pharaoh that if he does not allow Bnei Yisrael to journey into the desert and worship their God, a severe Divine punishment will ensue and many people will die (including Egyptians).

As we explained above, a careful analysis of the entire Exodus narrative renders Rashbam's explanation that God commands Moshe to employ 'trickery' as the simple 'pshat'.

Even though we have referred to this plan as 'trickery', Rashbam does not call this 'lying' - he refers to it instead as 'derech chochma' - a wise scheme. He brings a parallel example from Sefer Shmuel. When God instructs Shmuel with the mission to anoint David as king, Shmuel expresses his fear that Shaul may find out and then kill him. To solve this problem, God provides Shmuel with a 'cover up', telling him to claim that he is going to Bet-Lechem to offer a public sacrifice. Once there, he will secretly anoint David as king. [See Shmuel I/16:1-3!]

When you read this Rashbam inside, note the 'confident' style with which he begins his explanation:

"Anyone who would like to understand the primary 'pshat' of these psukim should study my interpretation of this pasuk, for those who explained it before me did not understand it at all!" [See Rashbam 3:11-12.]

Later on, Rashbam is so sure that his interpretation is correct that he concludes his commentary by stating:

"Anyone who explains these psukim in any other manner is totally mistaken!" [See end of peirush to 3:11-12.]

'NOT SO FAST ...'

Despite the charm and appeal of Rashbam's explanation, there appears to be a major 'hole' in his theory. Let's explain:

Recall that, in addition to his mission to Pharaoh, Moshe's mission also included that he tell Bnei Yisrael that God had now come to take them out of Egypt to the Promised Land (see 3:16-17). And this is exactly what Moshe does in 4:29-31.

Is it possible to expect that over one million people know the 'real' plan, and Pharaoh won't find out? Can it be expected that no one will leak the story? Doesn't Pharaoh have his own CIA [KGB, Shin Bet... take your pick]?

Furthermore, it appears that Moshe has nothing to gain by not telling Pharaoh the whole truth? Either way, God tells Moshe that Pharaoh won't listen in any event (see 3:19), so why not tell Pharaoh the whole truth in the first place?

Finally, is God not powerful enough to bring plagues capable of forcing Pharaoh to grant Bnei Yisrael total freedom? Is it better to deceive Pharaoh rather than tell him the truth?

NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE

When we read the story of the Exodus, it is commonly assumed that the only obstacle preventing Bnei Yisrael's return to Eretz Canaan was their enslavement to Egypt. However, if we consider their condition more realistically, we realize that Bnei Yisrael had no alternative other than remain in Egypt. Let's explain why:

Bnei Yisrael's population is over two million. [The census included 600,000 men over the age of twenty. Figure an equal amount of women, and considering the high birth rate figure as many children under twenty as adults over twenty, and you arrive at a figure of about two million!]

To provide food and water for this size population is not an easy task. Egypt, thanks to the Nile River and Nile Delta, could provide their needs. However, survival of a nation of this size in desert conditions, even for a few weeks, would be impossible.

Even if Pharaoh had granted them permission to emigrate, could a nation of some two million people [ex-slaves] survive the lengthy, arduous journey through the desert? And even if they could make it to Canaan, could they conquer the land with its walled cities and formidable, armed enemies? As the 'meraglim' themselves concluded, such a plan would be suicidal - and that's a conclusion reached by people who had witnessed the miracles of Yetziat Mitzrayim! [See Bamidbar chapters 13->14.]

Without anything less than a 'miracle', Bnei Yisrael have no option other than to remain in Eretz Mitzrayim.

Furthermore, Bnei Yisrael had been living in Egypt for (at least) the last two hundred years. Certainly, in the eyes of the Egyptians (and most likely in their own eyes), even though they may be 'third class citizens', they remain a distinct ethnic group within Egyptian society and culture.

In fact, it is for this very reason that their enslavement begins when Bnei Yisrael become so numerous. Egypt fears that they may soon take over! Many dynasties in Egypt had been taken over by enemies from within or by foreign powers. They now fear that Bnei Yisrael may soon become powerful enough to take over their own country or help others do so (see 1:8-10).

Thus, despite the hardships of their enslavement, [without some sort of miraculous, divine intervention] Bnei Yisrael had no realistic alternative other than staying in Egypt. When Bnei Yisrael cry out for salvation in 2:23-25, they are an oppressed working class who desire a lighter workload and better living conditions; they are NOT yearning for Zion.

With this in mind, let's imagine what would have happened had Moshe presented Pharaoh with this plan of an en-masse emigration to Eretz Canaan. Pharaoh most probably would have dismissed him as insane! Moshe would have lost all credibility in the eyes of Pharaoh as a responsible leader of the Hebrew

Nation. Instead, God instructs Moshe to make a fairly reasonable request - to allow his afflicted brethren to worship their God. Moshe does not lie to Pharaoh, nor does he deceive him. He simply claims the legitimate right of religious freedom for an oppressed people!

Furthermore, God can demand that Pharaoh grant religious freedom to an oppressed people, and hence punish him for not obeying; but He can't expect Pharaoh to act as 'an ardent supporter of Zionism' - allowing an entire nation to embark on a journey that would most certainly be suicidal!

Hence, there would no point for Moshe to demand that Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael to emigrate. Instead, he demands that Pharaoh allow Bnei Yisrael the right to worship their God in the desert. This is not a lie, for this is exactly where Bnei Yisrael first plan to go (to Har Sinai), and there they will offer korbanot (see Shmot 24:4-11).

This explains why Pharaoh never accuses Moshe (during the Plagues) that he may really be planning to take Bnei Yisrael to Eretz Canaan, for Pharaoh never considers this a realistic option!

So what is Pharaoh worried about? Why is he so adamant not to allow them to worship their God in the desert for a few days?

The answer is quite simple, and it explains every problem that we have raised thus far.

Pharaoh has ONE fear, and only one fear: From the time that the enslavement began until the day of the Exodus, Pharaoh's only fear is that Bnei Yisrael may take-over his country. That is exactly why he enslaved them in the first place (see 1:8-10), and this is exactly why he is reluctant to allow the entire nation to leave with all their belongings.

Pharaoh fears that should he let them free to worship their God, they will take advantage of the situation, and instead of returning to slavery, they will return and rebel; or join with other nations and attack. By not allowing them to travel too far, and by leaving their women and children (or at least cattle) behind, Pharaoh remains with a clear advantage. But should the entire nation leave to worship their God, nothing guarantees that Bnei Yisrael will return to their servitude. Instead, they could take advantage of the situation and declare their independence when they return to Egypt, or possibly even attack Egypt.

And when Bnei Yisrael finally did leave Egypt, what Pharaoh feared most is exactly what happened. Bnei Yisrael DON'T go to the desert. Instead they march away 'armed' (see 13:18), with all of their own possessions, and with a significant amount of 'borrowed' Egyptian gold and silver - everything they need to declare independence! As soon as Pharaoh realizes that they are not going to the desert, he concludes that he has a rebellion on hand, and he launches a pre-emptive strike before they attack him (see 14:1-6).

With this in mind, we can suggest an answer to our other questions as well.

KEEPING A SECRET

Even though Moshe had told Bnei Yisrael of God's promise to take them to Eretz Canaan, had the Egyptians heard this 'rumor', they would have scoffed at the very thought. Could a multitude of slaves possibly organize themselves into an independent nation? Could they survive the journey through the desert? Could they conquer the kings of Canaan? Are there any neighboring lands as good as Egypt?

No one was keeping any secrets. Even the majority of Bnei Yisrael felt that this idea would lead to national suicide (see 14:12!). Why should the Egyptians believe this 'rumor' any more than Bnei Yisrael did? Throughout Sefer Shmot and Sefer Bamidbar, we find the people time and time again expressing their desire to return to Egypt. As the "meraglim" (spies) themselves later conclude, it is the only logical alternative (see Bamidbar 14:1-4).

Although God's promise of a land 'flowing with milk and honey' (see 3:8,17) was originally endorsed by the elders (see

4:29-31), only a short while later, after their workload was doubled, these hopes fizzled out (see 5:1-21).

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In addition to our explanation that God has no intention to fool Pharaoh, one could even suggest that there is a certain thematic value in the fact that Moshe's request from Pharaoh is specifically for 'religious freedom' and not the right to emigrate.

The story of the Exodus, and hence God mission to Moshe at the 'sneh', focuses on two independent issues:

- 1) To redeem Bnei Yisrael from Egypt - to fulfill Brit Avot;
- 2) To 'teach' Pharaoh and his country the lesson of 'ANI HASHEM' - that God of Israel exists.

In His 'hitgalut' to Moshe at the 'sneh', God charges Moshe with the responsibility of dealing with both issues.

Let's begin with the latter by asking a more basic question: why must Moshe confront Pharaoh in the first place? If the entire purpose of Yetziat Mitzrayim is simply to fulfill 'brit Avot' and take Bnei Yisrael to Eretz Canaan, why involve Egypt in this process at all? Surely God could create circumstances whereby Bnei Yisrael would emigrate without official Egyptian authorization. For example, let God cause a sudden change in Egyptian policy, or make just one miracle where all the Egyptians would fall asleep for 48 hours, etc.

[See Ramban on 3:13 for an interesting perspective.]

Nonetheless, at the 'sneh' we see how God insists that Bnei Yisrael must receive Pharaoh's permission to leave. Note how the psukim emphasize this point:

"Now go, I have sent you to PHARAOH..." (3:10)
and Moshe responds:

"Who am I that I should go to PHARAOH?..." (3:11).

Moshe's confrontation with Pharaoh constitutes a critical element of God's plan. God does not tell Moshe to 'trick' Pharaoh. Rather, Moshe must confront Pharaoh over the fundamental issue of religious freedom - the basic right of any people, especially an oppressed nation, to worship God. The fact that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt - the world superpower and center of ancient civilization - rejects this request shows that he considers himself above his fellow man. He acts as though he himself is a god; God must therefore teach him (and any future Pharaoh/monarch) the lesson of "ve-yad'u Mitzrayim ki ANI Hashem" (see 7:5,9:16,11:9,14:4).

[One could suggest that the natural resources of Egypt, especially the inestimable Nile river, granted power to the Egyptian people. [See Yechezkel 29:1-3.] This power not only allowed their monarch to claim divine power and authority, but also led Egypt to their self-proclaimed privilege to oppress other nations - to act as though they were gods. It is not by chance that the first plague strikes specifically the Nile River.]

TWO PERSPECTIVES

Therefore, from a universalistic perspective, the primary goal of Yetziat Mitzraim is that Egypt - the center of ancient civilization - realize that God is above all Man - "ve-yad'u Mitzraim ki Ani Hashem." Moshe must deliver this message to the Egyptian people, in God's Name, directly to Pharaoh (as explained in 3:10-12, 18-20). The MAKKOT ensure that the Egyptians will ultimately internalize this message.

Hence, when Moshe is commanded to go to Pharaoh and demand Bnei Yisrael's right to worship their God, it's not a 'trick', but rather a basic, human demand.

On the other hand, from Am Yisrael's perspective, the central purpose of Yetziat Mitzraim relates to the fulfillment of God's covenant with the Avot, that Bnei Yisrael return to Eretz Canaan in order to become God's special nation. As Bnei Yisrael must prepare themselves for this redemption (as we will explain in next week's shiur), Moshe must convey this message to them (see 3:7-9, 13-17). Ultimately, this redemption will take place in wake

of the events that unfold once Pharaoh allows Bnei Yisrael to leave after the Ten Plagues.

FROM MAKKOT TO DIBROT

In conclusion, it is interesting to note the inter-relationship between these two aspects of the Exodus.

As we explained in Sefer Breishit, an ultimate goal of the Nation of Israel is to establish a model society that can bring all mankind to recognize God. At Yetziat Mitzrayim - when Israel becomes a nation - it is significant that Egypt - the center of ancient civilization and the epitome of a society that rejects God - must recognize God, specifically at the moment when Am Yisrael becomes a nation.

Initially (and unfortunately), this goal must first be achieved through force, by Moshe's MATEH and God's TEN Plagues. Ultimately, when Israel becomes a nation in its own land, this very same goal can be achieved in a more 'peaceful' manner - i.e. through education - should Bnei Yisrael integrate the message of Moshe's DIBUR and the principles of God's TEN Commandments.

*shabbat shalom,
menachem*

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Hashem's Response to Moshe's question - 3:12

Before presenting the various approaches taken to this pasuk let us first identify the various problems that immediately arise. The pasuk reads, "He said, I will be with you, and this shall be a sign that I have sent you, when you free the nation from Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain." The mefarshim must grapple with the following questions:

Most urgently, as we discuss in the shiur, is the issue as to how Hashem here responds to the concerns Moshe expresses in 3:11: "Who am I, that I can go to Pharaoh and that I can take Bnei Yisrael from Egypt?"

To what does 'this' refer in the phrase, "this shall be a sign that I have sent you"? Does it refer to the immediately preceding clause - "I will be with you," that somehow Hashem's "being with" Moshe serves as a sign? Or does it refer to the immediately following clause, the nation's serving Hashem at this mountain after leaving Egypt? How could Matan Torah serve as a sign that "I have sent you"? Significantly, an 'etnachta', signifying a pause in the sentence, appears under the word, 'shlachticha' ('that I have sent you'), perhaps suggesting that the 'sign' refers to what was mentioned earlier, rather than that which follows the 'etnachta'.

Why does Moshe need a sign that Hashem sent him; did he ever express any doubt that it was God who spoke to him? He doubted only his ability to speak to Pharaoh and demand the release of the slaves.

A question that necessarily relates to the previous questions: what does Matan Torah have to do with Yetziat Mitzrayim? Why does Hashem mention it here to Moshe?

It is important to bear all these questions in mind when surveying the various interpretations. This will help us appreciate what prompted each mefaresh to explain as he did.

In the shiur we accept the Rashbam's interpretation of the pasuk, that Hashem responds to Moshe's concerns by telling him that a) He will ensure Moshe's permission to come before Pharaoh and b) he would free Bnei Yisrael by 'fooling' Pharaoh into thinking that he requests merely permission for a three-day trek into the wilderness to worship Hashem.

Here is a brief survey of some other explanations offered:

- A. Rashi, first interpretation: The burning bush serves as a sign to Moshe that he will succeed, since "I have sent you". Just as the bush was not consumed by the fire in compliance with Hashem's will, so will Moshe succeed because he performs Hashem's mission, which can never fail. The second half of the pasuk refers to a second question that Moshe had asked: in what merit Bnei Yisrael will be freed? Hashem responds that He will redeem them in the merit of their eventual assembly at that mountain for Matan Torah.
- B. Rashi, second interpretation: The clause, "this is the sign that I have sent you..." bears no connection to the first part of the pasuk. Hashem 'parenthetically' informs Moshe that his success in freeing Bnei Yisrael will serve as a sign of the fulfillment of a different promise - Matan Torah.
- C. Ibn Ezra (Peirush Ha-katzar) cites an approach that completely separates the two halves of the pasuk, before and after the etnachta. That is, "when you leave Egypt you will serve God" is merely additional information that does not address Moshe's concern. Within this approach, Ibn Ezra cites two versions. According to the Geonim, Hashem's 'being with Moshe' will serve as a sign, while the anonymous 'acheirim' view the miracle of the burning bush as the sign (recall Rashi's first interpretation). Either way, it seems, these phenomena serve as a sign "that I have sent you." As Ibn Ezra notes, however, Moshe never doubted Hashem's having sent him (as noted earlier). Additionally, we should add, this approach leaves unresolved the question as to why Hashem makes mention of Matan Torah in this context.
- D. Ibn Ezra himself (in his Peirush Ha-katzar) suggests a somewhat revolutionary pshat, claiming (though somewhat cryptically) that the word 'ot', generally translated as 'sign', here means 'purpose'. Hashem thus informs Moshe that the

purpose of His taking Bnei Yisrael from Egypt is for them to stand at Har Sinai and receive the Torah. Ibn Ezra does not explain why Hashem suddenly mentions this now, rather than when He initially instructed Moshe to go to Pharaoh.

- E. Ramban understands the reference to Matan Torah as Hashem's assurance to Moshe that Bnei Yisrael will agree to go to Canaan. Moshe was concerned that the people would refuse to go in fear of the nations they would have to fight upon entering the land. Hashem thus tells Moshe that the nation will first worship Him on that mountain, and there they will accept the mitzvot and Moshe as their leader. They will then follow him to Canaan. (One version of the Seforno's commentary on our pasuk has him adopting this explanation - see footnotes on the Seforno in the Torat Chayim Chumash.) Although Ramban does not make it clear how this serves as a 'sign', he likely refers to Ramban's reading of this pasuk, as he explains in Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 8:6. Ramban there writes that Matan Torah served to firmly establish Bnei Yisrael's faith in Moshe as Hashem's prophet. Thus, it serves as a 'sign' to Bnei Yisrael "that I have sent you".
- F. Seforno explains the opening phrase, "I will be with you," as meaning that Hashem will guarantee the fulfillment of every one of Moshe's predictions. This will serve as a sign to one and all - Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians - that Hashem has sent Moshe to free the slaves. As for the mention of Matan Torah, Seforno follows Rashi's approach, that Hashem here informs Moshe that the merit of Matan Torah renders Bnei Yisrael worthy of redemption.
- G. Abarbanel - first approach: Like one view mentioned earlier, this approach identifies the burning bush as the sign. It serves as a sign to Moshe that Hashem will assist him in his meetings with Pharaoh. In this approach, Abarbanel suggests two possible explanations of the second half of the pasuk: the Ramban's explanation, that Matan Torah will give Bnei Yisrael the confidence and hence the willingness to go to Canaan, and Rashi's interpretation, that Matan Torah renders them worthy of deliverance from Egypt. (Abarbanel expresses his preference for this first approach.)
- H. Abarbanel - second approach: The prophecy Moshe now received serves as sign for him that God will accompany him to Pharaoh such that he will succeed. The mention of Matan Torah responds to another question of Moshe, which he expressed when said, "... and that I will take Bnei Yisrael out from Egypt." Moshe here asks the question that, as we discuss in the shiur, many among Bnei Yisrael probably asked: why must they leave Egypt at all? Why can't Hashem simply free them from bondage without taking them from Egypt? To this Hashem responds that they must serve Him, and this worship cannot take place in Egypt, given the widespread idol worship in the country; Moshe must therefore take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt to worship Hashem in the wilderness.
- I. Abarbanel - third approach: Moshe had questioned his ability to undertake this mission on the basis of his lowly stature. Hashem responded that He will accompany Moshe, and his lowly stature will itself serve as a sign to Hashem's having sent him; a simple, old man could not defy Pharaoh and lead a multitude out of Egypt without Hashem's help. For this very reason, Bnei Yisrael will serve Hashem after leaving Egypt, rather than worship Moshe himself, as they will clearly recognize the Almighty's hand in this process.

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We should note that all these approaches give rise to the problem of "ikar chaser min ha-sefer", that Hashem seems to have omitted the primary component of His message to Moshe in this pasuk. This is characteristic of very difficult and ambiguous psukim. Since the pasuk makes little sense as written, the mefarshim have no choice but to read external information into the text in order to make it comprehensible.

Parshat Shemot: Slavery's Racist Roots

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PREPARATION FOR PARASHAT SHEMOT:

1. A NEW SEFER: Sefer Shemot (Exodus) opens up with familiar names: the names of the sons of Ya'akov, personalities to whom we know we can look for leadership. We seem to be on firm ground despite having just begun a new sefer (book). We expect things to continue as before. But this sense of familiarity quickly evaporates as we encounter the new realities of Sefer Shemot. In what ways does the opening of Sefer Shemot present unfamiliar territory? What is missing from Bnei Yisrael's new reality? The answer to this question -- and the appearance of what is missing -- are primary themes of Parashat Shemot.

2. LEADERSHIP: Our discussions of Sefer Bereishit (Genesis) focused heavily on themes of leadership. Our discussions of Sefer Shemot, VaYikra (Leviticus), BeMidbar (Numbers), and Devarim (Deuteronomy) will also focus on leadership, as the career and personality of Moshe and other leaders offer great opportunities for insight. As each leader steps onto the scene, pay careful attention to his or her leadership style; ask yourself what leadership means in each context. Although many of us may think of leadership as a combination of charisma, power, "personal magnetism," and other buzzwords, we will see that leadership comes in many different flavors. If you do not consider yourself "charismatic, powerful, personally magnetic," etc. and you are asking yourself what leadership has to do with you, keep in mind that one of our goals is to think about different models of leadership and how our own characteristics and gifts offer us different leadership opportunities.

3. MOSHE:

a) The Torah tells us very little about the early life of Avraham. Instead, he appears somewhat suddenly on the scene as a prophet commanded and tested by Hashem. In contrast, the Torah provides plenty of detail about Moshe's birth, his early adventures in the Nile, his adoption by Paro's daughter, his trouble with informers, and many other details. Why does the Torah introduce Moshe to us in such detail?

b) Hashem commands Moshe to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, but Moshe seems very reluctant to do the job, as the Torah reports in great detail. What does this tell us about Moshe?

4. THE DIVINE PLAN: Why does Hashem command Moshe to demand that Paro release Bnei Yisrael for a trek into the desert to serve the Hebrew God, "Y-HVH" if He knows that Paro will only refuse and cruelly increase his demands of the Jewish slaves, making Moshe the target of Jewish anger?

PARASHAT SHEMOT:

AND THEY ALL DIED:

Sefer Shemot (Exodus) opens up with familiar names: the names of the sons of Ya'akov, personalities to whom we know we can look for leadership. We seem to be on firm ground despite having just begun a new sefer, and it seems that things will continue as before. Many mefarshim (commentators) offer various explanations for why the names of the sons of Ya'akov appear here, since they have recently been listed at the end of Sefer Bereishit (in Parashat VaYigash). But from a literary perspective, the names may appear here simply to establish Sefer Shemot as a literary entity independent of Sefer Bereishit. The "unnecessary" review of the names signals the distinctiveness of this book from the previous one (see Bekhor Shor; Abravanel and others offer examples from other books in Tanakh which open up with information we already know from previous books). But a look at the list of Ya'akov's sons provides what may be a more satisfying answer: the Torah lists the sons of Ya'akov again to tell us that they are dead!

SHEMOT 1:1-7 --

These are the names of the sons of Yisrael who came to Egypt: Ya'akov, the man and his household, came: Re'uvein, Shimon, Leivi, and Yehuda, Yissakhar, Zevulun, and Binyamin, Dan, Naftali, Gad, and Asher. All of the souls who came from the loins of Ya'akov were seventy souls; Yosef was [already] in Egypt. Yosef and all of his brothers died, and all of

that generation [died]. Bnei Yisrael were fruitful, and swarmed, and increased, and became very, very mighty; the land was full of them.

First the Torah lists the sons of Ya'akov, followed by a summary of the total number of people who came to Egypt as part of Ya'akov's household -- seventy people. The situation sounds as if it is under control: the whole group is only seventy people, and leadership for the group is amply provided by the sons of Ya'akov, who, as we know from VaYeishev, Mikkeitz, VaYigash, and VaYhi, include such capable leaders as Yosef and Yehuda. But the Torah quickly takes away this feeling of security by suddenly reporting two facts (I say "suddenly" because it is clear that these events take much longer to occur than their brief treatment in the Torah conveys):

1) Yosef, all of his brothers, and all of his generation are dead. In other words, all of the people we had been "depending on" for leadership, the mention of whose names had lulled us into believing for a moment that they were still here to lead, are gone. The family of seventy is left without a leader and no one appears to fill that vacuum. A crisis of leadership is brewing.

2) Bnei Yisrael (and here, ironically, the Torah uses the same phrase -- "Bnei Yisrael" -- to refer to both the twelve sons of Ya'akov and, only several lines later, to the thousands of their descendants who "swarm" and "fill the land") are no longer a family group of seventy people. They have grown to immense proportions. The Torah uses four different "growth" verbs to emphasize how quickly they grow and to what great proportions; the land literally "swarms" with them. This makes the lack of visible leadership even more worrisome: there is no comparison between the needs for leadership of a group of seventy people, and the needs for leadership of 600,000 people -- approximately the number of adult males who eventually leave Egypt.

A BREWING CRISIS:

The Torah may be trying to communicate that with the death of the older generation and the explosive growth of Bnei Yisrael, a crisis of leadership is brewing: Who will represent Bnei Yisrael to the Egyptians, now that Yosef is gone? Who will organize them so that they can stand up for themselves, train them to defend themselves, provide spiritual leadership so they can maintain the monotheistic beliefs of the Avot in the midst of pagan Egypt? How will they preserve the moral values of the Avot if they do not remain distinct from the surrounding culture? Finally, despite the emphasis placed by Ya'akov and Yosef (just before their deaths, as we discussed on Parashat VaYhi) on the family's connection to Eretz Yisrael and their repeated assertion that Hashem will return the family to Eretz Yisrael, how will the people maintain an emotional connection to the land and not become comfortable and complacent in fertile Egypt?

To see how effective the leaders and educators of Bnei Yisrael are in Egypt in perpetuating the values and beliefs passed down by the Avot, see Yehezkel 20:5-10 for the dismal report.

OMINOUS SIGNS:

One reason leadership is particularly necessary is because Egypt is not a friendly place for Bnei Yisrael. The roots of latent Egyptian hostility are struck well before Paro commands that Bnei Yisrael be enslaved:

1) The stories of Yosef and his brothers showed that the Egyptians, despite their need for Yosef as architect and executor of their national survival program in the seven-year famine, maintain racist and cultural prejudices against Bnei Yisrael:

a) They consider it "an abomination" to eat with Yosef, or with Ya'akov's other sons (Bereishit 43:32).

b) They look upon the raising of sheep, the occupation of Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya'akov, and all of Ya'akov's sons, also as "an abomination" (Bereishit 46:34).

c) Despite Yosef's status as second to the king, he must humbly request permission of Paro to leave Egypt to bury his father in Eretz Canaan (Bereishit 50:4). Some mefarshim point out that one of the reasons Ya'akov asks Yosef to *swear* to bury him in Eretz Canaan is because he anticipates that Paro will refuse to let Yosef meet this commitment to his father unless Yosef has *sworn* to uphold it. Indeed, in requesting permission to leave, Yosef says that he is sworn to follow his father's wishes, hinting that he may fear that if not for the strength of his commitment, Paro would not grant permission. Most telling of all, Yosef seems unable to speak directly to Paro, and sends his request as a message, humbly worded, to be delivered to Paro.

Any group, under any conditions, needs leadership. But in an unfriendly and uncertain environment, leadership is especially critical. People must have someone to look to for hope and guidance, someone to focus their energies and help them accomplish their goals -- and, when necessary, force them to face realities they would rather ignore. Yosef and his brothers are dead; the family of seventy has grown into a group the size of a nation. And the situation is about to get worse.

WHO'S AT THE HELM?

This vacuum of leadership is part of what enables Paro and his people to subjugate Bnei Yisrael. Paro himself testifies that Bnei Yisrael have become more numerous than his own people, that he fears that their strength threatens Egypt. We might have expected Paro to try to reach an agreement or treaty of some sort with Bnei Yisrael, as previous leaders (like Avimelekh) had done once they recognized the power in (or behind) Bnei Yisrael. But Paro is able to completely take advantage of Bnei Yisrael despite their strength. Among other causes, this weakness points to a lack of leadership. Even a powerful group is defenseless without leadership to direct its power and channel its energies. If leadership is not provided from within, by the appearance of a leader from among Bnei Yisrael, then leadership will be provided from without -- by a Paro, who will take advantage of the strength of the people for his own purposes.

EGYPTIAN FEARS:

What are Paro's "purposes?" Why does he come up with the idea of making Bnei Yisrael suffer in various cruel ways?

SHEMOT 1: 8-10 --

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef. He said to his nation, "The nation of Bnei Yisrael is many, and more powerful than we are. Let us 'wise up' about him, lest he increase, and then, when a war breaks out, he will join our enemies, fight us, and go up out of the land!"

Paro seems to fear that Bnei Yisrael will leave Egypt and go wherever they choose (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Abravanel). Why? What does Egypt have invested in Bnei Yisrael's remaining where they are?

ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY?

Although this new king does not remember Yosef, Egypt became dependent on Yosef long ago to save it from starvation. This established a relationship which Yosef himself became confined by: when he wanted to leave to bury Ya'akov, he had to ask Paro for permission (and obsequiously, at that). We usually assume that, once released from jail to interpret Paro's dreams, Yosef gains his freedom and has the power of the king, for all practical purposes. But it seems that he never gains complete freedom; one price of his being an indispensable asset to Egypt is that Paro keeps him under close watch and restricts his movements. Paro's attitude toward Yosef may have trickled down and become the prevalent Egyptian attitude toward Bnei Yisrael.

One other hint of the economic dependency of Egypt on Bnei Yisrael appears in Parashat VaYigash: when Yosef's brothers come down to Egypt with their father, Paro welcomes them. Knowing that the Egyptians consider shepherding an abomination, Yosef carefully prepares his brothers to let Paro know that they are shepherds. He suggests to Paro that his family live in the area of Goshen, not only because the area is well-suited for sheep, but also in order to achieve some seclusion from the Egyptian populace, who would object to their shepherding. Paro not only agrees to this arrangement, but also requests that Yosef find out if his brothers are good shepherds, and if so, to have them take care of his sheep as well! The Torah does not tell us whether Bnei Yisrael become the shepherds of the royal flock, but this remains a possibility. (If so, we have a pattern repeated here: Paro is unwilling to let Bnei Yisrael leave in the same way that Lavan was unwilling to let Ya'akov leave. Both Lavan and Paro see their flocks increasing under the care of this family and know that if Ya'akov/Bnei Yisrael leave, their success will come to an end.) Jewish history has provided plenty of examples of forced expulsion of Jews when religious or economic motives come into play. It stands to reason that when Jews are seen as essential to the economy, they may be forced *not* to leave.

AN INFERIOR PEOPLE:

Rashbam (and perhaps Abravanel and other mefarshim) implies that even before the Egyptians officially enslave Bnei Yisrael, they already look at Bnei Yisrael as either cheap labor or a potential source of slave labor. The Egyptians fear that

this source of labor may one day develop feelings of independence and decide to leave Egypt. That the Egyptians look at Bnei Yisrael as potential slaves fits well with the hints we have mentioned that the Egyptians consider Bnei Yisrael a lower class: they refuse to share a table with members of Bnei Yisrael and consider Bnei Yisrael's traditional and current occupation an abomination.

Seforno (1:8) develops this theme further, suggesting that even though Yosef's deeds have certainly been written in the official Egyptian royal history, the new king refuses to *believe* that someone as capable as Yosef could have been part of the nation he sees before him now. Seforno adds (1:10) that part of what convinces Paro that Bnei Yisrael is the enemy are some of the elements which have faithfully fed antisemitism over the millennia: Bnei Yisrael have different customs (e.g., circumcision), a different language, and a different culture and value system. This, Seforno says, is behind the Egyptian refusal to break bread with Bnei Yisrael. Paro is not merely a leader facing a threatening group, he an antisemitic leader of an antisemitic society determined to maintain its source of cheap labor and determined to defend itself against the alien 'inferiors' whose number and strength have begun to worry him.

DEHUMANIZATION: INSECTS AND VERMIN

Several other hints complete the picture: the Torah uses the word "**va-yishretzu**" to describe the great increase in Bnei Yisrael's population. The word "sheretz," which in the Torah refers to swarming, rodent-like, creeping-crawling creatures, is hardly the word we would choose to describe our own growth! In all of the places "sheretz" appears in Tanakh -- 29 places, to my knowledge -- "sheretz" refers to people in only ONE other place (Bereshit 9:7). In every other context, "sheretz" is a swarming or creeping animal; for example, "All swarming creatures [sheretz] which swarm on the ground are disgusting; they are not to be eaten" (VaYikra 11:41).

If you wanted to describe a couple blessed with many children, you would not say, "They breed like rabbits!" or "They swarm like cockroaches!" unless you meant to be disrespectful and dehumanizing. And, shockingly, the frogs which are to swarm over Egypt in just a little while are described using the SAME WORD the Torah uses to describe the growth of Bnei Yisrael (from the perspective of the Egyptians): "The river shall swarm ["sharatz"] with frogs; they will come up into your house, your bedroom, on your bed, in the house of your servant, among your people, in your ovens and in your baking-pans" (Shemot 7:28; see also Tehillim 105:30, which uses the same word to describe the plague). By describing Bnei Yisrael's growth in this way, the Torah is telling us that the Egyptians, frightened by Bnei Yisrael's explosive fertility and already accustomed to looking at Bnei Yisrael as a lower, alien class, feel threatened by their "swarming," rodent-like multiplication.

And it is no accident that just after describing Bnei Yisrael as experiencing such growth, the Torah reports that "the *land* was full of them" -- for a "sheretz" is (usually) a creature of the ground, as the above-quoted pasuk (verse) from VaYikra confirms. The Egyptians see Bnei Yisrael as a population of useful creatures -- but who are growing to epidemic proportions. The "obvious" solution: strictly enforced population control.

No Jew living in (or after) the twentieth century needs to be reminded that there is barely a hair's-breadth between merely *thinking* of a group of people as essentially inferior and actually *treating* the members of such a group as subhumans. If one wanted to convince a group of economically productive people to stay in the area, one would offer them attractive incentives; but if one wanted to get a *monkey* to stay in one's area, one would simply put him in a cage. It is only because the Egyptians think of Bnei Yisrael as sub-Egyptian that they are able to enslave and murder them.

POPULATION CONTROL BEGINS:

The Egyptians begin by imposing a human tax (what is usually referred to in Tanakh as "mas oved") on Bnei Yisrael, demanding that the people perform physical labor -- building -- for them. This alone is not unusually cruel; many kings forced subjugated peoples to provide a set number of laborers for work, and many kings even demanded that their own people provide laborers for work required by the kingdom (including Shlomo HaMelekh! See I Melakhim 5:27). But the work imposed by Egypt is not to serve constructive national needs, but to erase any potential dreams of freedom by making it so difficult for the people to make it from day to day that no one will be able to raise his eyes above the struggle and develop a vision of freedom and independence. More practically, no one will have the energy to continue having children. When this strategy does not work -- "As much as they oppressed them, so did they increase and expand . . ." (1:12) -- the Egyptians turn to harsher measures. True enslavement begins with a vengeance, as the Egyptians force Bnei Yisrael into harsh slave labor.

When this too fails to control Bnei Yisrael's growth (see Ibn Ezra 1:13), Paro turns to more direct methods: he instructs the midwives to kill all baby boys. This brings us back to the theme of leadership: Rashi (1:16) explains that Paro cares about killing only the boys because his astrologers have told him that a leader is to be born to Bnei Yisrael who will eventually lead them to salvation. Since Paro assumes that such a leader can only be a man, he must kill all of the boys. But it doesn't take astrologers to know that a nation which suffers from a lack of leadership might become much more powerful if a leader appears! Paro knows that in order to control Bnei Yisrael, he must 1) reduce their population and 2) prevent them from developing leadership. As we said above, it is largely because of a lack of strong leadership that Paro is able to enslave and kill as he pleases. Paro is aware of this and knows that in order to maintain his latitude, he must extinguish any flickerings of leadership and independence which appear.

JUST LIKE ANIMALS:

Then a strange event takes place: Paro finds out that the midwives have not been carrying out his orders to kill all baby boys. He summons them and demands an explanation. The midwives respond with what seems a flimsy excuse:

SHEMOT 1:19 --

The midwives said to Paro, "The women of Bnei Yisrael ["lvriyyot"] are not like Egyptian women -- they are "HAYYOT." Before the midwife can get to them, they have already given birth!"

The mefarshim debate the meaning of the word "hayyot." Hazal (Sota 11a), Rashi, and Abravanel take it quite literally and explain that the midwives mean that the women of Bnei Yisrael are like animals, which give birth without the aid of midwives. Some mefarshim suggest that "hayyot" means "energetic" or "quick"; others suggest that it means "midwives" (as it does in Hullin 4:3) -- the women who give birth are skilled as midwives themselves, so they do not summon the official midwives for help. Unless we accept that "hayyot" means midwives, which seems unlikely since this word is not usually used to mean "midwives" in Tanakh, how could the midwives hope to satisfy Paro with the explanation that the women of Bnei Yisrael are either "animals" (Hazal) or "quick at giving birth"? Why would Paro believe that these women are different than other women?

Rabbi Dan Jacobson (a friend of mine) suggested that Paro's willingness to accept this explanation is one more manifestation of the Egyptian view of Bnei Yisrael as inherently inferior. Paro is not surprised to hear that the women of Bnei Yisrael are "hayyot," "animals," and that they therefore give birth without the aid of midwives; this merely confirms his deeply held beliefs about Bnei Yisrael's inferiority. These people, "swarmers" who "fill the land," not only reproduce in the numbers that the lower animals do, they even give birth as lower animals do. They are simply uncivilized, and do not require trained medical assistance, as the more refined and complex Egyptian women do.

If "hayyot" means "energetic" or "quick" (as some mefarshim suggest), Paro is again not surprised to hear that there is a biological difference between the women of his nation and those of Bnei Yisrael. "Scientists" of Nazi Germany expended much effort and research "discovering" ways in which the Jew was biologically (not just culturally or psychologically) different than the Aryan. This was important because part of dehumanizing the Jew was "proving" that he was of a different race than the Aryan. Once this had been "proven," it could be easily "demonstrated" that the Aryan was superior in every way and that the Jew was not truly human.

A NATION OF KILLERS:

Until now, only the midwives had been instructed to carry out Paro's "population control" scheme. Paro's final step, once he sees that they cannot help him, is to bring his entire nation into the effort to put Bnei Yisrael in their place:

SHEMOT 1:22 --

Paro commanded his entire people, saying: "Any boy who is born -- throw him into the river! Any girl -- let her live."

Lest we imagine that only Paro and a small group of bloodthirsty maniacs are responsible for murdering the babies of Bnei Yisrael, the Torah makes it clear that the entire nation is not only complicit, but actively involved in the murders. I hate to belabor the point -- especially a point this painful and horrifying -- but anyone who has trouble imagining how "normal" people could drown newborn, helpless babies in the Nile need only look back fifty years and witness how "normal," highly cultured Germans murdered Jews of all ages in terrifyingly horrible ways with customary German efficiency.

"RIGHTEOUS GENTILES":

One other fascinating parallel to the Holocaust is worth mentioning at this point: the Holocaust produced some heroes, "righteous gentiles" who protested against the madness by saving Jews when they could, often at enormous personal risk. Abravanel claims that the midwives discussed above were indeed "righteous gentiles" -- that in fact, they were not midwives from among Bnei Yisrael, but Egyptian midwives who had been assigned to Bnei Yisrael (Abravanel interprets "me-yaldot ha-ivriyyot" to mean "the midwives *of* Bnei Yisrael," not "the Israelite midwives"; he supports this by asserting that Paro would never have trusted members of Bnei Yisrael to kill babies of their own nation) and who flouted Paro's orders to kill the baby boys because, as the Torah says, "they feared Hashem."

One other "righteous gentile" also appears in our parasha: Paro's daughter, who finds Moshe floating in a box in the Nile, realizes he is a child of Bnei Yisrael, and nevertheless adopts him. This brings us to the next major unit of Parashat Shemot: the appearance of Moshe Rabbeinu.

A LEADER APPEARS:

Parashat Shemot begins by stressing the lack of strong leadership which plagues (no pun intended) Bnei Yisrael. But the second half of the parasha fills the vacuum with the birth, initiation, and first acts of leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu. We will focus on Moshe Rabbeinu in next week's shiur.

Shabbat Shalom