

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) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Hersh ben Perel Chana, cousin of very close friends of ours, has been confirmed as one of approximately 240 initial hostages to Hamas in Gaza. The Wall St. Journal featured Hersh and his family in a front page article on October 16. Chabad, OU, and many synagogues recommend psalms (Tehillim) to recite daily for the safety of our people. May our people in Israel wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully – with the help of Hashem.

Vaera is when Hashem starts teaching Paro, the Egyptians, B'Nai Yisrael, and the rest of the world who "Hashem" is. Beth Lesch from AlephBeta.org explains what is new in this message. Previously, God had related to our ancestors in his aspect of Kel Shakkai, as a shepherd, as Yaakov describes (Bereishis 48:15). A shepherd walks behind his sheep and nudges them from the back to direct them to move. Looking at the sheep from the front, one would not notice that the shepherd is directing the flock. Now God starts relating to the world in His aspect as Hashem, the Lord who controls the world in obvious ways.

In Vaera, the Torah relates the first seven of the ten plagues. As Rabbi Label Lam and others remind us, the plagues repay the people of Egypt for ways that they had oppressed our people. For example, Hashem starts by turning the Nile River and water of the Egyptians into blood for week to repay them for drowning and killing Jewish babies in water. The plague of blood also links back to God's message to Kayim that his brother's "bloods" cry out to Him. God says "bloods" rather than "blood," because the blood of Hevel and all his descendants who would never be born are crying out to God.

Paro and the Egyptians oppress the Jews and reduce them to nameless slaves. The Egyptians in turn become nameless masters. The Torah shows this dehumanization of the generations after the death of Joseph and his brothers until the year of the plagues by not mentioning the names of any of the Jews or Egyptians (except the midwives) in the first parasha in Sefer Shemot. Rabbi Angel makes this point – and Rav Kook adds to it by quoting from Ezekiel 16:7, where the prophet calls the Jews "naked and bare." Oppressed slaves lose their self respect, decency, and integrity. Rav Kook and Rabbi Angel could have been writing about the situation for our hostages locked away in tunnels under Gaza for the past three months. The Red Cross refuses to accept medications for hostages who have long term illnesses and need medications to survive. Hamas gives the hostages minimal portions of food barely sufficient to keep them alive. The monsters use our hostages as sex toys and punching bags. The beginning chapters of Sefer Shemot describe the situation for our hostages in Gaza as accurately as they describe the situation for our ancestors three thousand years ago in Egypt.

Rabbi Angel's archived Devar Torah outlines how modern journalists would have reported the story of Israel in Egypt during the period of the plagues. The media would have reported Hashem's brutal treatment of the Egyptians – just as

much of the world is now describing Israel's response to the brutal attacks and inhumane treatment of our hostages. We need not imagine reports of the Exodus – we can see the media response and the rallies of our enemies all over the world today. Meanwhile, virtually every "major university" and many public schools teach the brutality of Israel and the cruel situation of the weak Palestinians because of the crimes of the wicked Jews. Is no one amazed that fewer than 10 million Israelis have enslaved and oppressed the hundred million plus Arabs in 99 percent of the land in the Middle East? How much of the poor condition of the people of Gaza results from none of the Arab countries permitting any of these people to settle in their countries in the period since 1948?

We always read the opening chapters of Sefer Shemot in January, as we approach International Holocaust Remembrance Day (January 27), the anniversary of the day on which the Red Army liberated the Auschwitz Death Camp in 1945. The Nazis killed two thirds of the Jews in Europe and one third of all the Jews alive at the time. Hamas follows the pattern of Hitler and Paro. They focus more on killing Jews than on improving their land or protecting their people. Indeed, Hamas uses its people as human shields and hides weapons, terrorists, and leaders in and under hospitals, schools, old age homes, and other places where any attempt to defeat Hamas will end up killing as many innocent civilians as possible.

As we study the parsha to prepare for Shabbat, recognize that we are reading about Paro, Amalek, the Assyrians, Babylon, Rome, the Crusaders, the Nazis, and Hamas with every sentence. The Torah is universal. History repeats. We Jews need Israel for our safety – and the world needs Israel if we are ever to move closer to God's vision of a nation chosen to lead the rest of the world to a higher moral level. My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, always taught us to recognize the patterns in history and look for Hashem's hints that He is still around and protecting B'Nai Yisrael. May we all remember this lesson and teach it to our children and grandchildren.

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 Shlema for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Eliezer Tzvi ben Etta (Givati infantry brigade, lead IDF force in Gaza); Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Milda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Rena bat Ilisa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Vaera: A Global Catastrophe

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5765

Why did HASHEM bring certain types of plagues upon the Egyptians? Why, for example, fill a river with blood? The Midrash Hagadol answers, *“Because they threw the children of Israel into the water, as it says, ‘All new born males you should toss them into the river.’ And therefore they were judged with the water of the river.”* Alternately, Lekach Tov says, *“Because they spilled the blood of Israel like water, their river was turned into blood and their water became undrinkable.* (Lekach Tov)

The Midrash catalogues and explains the context for the “Ten Plagues” with the aim to point out that each hit was not just a punishment but a message encoded in symbolic language to communicate to those who would bother to look for meaning. One of the many important keys that “open up” not just many passages in the Torah but our very lives is the “measure for measure” principle. Sooner or later whatever we do comes back to help or haunt.

Again, why was the river of Egypt choked with blood? Had they spilled that much Jewish blood? Emphatically, yes! When Cain killed his brother Abel early on in human history, G-d approached him and asked, *“What did you do? The voice of the bloods of your brother cry out to Me from the earth.”* Why does The Almighty refer to the “bloods” and not simply “the blood” as we would normally speak? Rashi succinctly states, *“His blood and the blood of his offspring!”* This is astounding!

When Cain killed his brother he also killed all his future generations as well. The full scope of the act is implied in the word “bloods.” Let us calculate with the assumption that Abel would have been just as prolific in having children as brother Seth would later be. The whole world’s population present and past emanates from him almost exclusively. That means that he killed billions and billions of people adding up over the course of generations. The ever widening angle of emptiness created by that single act of indiscretion is too frightening to face.

When the Egyptians awoke one morning to find rivers of blood flowing through their country they were being made to recognize the full impact of their crime against the Children of Israel. How many innocent ones they snuffed out in their infancy, killing not only them but future generations too? No crime of that magnitude can remain an isolated incident. They may have justified it albeit perversely and myopically minimized its importance but when all that blood rushed in their midst they were shown with a portion of the full measure of the “bloods” they had recklessly spilt. In that sense each plague was not merely punitive but poignant, as well.

The study of “measure for measure” searches for consequences and matching causes. Surely only a great sage or a prophet can really tell which explosion and the shedding of which “bloods”, is ultimately responsible for a growing wave of destruction that carries beyond its intended boundaries and in the shadow of whose good deeds we gained today. In Pharaoh’s mind, and Cain’s too, they merely sought to solve some local -- immediate problem but in the end they invited a global catastrophe.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5765-vaera/>

Va’era – The Rosh Yeshiva Responds – Praying with a Cross in the Room

by Rabbi Dov Linzer

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

“As soon as I am gone out of the city, I will spread abroad my hands unto the Lord.” (Shemot 9:29).

QUESTION-Washington, D.C.

A person is a patient at Holy Cross Hospital and there is a crucifix on the wall of each room. Can she make brakhot and daven there?

ANSWER

The halakhic discussion of this topic begins with the verse (Shemot 9:29) in which Moshe tells Pharaoh during the plague of hail that he will pray to God as soon as he leaves the city. The midrash (Shemot Rabbah 12:5) explains that:

From this verse we see that Moshe did not wish to pray in Egypt (i.e., in the city), because it was filthy with gilulim vi'shikutzim.

The term gilulim, which literally means dung, is a standard Rabbinic dysphemism (a disparaging term chosen instead of a neutral one) for idols. The word sheketz, a detestable creature, functions similarly.

This midrash, then, could be seen as a basis for forbidding a person to pray in the presence of the religious symbols and objects of worship of other faiths, which are seen as repugnant. Whether that applies as a matter of halakha (rather than Moshe just “not wishing” to pray there) is a different question. We must also ask whether this statement, which sees idols as something theologically repulsive (although religious pluralists would contest this point), would apply to mere religious symbols of other faiths.

Rema (OH 94:9), basing himself on the ruling of Rabbi Israel Isserlen (Austria, 1390-1460) in Trumat HaDeshen (no. 6) who cites the above midrash, rules that a Jew who is traveling should pray on the roadside, although he will not be able to have the ideal degree of focus on his prayers, rather than pray at the inn he is heading to if it is filled with religious statues and paintings.

Two points emerge from this: (1) there is no halakhic restriction against praying in such a room; and (2) Christian religious statues and paintings are seen as problematic when it comes to the ideal place for prayer.

As far as a cross is concerned, we should note that Rema rules that a cross in most cases is only a religious symbol and not an object of worship (SA YD 141:1). Nevertheless, it would seem that the ideal place for prayer should be free of such objects as well. While we do not need to — indeed, should not — see the religious objects of another faith as “detestable,” we should still strive to ensure that our prayer spaces are neutral or Jewish ones.

Based on all this, many poskim rule that when a person is a patient in a hospital where there is a cross in the room, and it is not reasonable to ask that it be removed, then the patient can nevertheless pray, and certainly recite brakhot, in the room (see, for example, Shut Lev Avraham, 30). One should be particularly careful not to pray in the direction of a cross so as not to be seen as praying to the cross, even if this requires praying not towards Jerusalem (MB 94:30, based on SA OH 113:8 and YD 150:3). All that being said, if and when possible, the cross should be removed or covered.

Finally, it is important to note that these sources understand Christianity to be avoda zara, at least for Jews. This is the traditional approach although there are some who contest this designation, a topic that goes beyond our current discussion.

* Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, New York.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2024/01/ryrvaera/>

Equal and Opposite: Leadership and Partnership

By Rabbi Haggai Resnikoff *

Equal partnership, says the Gemara, is a recipe for disaster. When all the people in a group bear equal responsibility and hold equal power, nothing is accomplished: a pot owned in partnership never gets cold but never gets hot (Baba Batra 24b). Why? Because although either partner may throw a stick on the fire to keep it alight, neither will expend the energy to make the pot boil. Partnership alone cannot complete a project, the Gemara insists. For that, leadership is necessary.

In light of this, it is perplexing to find a Rabbinic statement that Aaron and Moses were equal partners. The Torah says (Shemot 6:26):

"That is [the] Aharon and Moshe to whom God said: Bring the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt in their masses."

The last Tosefta in Masechet Keritut (4:7) comments:

"In every place, Moshe preceded Aharon. [However] in one place, it is written: "That is [the] Aharon and Moshe" which teaches that they are considered equal."

How can that be? In all of Jewish history, Moshe stands alone, our greatest prophet, our greatest leader. There is no question that Aharon, Moshe's older brother, was great, but equal to Moshe? It's not possible!

Rabbi David Pardo (18th c. Sarajevo), in his commentary to the Tosefta, Chasdei David, brings a kabbalistic explanation:

All of the lower sefirot are imbued with divine light that causes them to crack. When the light escapes from one sefirah, it crisscrosses the lights from the other sefirot. Therefore the light that comes from the right side ends up on the left and vice versa.

Moshe, represents gevura (strength) and Aharon represents chesed (kindness). The Gemara (Sanhedrin 6b) says:

Moshe would say: Let the judgment pierce the mountain. But Aharon was a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace, and he would make peace between one person and another.

This is reflected in the simple narrative (peshat) as well. Moshe strikes down the Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew slave and he breaks the Tablets when he sees the Jews worshiping the Golden Calf. Aharon, on the other hand, is forgiving to a fault. He constructs the Golden Calf to soothe the anxious nation, and he is silent when his two sons are struck down for overzealous worship.

The Chasdei David explains that even though Moshe is gevurah, he projects light that lands on chesed. Similarly, although Aharon represents chesed, he projects light that lands on gevurah (strength), and there is a spot where both of their lights meet in the middle. Although both Aharon and Moshe have their own areas of specialization, the strengths of each are also present in the other.

The genius of the Chasdei David is that even in the simple narrative (peshat), Moshe has moments of softness. His healing prayer for his sister, Miriam (Bemidbar 12:13), *"Please God, please heal her,"* is a masterpiece of compassion. On the flip side, Aharon enacts many of the plagues of Egypt. He too has a hard side, a capacity for violence when justified.

How does this address the question of the pot that will not boil? Because of their specializations, neither Moshe nor Aharon is likely to rely on the other to do their part of the job. However, each still retains the strengths of the other.

Each of us is gifted with particular strengths. There is a temptation to identify with these strengths as though they are all we have to offer. 'I'm a math person,' 'I'm a spiritual person,' 'I'm an artist,' 'I'm a rationalist.' This identification can close us off to other gifts we may have. Moshe and Aharon both specialized and embraced their other strengths. I bless all of us that we succeed in strengthening our other gifts and not solely identifying with our specializations. We must seek out the places where the lights meet: where strength is tempered with kindness and rigor is tempered by faith. Only by embracing our multifaceted gifts can we begin to approach the greatness of our biblical role models.

* Dean and Rebbe, Yeshivat Chovevi Torah. Semikha YCT 2014. Hebrew texts omitted because of difficulties keeping Hebrew consistent across word processing platforms. For the Hebrew, go to the source below.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2024/01/vaera5784/>

Naming Names: Thoughts for Parashat Vaera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Parasha opens with God's words to Moshe: God hears the cries of the Israelites and will redeem them. God instructs Moshe and Aharon to go to Pharaoh and demand that the Israelites leave Egypt. After this dramatic opening, the Parasha abruptly gives a listing of the names of "heads of the fathers' houses." We learn the names of the family members of Reuben, Shimon and Levi, with special elaboration of the family line of Moshe and Aharon. After this interruption, the narrative continues with God's instructions to Moses to appear before Pharaoh.

Commentators suggest that this break in the flow of the story was to provide the family background for Moses and Aaron. But this hardly explains why so many names of family members of Reuben, Shimon and Levi are mentioned.

Perhaps the extensive listing of names at this juncture is conveying something beyond the lineage of Moses and Aaron. It is a striking contrast to the narrative in last week's Torah portion.

In Parashat Shemot, we read that Pharaoh feared the growing numbers of Israelites in Egypt. He decided to enslave them and to have their male children murdered. Rabbi Hayyim Angel has pointed out that the Torah conspicuously avoids mentioning the names of any Israelites or Egyptians – except for Shifra and Puah – from the time Yosef died until the birth of Moshe. (Pharaoh is a title, not a personal name.) People – both Egyptians and Israelites – had become nameless "things" – oppressors and oppressed, masters and slaves. When humans are reduced to "things," then both the oppressor and oppressed are dehumanized; they internalize false ideas about who they are and about their true worth as human beings.

In the generations between Yosef and Moshe, the Israelites had become a nameless mass of anonymous slaves. The condition of servitude erodes the self-respect of the victims so that they tend to lose their own identities. Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, who had been a Jewish prisoner in a German concentration camp, wrote that the prisoners feared not only for their physical lives; they feared that they would come to see themselves as the Nazis saw them – as animals. *"The main problem is to remain alive and unchanged...the more absolute the tyranny, the more debilitated the subject."*

After the protracted period of slavery, the Israelites needed to be reminded: we are human beings, we have names, we have personalities, we are not beasts of burden. Moshe's initial challenge was to get the Israelites to recognize their own humanity.

So this week's Torah portion begins the process by recounting names and family relationships. Before Moshe and Aharon confront Pharaoh, they need to instill dignity and self-respect in the Israelite slaves. The listing of names is not an interruption in the narrative; it provides the groundwork for the liberation process.

Later in the Torah when the freed Israelites conduct a census, they are counted by “*their families, by the houses of their fathers, by the number of names...*” (Bemidbar 1:2). They had regained their names, their selfhood, their self-respect. They were no longer anonymous slaves.

What was true for the Israelites of old continues to be true today. People should not be nameless blurs but should be individualized human beings with their own names and identities. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik stated this very well:

“To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that: it is an act of identifying him existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him. The halakha equated the act of publicly embarrassing a person with murder” (The Community, p. 16).

Freedom is not static but is a process. The first step and ongoing challenge is to remember and insist: we have names, families, and historical context.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Please share this Shabbat column with your family and friends, and please visit our website jewishideas.org for many articles that foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its winter fund raising period. Thank you.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3193>

War Crimes! --Thoughts for Parashat Vaera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Imagine how modern media might report charges of war crimes in the biblical story of Egypt and the Israelites. Here is how Pharaoh's position might be presented.

PHARAOH: On behalf of the people of Egypt, we lodge the charge of heinous war crimes against the Israelite nation. Their leader, Moses, ruthlessly murdered one of our best soldiers who was merely prodding his workers to labor more efficiently. Moses and his brother Aaron brought a host of terrible plagues upon Egypt, poisoning our water, afflicting our cattle, murdering our first-borns. Their plagues spared no one, causing hardship and death to innocent civilians. The Israelites took Egyptian property and fled our hospitable land; they caused many of our bravest soldiers to drown in the Red Sea while they stole away in safety.

The Israelites have shown themselves to be criminals — murderers and thieves. They have betrayed the trust and honor of the Egyptian people and of all humanity by their unconscionable deeds of malice and violence. We demand justice!

Here is the response of Moses, which the media would most likely not report.

MOSES: The Egyptians enslaved the Israelite people for centuries. They tortured and brutalized us. They ordered that our male babies be cast into the river to die. They taught their own children to hate, disparage and commit violence against us. It must be remembered that the Israelites had done no harm to Egypt to warrant such treatment, but rather had been

of great help to Egypt. Our ancestor Joseph saved Egypt from famine. Yet, in spite of our peacefulness and goodwill, the Pharaohs enslaved our people and treated us like animals of burden.

Yes, I murdered an Egyptian soldier. But it was because that soldier was mercilessly beating a downtrodden Israelite slave! Any moral person would have done the same, or at least would sympathize with the one who sought to protect an unfortunate slave from his oppressor.

Yes, the Almighty brought plagues on Egypt; but Pharaoh could have stopped these plagues in an instant, as we told him so often. All he had to do was to free the innocent Israelites from servitude. The people of Israel are human beings, after all; we too have rights; we too have dignity. But Pharaoh's hard heart would not yield, would not admit a drop of sympathy for Israel, would not entertain the possibility that the Israelites had a rightful claim to freedom.

Pharaoh neglected to say that it was the Egyptians themselves who freely gave Israel gold and silver, in recognition of their centuries of unpaid slavery. Pharaoh neglected to say that even as the people of Israel were finally leaving their bondage in Egypt, Pharaoh ordered his troops to go after them and destroy them. By miracle, the Israelites were saved and Pharaoh's men were drowned. But that was a miracle of God! Pharaoh wanted to murder each and every Israelite and would have done so if given the opportunity.

War crimes?? Yes, there are many war crimes in this story — and all of them are crimes of Egypt against the people of Israel! Israel's "crimes" consisted of wanting to be free, wanting to resist the ongoing brutal oppression and dehumanization inflicted on them by the Egyptians. When Egypt enslaves and tortures and murders us — this is nothing? But if we rise in our own defense, this is a war crime?

We bring our case not to the media and not to human courts: we bring our case to Almighty God, the true Judge.

And here are some news headlines that might appear in some media:

ISRAELITES CHARGED WITH WAR CRIMES

EGYPTIAN CIVILIANS SUFFER AS ISRAELITES DANCE AT THE RED SEA

PHARAOH MAKES HIS CASE AGAINST MOSES

And the accompanying photos will depict Egyptians mourning the deaths of their first-borns. There will be no photos of Israelites suffering in slavery or of Israelite babies tossed into the Nile to die.

Context? Who cares about context? The public needs to be fed half-truths and misleading images. Justice? Who cares about justice? What's important is being "politically correct," slanting the news to increase our circulation and our profits. Truth? We have our own version of truth.

To the media, politicos and anti-Israelites of the world, we quote the imagined words of Moses: "*We bring our case not to the media and not to human courts: we bring our case to Almighty God, the true Judge.*"

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

<https://www.jewishideas.org/war-crimes-thoughts-parashat-vaera>

Va'eira: Mesiras Nefesh -- Total Dedication

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

The frogs of this week's Parsha were really dedicated. When Moshe announced the coming of the second Makah (plague), he declared that the frogs would go everywhere including the hot ovens. Indeed, the frogs came and infested Mitzrayim. Although there was no clear directive as to which frogs should jump into the hot ovens, some frogs took it upon themselves to fulfill Moshe's words. These frogs chose to be the ones who jumped into the hot ovens to sanctify Hashem's name and impose a total infestation. Miraculously, these frogs survived.

The Medrash (Shir Hashirim 7 and Tehillim 28) tells us that centuries later, some great Jews gained inspiration from the frogs. At the time that the first Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, Nevuchadnetzar erected an icon in his honor and demanded that representatives of each nation bow to it. Anyone who did not bow would be thrown into a fiery furnace. Tosfos (Pesachim 53) explains that bowing to this icon was not true idol worship. Yet it was so akin to idol worship that it was dishonorable. Three great Jews, Chananya, Mishoel and Azarya, decided that they would represent the Jewish nation as the people designated not to bow, and they would refuse to bow. In this way, they would voluntarily sanctify Hashem's name.

These three dedicated Jews reached out to consult the Novi Yechezkel and inquired if they would miraculously be saved as the frogs were. Yechezkel asked Hashem, and Hashem said, "*I will not save them.*" In other words, if they choose to voluntarily give up their lives to sanctify Hashem's name, that is acceptable. But there will be no miracle for them.

Yechezkel related Hashem's response to Chananya, Mishoel and Azarya. They replied, "*We will proceed with the plan anyway.*" (As the commentaries explain, there are cases where one is not obligated to give up one's life, but it is not forbidden to do so.)

The Medrash relates that once Yechezkel left Chananya, Mishoel and Azarya, Hashem appeared to him and said incredulously, "*Do you really think I will not make a miracle for them? I certainly will make a miracle!*"

Indeed, as described in Daniel 3, Chananya, Mishoel and Azarya were thrown into a fiery furnace as a punishment for not bowing down to the icon of Nevuchadnetzar — because they chose to sanctify Hashem's name — and they were not hurt.

We wonder, if Hashem intended to save these great Jews, and even declares this to Yechezkel incredulously, why was it so important that they not know that they would be saved?

My Rebbe, Rabbi Wein, was once approached by a car salesman who did not yet keep Shabbos, with an important question. "*Saturday is my biggest day of business. If you promise me, dear Rabbi, that if I become Sabbath observant that I will not lose business, then I will become Shomer Shabbos.*" Rabbi Wein assured him that our tradition is that Shabbos brings blessing. But he would not state the promise and guarantee that the man demanded.

Eventually, the man did find a Rabbi who provided the stated promise and guarantee, and he became a Shabbos observer. But, as Rabbi Wein described it, "*From that point on, he always struggled to make a livelihood.*" Rebbe added, "*I often thought that if he had become Shomer Shabbos without the promise he would have become wealthy, as the blessings of Shabbos are great.*" But when you do the Mitzva only with guarantees it doesn't create the same love and energetic blessing in the world.

This is similar to what happened to Horon, Avraham's brother. When Nimrod threatened Avraham with the fiery furnace if he didn't renounce his belief in Hashem, Horon pushed off his own decision. He said, "*If Avraham is saved, I will join him in his belief.*" Avraham was saved, so Horon declared his allegiance to Hashem. But when Horon was thrown into the furnace no miracle occurred for him.

The lesson is that for a Mitzvah to be its best, it needs to be done with total devotion. This is why Chananya, Mishoel and Azarya needed to be told that they would not have a miracle. Their decision to sanctify Hashem's name even without a miracle is what created the energy for a miracle. This is what creates the energy of Shabbos as well. We observe because we are devoted to Hashem, grateful for creation and all that Shabbos represents. The result is blessings beyond all expectation. But if we were to do the Mitzva for the blessings, a bit of the devotion and love would be missing.

Interestingly, Tzedaka seems to be the one exception to this. Hashem is so interested that people provide for His interests)provide for the poor and support Torah(that He says)Taanis 9(, *"You can test Me. If you give Tzedaka generously I will shower you with wealth."*

The frogs of Mitzrayim are long gone. But their lesson of Mesiras Nefesh without guarantees lives on through the legacy of Chananya, Mishoel and Azarya who took a lesson from them. They estimated that they would be saved as the frogs who jumped into the furnace were saved. They were right; but only if they would do it without the guarantee.

Miracles — both open and hidden — do happen. Particularly when we reach a level of devotion with no strings attached.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

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

Parshas Va'eira – Patience Is Wisdom

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2021

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

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

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

The Medrash is teaching us that Pharaoh was a fool to express his opinion so clearly and extensively. Yet, when we consider the scene in Pharaoh's throne room, this Medrash requires some further thought. Moshe and Aharon walked into Pharaoh's throne room claiming to speak in the name of the Omnipotent, G-d of the Jews. Pharaoh asked for a sign of the power of their G-d, and even stated that he had never heard of an Omnipotent G-d. Moshe and Aharon then proceed to provide a sign by turning a staff into a snake. As Pharaoh goes on to demonstrate by having his entire household replicate the same trick, the sign that Moshe and Aharon used was meaningless in Pharaoh's eyes. One can only imagine the scorn Pharaoh must have felt when they used this as a sign to prove G-d. His scorn must have quickly

become rage at the audacity of trying to fool him with such a simple ploy, that anyone in his household could replicate. From this perspective, one has to wonder, why was it foolish for Pharaoh to display his rage in full force and display his mockery openly? He had asked for a sign and received an insult in return.

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

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

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

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

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

By Rabbi Herzl Hefter * © 5783

And God spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty)El Shaddai(, but by My name LORD)YHVH(I was not known to them.)Exodus 6:2-3(

"My name is Alice, but — "

"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. "What does it mean?"

"Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

R. Simcha Bunim’s reading of God’s name provides the necessary space for tolerance of others and their choices. God

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

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

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

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

Vaera

By R. Haim Ovadia

]I did not receive a new Dvar Torah from Rabbi Ovadia. Watch this space for his insights in coming weeks.[

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

A "Jewish UnJewish" Happy New Year!

By Rabbi Moshe Rube * © 2022

]Rabbi Rube and the Aukland Hebrew Congregation are closed for three weeks for summer vacation. During this period, I am reprinting Devrlei Torah from Rabbi Rube's archives.[

Writing emails like these is like hosting a meal. It's fun to do on its own, but it's even more interesting to hear people's reactions to what you've managed to cook up.

After I wrote about China last week, I received a message from one of you offering an added insight beyond the historical reasons for why Jews eat Chinese over Christmas. We eat it because it's silly. And what's life without a little bit of silliness? What's life without a little abandonment of the "Bah Humbug" attitude? What's life without a little sweet and sour sauce?

As this idea percolated, I had another conversation this week with a friend about the topic of what makes an idea specifically "Jewish" as opposed to "not Jewish." Must it be from a Jewish source? Must it be only from familiar Jewish sources? Must we be so obsessive about the ideological purity of an idea?

Sometimes we can take this obsession about what's Jewish and conflate it with what has value. Especially scholars, teachers and rabbis. Sometimes we can get trapped in thinking that an idea or practice must have an explicit Jewish source in order to have value. If it can't be justified through Judaism, then it doesn't have value to a Jew right?

Not according to Maimonides who encouraged us to accept the truth from wherever it comes. Not according to our Sages who encouraged us to learn from the wisdom of the nations. Not according to those who remind us that it's perfectly okay and human to be a little silly.

So what about New Year's Day? A harmless secular holiday where we celebrate the newness of the solar year and restart the Gregorian calendar. The calendar that the whole world including us uses to some degree or another.

I could talk about the Jewishness of this holiday and how we can justify it within Judaism. I could talk about how Jews use the solar calendar to balance our lunar calendar so Pesach doesn't float through the seasons like it does for Muslims with Ramadan. I could talk about how this time allows us to reflect on the place for Jews within natural law even though our existence is nothing short of miraculous.)See my New Year's email for 2021.(

But this year, let's try a different tack. Suppose all we had was a fun little holiday where we join with our fellow human beings and celebrate the newness and hope of the upcoming 2022. Maybe the date is arbitrary. Maybe there is no Talmudic source justifying our acknowledgment of New Year's. But it's fun. It does not go against any Torah precept, and it has personal meaning for many of us. Like eating Chinese on Christmas.

The Talmud says that the sage Rava would start his classes with "words of laughter" giving his listeners the chance to smile and thus open themselves to what was to come. Maybe in the long and winding road of Jewish history, we have found a way to open the new solar year by giving ourselves the chance to have a little non-Talmudically based fun whether through Chinese food, watching the ball drop, or having some New Year's Eve nachos. Maybe through this our hearts will be free to open to whatever comes in 2022. Maybe it will be easier to take a cup of kindness yet for auld lang syne.

So whether it's "Jewish" or not, may you have a happy and joyous 2022!

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Moshe Rube

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

Rav Kook Torah

Va'eira: Priceless Jewels on Tattered Clothes

Every year at the Passover seder, we read Ezekiel's allegorical description of the Israelites in Egypt:

"You grew big and tall. You came with great adornments and were beautiful of form, with flowing hair. But you were naked and bare.")Ezekiel 16:7(

The prophet describes the Israelites as being large and numerous, yet, at the same time, impoverished and barren. Physically, Jacob's family of seventy souls had developed into a large nation. Despite Egyptian persecution and oppression, they had become numerous. Morally and spiritually, however, they were "naked and bare."

What about the "great adornments" that the verse mentions? What were these "jewels" of Israel?

Two Special Jewels

These “jewels” symbolize two special traits of the Jewish people. The first trait is a natural propensity for spirituality, an inner desire never to be separated from God and holiness.

The second “jewel” is an even greater gift, beyond the natural realm. It is the unique communal spirit of Israel that aspires to a lofty national destiny. Even in their dispirited state as downtrodden slaves in Egypt, their inner drive for national purpose burned like a glowing coal. It smoldered in the heart of each individual, even if many did not understand its true nature.

For the Hebrew slaves, however, these special qualities were like priceless diamonds pinned on the threadbare rags of an unkempt beggar. The people lacked the basic traits of decency and integrity. They were missing those ethical qualities that are close to human nature, like clothes that are worn next to the body.

Without a fundamental level of morality and proper conduct, their unique yearnings for spiritual greatness had the sardonic effect of extravagant jewelry pinned to tattered clothes. *“You came with great adornments... but you were naked and bare.”*

)*Silver from the Land of Israel*. Adapted from *Olat Re’iyah* vol. II, p. 276.(

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/VAERE60.htm>

Freedom & Truth (Vaera 5772, 5777)

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

Why did Moses tell Pharaoh, if not a lie, then less than the full truth? Here is the conversation between him and Pharaoh after the fourth plague, arov, “swarms of insects”)some say “wild animals”(:

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land.” But Moses said, “That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us? We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, as He commands us.” Ex. 8:21-23

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

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

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

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or He may strike us with plagues or with the sword.” Ex. 5:1-3

God even specifies this before the mission has begun, saying to Moses at the burning bush:

"You and the elders of Israel will then go to the king of Egypt. You must tell him, 'The Lord, God of the Hebrews, revealed Himself to us. Now we request that you allow us to take a three day journey into the desert, to sacrifice to the Lord our God'")3:18.

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

The king of Egypt received news that the people were escaping. Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds regarding the people, and said, "What have we done? How could we have released Israel from doing our work?" Ex. 14:5

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

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

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

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

"How could you do this? You went behind my back and led my daughters away like prisoners of war! Why did you have to leave so secretly? You went behind my back and told me nothing!" 31:26-27

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place?

One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken My name in vain nor sworn deceitfully” Ps. 24:3-4

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

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

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/freedom-truth/>]Note footnotes have not been presrvd for this Dvar Torah[

The Real Reason for the Ten Plagues

By Yossi Ives* © Chabad 2024

From a young age, we are taught about the 10 plagues that G d visited upon the Egyptians: Pharaoh stubbornly refused Moses’ demands to “*Let my people go*,”¹ so G d struck Egypt with 10 mighty blows to force him to relent. Only after the repeated crippling attacks did Pharaoh finally have no choice but to let the Israelites go free.

Indeed, this narrative seems justified based on the way the Torah portrays the interactions between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses demanded that Pharaoh cede to the will of the Almighty, but Pharaoh refused.

When Moses insisted that he let the Israelites go free, Pharaoh responded defiantly: “*Who is the L rd , that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the L rd , nor will I let Israel go.*”² In response, G d warned: “*The Egyptians will know that I am the L rd when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.*”

So the plagues were sent to humble Pharaoh and force him to cooperate.

But Why So Many Plagues?

As neat as the storyline is, there is a major problem. If the goal was to liberate the Israelites, there were many much simpler ways to achieve that. G d could have unleashed a single plague so unbearable and so prolonged that Pharaoh would have been compelled to capitulate. Alternatively, G d could have simply instructed Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and paralyzed the Egyptians to prevent them from doing anything to stop them.

Even simpler still, G d could have influenced Pharaoh's mind so that he would be inclined to allow the Israelites to leave. After all, we read repeatedly that "*G d hardened Pharaoh's heart*" so that he would be resistant to Moses' demands. If G d had the power to harden Pharaoh's heart, surely he also had the power to soften it. As we know, "*The hearts and minds of kings are in the hand of the Lord.*"³

So, why 10 plagues?

The great classical commentators broadly take one of two central approaches.

Punishment

One view is that the purpose of the plagues was to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians for their evil acts. For generations, they had exploited and mistreated the Israelites, and it would hardly be acceptable if they were not made to pay for their crimes. Indeed, G d hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would continue to receive his full measure of punishment.

This is the view of Maimonides, who explains how it was justified for G d to punish Pharaoh if He was the one preventing him from complying (by hardening his heart).⁴ According to Maimonides, Pharaoh's behavior was so appalling that it became necessary to subject him and his country to a fitting punishment in the form of the 10 plagues. By the time the plagues came around, it was irrelevant whether or not Pharaoh was ready to comply; it was about giving him a taste of his own medicine.

This is expressed in the prophecy told to Abraham, that "the nation that will subjugate [your descendants] will be judged."⁵

Demonstrating G d's Greatness

A second approach is that the plagues were designed to demonstrate G d's sovereignty and might. Egypt was the most powerful empire at the time, and bringing it to its knees was to serve as a lesson to both Egypt and the whole world that the universe has an all-powerful creator.

This is the view of Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, who explains that the plagues were intended to subdue the Egyptians to accept G d's will.⁶ According to Seforno, the purpose of the plagues was so that the Egyptians would repent of their evil ways and recognize G d's greatness.

This sentiment is expressed in the verse in which G d tells to Moses to tell Pharaoh: "*I have preserved you for this very purpose, that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth.*"⁷ Pharaoh had brazenly denied any recognition of G d by repeatedly declaring, "*Who is G d?*"⁸ and "*I don't know of G d.*" The Divine show of force offered a resounding response to his defiance.

A Third Approach

These two perspectives (a punishment or a lesson) were the dominant views of the purpose of the 10 plagues for centuries. Yet, in an astonishing twist, the Rebbe demonstrates a third, entirely new approach. The purpose of the plagues was not primarily intended for the Egyptians, argues the Rebbe. Rather, the main aim was to inspire the Israelites. Any impact the plagues would have on the Egyptians was secondary.

The Rebbe bases this perspective on a comment from Rashi. On the verse, “*I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt*,”⁹ Rashi explains:

“Since he [Pharaoh] behaved wickedly and defied Me, and I know full well that there is no delight among the nations to make a wholehearted attempt to repent, it is better for Me that his heart be hardened, so that [I can] increase My signs and My wonders in him, and they will recognize My mighty deeds.” This is the custom of the Holy One, blessed be He: He brings retribution on the nations so that Israel should hear and fear.

Indeed, when Moses was sent one last time to confront Pharaoh, God told him that the plagues were also a message for the Israelites: “*In order that you tell into the ears of your son and your son’s son how I made a mockery of the Egyptians, and [that] you tell off[My signs that I placed in them, and you will know that I am the Lord.]*”¹⁰

The Cosmic Arc

But what makes Rashi attribute the main focus of the plagues to their role with regards to the Israelites, when the Torah primarily highlights their role in relation to the Egyptians?

The clue is in Rashi’s very opening comment to the Torah – Genesis 1:1. There, Rashi states that the world was created according to an overarching Divine plan. At the heart of this was that the Children of Israel would arrive at Mount Sinai for the Torah to be revealed to the world. Pharaoh and the Egyptians played a part in that process, but they were never the end game.

Yes, the Egyptians deserved to be punished, and justice was indeed meted out. True, Pharaoh’s arrogance towards the Almighty required a powerful response, and he sure got one. But the ultimate purpose was that the departing Israelites would learn an eternal message that would resound for generations. The Egyptian pharaohs would fade from history several generations later, but the lessons of the Exodus would live on forever in the descendants of those Israelites. Ultimately, the Israelites carrying this lasting message would go on to transform the world.

Adapted from Likutei Sichot, vol. 36, Parshat Vae’ra II.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Exodus 5:1; 7:16.
2. Exodus 5:2.
3. Proverbs 21:1.
4. Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuva 6:3.
5. Genesis 15:14.
6. Seforno to Exodus 7:5.
7. Exodus 9:16.
8. Exodus 5:2.
9. Exodus 7:3.
10. Exodus 10:2.

* Rabbi of Congregation Ahavas Yisrael of Pomona, N.Y.; also founder and Chief Executive of Tag International Development, a charitable organization that focuses on sharing Israeli expertise with developing countries.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5351270/jewish/The-Real-Reason-for-the-Ten-Plagues.htm

VA'EIRA: Existence, Providence, and Power

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Existence, Providence, and Power

In the second section of the Book of Exodus, G-d begins the process that will lead to the redemption of the Jews from Egyptian slavery. After some preparations, G-d then begins to strike the Egyptians with plagues.)Exodus 6:2–9:35(

- The first set of three plagues)blood, frogs, and lice(was intended to demonstrate G-d's existence.
- The second set)the mixed horde, epidemic, and inflammation of the skin(was intended to demonstrate G-d's providence.
- The third set)hail, locusts, and darkness(was intended to demonstrate G-d's supernatural power.

Thus, the plagues teach us that not only does G-d exist; He also directs the world and wishes to come to our aid, and that He can and does override the natural order.

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d grant a swift, miraculous and complete victory over our enemies.

Gut Shabbos and a bright and joyous Chanukah,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

Chapters of psalms to recite for Israel to prevail over Hamas and for the release of remaining hostages. Recite these psalms daily – to download:

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Spirits in a Material World

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

In the previous parsha, we read of how Moses was sent by God to lead the Israelites to freedom, and how his initial efforts met with failure. Not only did Pharaoh not agree to let the people go; he made the working conditions of the Israelites even worse. They had to make the same number of bricks as before, but now they had to gather their own straw. The people complained to Pharaoh, then they complained to Moses, and then Moses complained to God. "Why have You brought trouble to this people? Why did You send me?" Exodus 5:22

At the beginning of Va'era, God tells Moses that He will indeed bring the Israelites to freedom, and tells him to announce this to the people. Then we read this: So Moses told this to the Israelites but they did not listen to him, because their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh. Exodus 6:9

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

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

It turned out, though, that Moses was both right and wrong, right that they did not listen to him, but wrong about why. It had nothing to do with his failures as a leader or a public speaker. In fact, it had nothing to do with Moses at all. They did not listen "because their

spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh." In other words: If you want to improve people's spiritual situation, first improve their physical situation. That is one of the most humanising aspects of Judaism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jewish thought has always felt comfortable with a certain well-ordered worldliness, whereas the Christian has always felt a pull to otherworldliness. Jewish thought has had a candid orientation toward private property,

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whereas Catholic thought – articulated from an early period chiefly among priests and monks – has persistently tried to direct the attention of its adherents beyond the activities and interests of this world to the next. As a result, tutored by the law and the prophets, ordinary Jews have long felt more at home in this world, while ordinary Catholics have regarded this world as a valley of temptation and as a distraction from their proper business, which is preparation for the world to come.[2]

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

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said it well: “Don’t worry about the state of someone else’s soul and the needs of your body. Worry about the needs of someone else’s body and the state of your own soul.”

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

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

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

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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

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

We see this concept by at least some of the other plagues as well—that the Chartumei Mitzrayim were able to replicate them. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky in his *Emes L’Yaakov* provides a very important explanation about what happened to this power of magic in the world. In other words, we see that this

“kishuf” was a reality in the ancient world, not just “magic” based on sleight of the hand. This was the real thing! Rav Yaakov addresses the issue: How come this stopped? Likewise, in many places the Talmud discusses the power of Shaydim. Closer to our times, there apparently was a reality called a Dybbuk. A Dybbuk was a spirit that entered a body and took it over, controlling the person until he was treated by someone who knew how to exorcise the Dybbuk. What happened to all these things? Why do we not seem to experience (real) magic, Shaydim, or Dybbuks today?

Rav Yaakov says (and this is well known, but the application is very important) that there is a concept in hashkafa that is based on the pasuk in Koheles “...zeh l’umas zeh asa Elokim...” (7:14) (G-d has made the one as well as the other). To put it in layman’s terms, HaKadosh Baruch Hu creates a level playing field. If the true prophets (e.g., Moshe Rabbeinu) were given the power to do these kinds of tricks—to turn a piece of wood into a snake or other types of miracles like that—then it would be nearly impossible to deny the truth of Hashem’s message. Everyone would need to be an observant Jew who keeps the Torah. That would require a mass conversion of the entire planet, because no person or nation could deny the reality of the words of the true prophet. This in effect would take away the phenomenon of free choice.

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

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

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

For this reason, as long as we had the power of kedusha (holiness) on our side in the personage of Neviim and tzadikim, the nations

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of the world had to have parallel forces through the koach hatumah (forces of impurity). We all know the teaching of Chazal regarding Moshe’s role as the greatest of the prophets. Chazal expound: “There never again arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe...” (Devorim 34:10) – In Israel there never arose such a prophet, but amongst the nations of the world there was such a prophet—Bilaam son of Beor. Bilaam was a degenerate, but he was a prophet. Why? It would not be fair. The nations could claim that if they had a prophet like Moshe, they would have been different. So Hashem gave them such a prophet, but he led them further astray!

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

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

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

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

kedusha necessitated the presence of a corresponding power of tumah in their midst.

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

The Urgency of Removing the Frogs

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

The Darash Mordechai offers several answers to this question.

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

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

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

This really intensifies the question. It does not say "Vayispalel Moshe el Hashem" (which would indicate a more conventional word for prayer) but "Va'Yitzak". Moshe was so concerned that the frogs should cease that he resorted to the most powerful form of Tefilla that exists – namely, Tze'aka! Why?

In Tefilas Geshem (recited on Shemini Atzeres to pray for rain of blessing for the coming winter season) we invoke the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and then Moshe. The paragraph regarding Moshe mentions how he provided water for the people. We conclude with the words "Upon the Rock he struck and waters came forth." Many commentaries ask, this would seem like an inappropriate time to bring up "Al ha'Selah hach, va'yetzoo mayim"? The hitting of the Rock is what caused Moshe Rabbeinu to not be able to go into Eretz Yisrael. So why bring that up? We talk about the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It would seem that we should mention Moshe's merits as well, and steer clear of his actions that may have been problematic.

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

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

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

As long as the frogs were present and jumping into the Egyptian ovens, every minute was another indictment of Klal Yisrael. Therefore, when Moshe had the opportunity to get rid of

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the frogs, he did so with intensity: Va'Yitzak! "I want to stop them in their tracks and immediately halt this embarrassing comparison between their actions and that of the Jewish people." He therefore used the highest form of Tefilla.

The HaKaras HaTov of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach

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

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

I recently heard the following story: Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach was once in the hospital. He made a point of thanking every doctor and every nurse for the care they provided for him while he was in the hospital. (This is something that someone does not need to be Rav Shlomo Zalman to do. Many people rightly have this practice under similar circumstances.) But then he asked if he could see the woman who went from room to room to water the plants in the hospital rooms. He said that the plants brightened up the room and therefore the woman who poured the water into the plants to make sure that they would stay fresh also needed to be thanked for her efforts.

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

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Who was greater: Moshe or Aharon? In Parshat Va'era the Torah provides us with the genealogy of the tribe of Levi. We arrive in this list at the household of Amram and Yocheved and there we are introduced to their two sons, Moshe and Aharon. And then the

Torah says (Shemot 6:26), "Hu Aharon uMoshe," – "This was the Aharon and Moshe, the people who stood before Pharaoh and delivered us from Egypt," and then that statement concludes, "Hu Moshe v'Aharon," – "That, of course was Moshe and Aharon." (Shemot 6:27)

So here we have in one and the same statement, first Aharon and Moshe, and then Moshe and Aharon. The order is reversed.

Now, we know from other instances in the Torah that whenever this happens the message is one of equality. For example, in the Ten Commandments we are told (Shemot 20:12), "Kabed et avicha v'et imecha," – "Honour your father and your mother," and then in Parshat Kedoshim we are told (Vayikra 19:3), "Ish imo v'aviv tira'u," – "everybody should revere their mother and their father."

The order is reversed in order to let us know that in our home, fathers and mothers are of equal standing.

So therefore the Torah here wants us to know that Aharon and Moshe were equals.

But then we must ask, does the Torah itself not say, "Velo kam kemoshe od navi," – "Moshe was the greatest prophet of them all," and also, "Moshe anav mikol adam," – "Moshe was more humble than any person."

It is clear throughout the Torah that Moshe was the more famous and his impact on the nation and on generations to come was far more significant than Aharon so therefore why are we told that they are equals?

Rav Moshe Feinstein gives a wonderful answer. He says that Moshe was great because Moshe achieved his ultimate maximum personal potential, and Aharon did the same. He achieved his personal maximum potential, and that's why they were equally great.

From here the message is that when it comes to achievement we shouldn't, in a state of weakness, compare ourselves to others. We shouldn't think about who is better than whom. Rather, the way Hashem views it is in terms of us ourselves: to what degree are we maximising our opportunities, using our talent, using our ability in order to guarantee that the potential that Hashem has given us will not be squandered.

So who was greater, Moshe or Aharon? They were equally great. And what's wonderful to know is that each and every one of us can also be just as great as them.

Ohr Torah Dvar Torah

Unity and Redemption

Rebbetzin Sarah and Rabbi Leron

Bernstein

The 'Four Expressions of Redemption' found in Parshat Vaera are well-known – setting the

tone for our annual Pesach Seder and providing a powerful progression in our journey to freedom from the enslavement of Egypt.

"Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the L-rd. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people ("אֶתְּנָא"), and I will be your G-d. And you shall know that I, the L-rd, am your G-d who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians."

The final Expression of Redemption contains a very specific description of who we are at that point of ultimate freedom. We are called 'Am'. The Malbim in Sefer HaCarmel articulates the difference between two terms used to describe a nation – 'Goy', and 'Am'.

"Goy is a gathering of individual entities, without any higher purpose. It is derived from גּוֹי a body or unit. It is also used as a reference to a large group, which is what it means when used in reference to the Jewish people. Am is a higher level, which references a unified group with a guided purpose, whether it be governmental or otherwise. Therefore, a person can belong to an Am – גּוֹי. But a person never belongs to a Goy – there is no גּוֹי, my nation."

An 'Am', according to the Malbim, is a group brought together by a common purpose. The word 'Am' can also be read as 'Im' which means 'with'. We are a nation by virtue of joining with our fellow nation-members. We are connected because of that which binds us together.

More than that, when we join together at this core soul level, we reveal the unified purpose and destiny that emerges from who we are at our shared source – "One Man with One Heart". It is with this unity that the ultimate group of people merits the ultimate Divine mission, in receiving the Torah. The Ramban, Sforno and others identify this stage of "And I will take you to be My People" as a reference to Ma'amad Har Sinai.

The most impactful shlichut is found where one's commitment to the mission of being an 'Am' that is an 'Or LaGoyim' is fuelled by one's care for and identification with the other. That care for the other is, similarly, most elevated when it stems from seeing the best version of the other person – driven by the vision of who they ought to be and the potential they have to contribute to the ever-unfolding destiny of Am Yisrael.

These two fundamental principles of purpose and unity drive the educational philosophy of Ohr Torah Stone and the Straus-Amiel Institute. On a practical level, Theodore Roosevelt's words are always helpful guides along the way: "People don't care how much

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you know until they know how much you care". On the broader level, it is the unity of the nation that drives the realization of the mission.

We are living in miraculous times – beyond the Exodus from Egypt and the Receiving of the Torah, overcoming exile and thriving in our Homeland, Eretz Yisrael. As many of us return home to Israel, it is these same two values that are even more significant to instill at 'home' – unity and purpose. With these two shining lights as our guides, may we advance along the continuum of redemption, towards the complete Shvat Tziyon with the building of the Beit Hamikdash, bimheirah v'yameinu.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Michael Rosensweig

The Expansive Perspective of Torah Commitment

Parshat Vaera begins by dramatically introducing a new dimension in Hashem's relationship with Moshe Rabbeinu (Shemot 6:1- "ani Hashem") and Am Yisrael (6:6-"lachen emor le-Benei Yisrael ani Hashem") that transcends His previous interaction with the avot (6:3- "u-shemi Hashem lo nodati lahem"). This monumental revelation is followed (6:6-8) by an equally compelling crescendo - the promise of imminent liberation and the formulation of four (or perhaps five - "ve-heveti") facets of redemption! And yet, in a stunning anti-climax, the Torah records that these breakthroughs simply fell on deaf ears (Shemot 6:9), "vayedaber Moshe kein el Benei Yisrael ve-lo shamu el Moshe mi-kotzer ruach u-meavodah kashah". The Torah does not elaborate or even define these factors that impeded Benei Yisrael's capacity to embrace liberation and a broadly optimistic, promising meaningful future, inviting a wide range of views among the mefarshim. Later (6:12), Moshe invokes Benei Yisrael's traumatic non-response to underscore the challenge of impacting Paroah "hein Benei Yisrael lo shamu eilai, ve-eich yishmaeini Paroah, ve-ani aral sefatayim", one of the rare kal ve-chomers in the Torah, as the midrash and Rashi note. Evidently, the experience of Klal Yisrael's lack of responsiveness was perceived by Moshe as a considerable setback, jeopardizing his entire mission.

The formulation of "ve-lo shamu", conveying that they could not fully process or were incapable of reflecting upon, perhaps unable to fully comprehend Moshe's Divine mission is particularly intriguing in this context. Indeed, many of the mefarshim avoid this more literal meaning. Together with Onkelus they suggest that the "shamu" here connotes "ve-lo kabilu", they did not assent or accept Moshe's vision. Various explanations are offered for declining Moshe's presentation. Rashi indicates they rejected the "tanchumim" component, while Rashbam attributes their rejection to a loss of faith due to disappointment with their continued servitude. Baal Haturim posits that

they remained convinced that the redemption had not yet arrived, as the forecast initially called for a significantly longer period of subordination. Ramban argues that notwithstanding their status as maaminim, they simply were not willing or spiritually able to pay the short-term price in torture and intense servitude even to reap the worthy spiritual goal. While there is significant range in the assessment of Am Yisrael in these and parallel interpretations, the common thread is a denial that Klal Yisrael were incapable of internalizing or reflecting upon Hashem's vision or its implications.

However, Seforno, Or ha-Haim, and others embrace the more straightforward, yet conceptually more challenging understanding of "ve-lo shamu", the idea that they were developmentally incapable of hearing or appreciating Hashem's vision, a perspective that requires further clarification. While Seforno indicates that this condition was related to their insufficient faith in Hashem, Or ha-Chaim posits that their inability in dire conditions that threatened their very subsistence and even their short-term survival to perceive a broader spiritual vision, a more optimistic future perspective stemmed from the precipitous decline of Torah study in this period, a defining dimension of Jewish existence that directly expands one's horizons and perspective. Thus, he declares: "u-lazeh yikearei kotzer ruach ki ha-Torah merachevet libo shel adam". [Or ha-Chayim's assessment about the decline of Torah study in Mitzrayim has been challenged by some based on the gemara Yoma 28b - "miyemeihem shel avoteinu lo parshah yeshiva mei-hem...hayu be-Mitzrayim yeshivah imahem..." However, others (see for example, Rinat Yizchak Shemot 6:9) have noted Rambam's (Hilchot Avoda Zara 1:3) affirmation of this decline, alongside the assignment of shevet Levi to protect and preserve the indispensable legacy of talmud Torah even in the periods where spiritual paucity intensified. The fact that shevet Levi remained an ally of Moshe Rabbeinu and avoided "avodah kashah" is consistent with Or ha-Chayim's perspective.]. It should be noted that the Mechilta, as well as Targum Yonaton ben Uziel understood that "avodah kashah" refers to "pulchanh nuchraah", idolatry. While some understood this to indicate that a commitment to avodah zarah motivated a rejection of the plan to liberate Am Yisrael from Mitzrayim, it is conceivable that this factor is parallel to that of Or ha-Chayim and Seforno. The mentality associated with avodah zarah - the focus on physicality, on forces that appear to provide pragmatic benefits, on improving prosperity or neutralizing suffering in the present- is completely incompatible with embracing an authentic spiritual vision, one which is ordered by multiple and idealistic values and which transcends the moment or the individual, alternatively focusing on a greater religious goal and destiny. It is possible that the more literal and subtle understanding of "ve-lo

shamu" translated into the mentality that underpinned numerous of the "ve-lo kabilu" explications, as well.

We may further appreciate the Or ha-Chayim -Seforno position when we consider some facets of "kotzer ruach" (and, briefly, "avodah kashah"). Meshech Chochmah and Rav Hirsch (who do not necessarily adopt the perspectives of Seforno and Or ha-Chayim) each posit that kotzer ruach signifies the inability of one whose present fate is precarious to seriously confront his future, or to be sufficiently inspired by a more lofty ideal. Rav Hirsch argues that kotzer ruach is the opposite of "erech appayim", patience that derives from Divine vision and timeless perspective. In light of Or ha-Hayim and Seforno, one may more fully appreciate that Torah commitment and Divine faith not only expand horizons, neutralize hopelessness, provide a different perspective on obstacles, challenges and priorities, but also largely moderate the otherwise natural human focus on the present. Rav Soloveitchik zt"l frequently developed the idea that halachah embraces a Bergsonian notion of qualitative time, in which the past remains relevant, even halachically accessible in some respects and the future as the embodiment of aspiration and destiny is a living force. Yetziat Mitzrayim by means of zechirat and sippur particularly crystallizes this theme. Moreover, the idea of time-consciousness, as the Rav and others have noted, differentiates slaves from the community of the liberated, and is therefore a crucial facet of the process of yeziat Mitzrayim and the countdown to mattan Torah. Certainly "avodah kashah" may also signify Klal Yisrael's slave mentality, so acutely documented by Ibn Ezra in his analysis of yeziat Mitzrayim, kriyat yam suf, and the subsequent sojourn in the midbar. The spiritual impoverishment of "kotzer ruach" conjoined with the equally halachically problematic "avodah kashah" engendered a toxic mix that impeded, even made inaccessible or unhearable, at least temporarily, the vision of "ani Hashem" and the multiple facets of geulah!!

It is noteworthy that the solution advanced by Hashem is formulated (6:13) broadly and ambiguously: "vayezavem el Benei Yisrael", a pasuk that predictably is subject to numerous interpretations. One midrash suggests a targeting of the offending avodah zarah! The Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashana 3:2, also cited by Netziv Haamek Davar and others) focuses on the mitzvah of freeing slaves in timely fashion! It is conceivable in light of Seforno and Or Hahayim "vayezaveim" also broadly calls for a rigorous campaign to re-imbue Am Yisrael with the values of Torah and emunah, to embrace the principle of tzivui, sine qua non for neutralizing "kotzer ruach" and "avodah kashah", paving the way for the successful receptivity to "ani Hashem" and the four geulot. The emphasis throughout the process of yetziat Mitzrayim on an avodah experience, the ultimate stress on ve-lakahti and numerous

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hints linking the exodus to mattan Torah, and the goal of "halelu avdei Hashem ve-lo avdei Paroah" are certainly consistent with this perspective, alongside the other insights of the classical commentators.

Finally, we note that at mattan Torah when Am Yisrael experienced gilui Shechinah, Hashem's unmediated presence, and embraced with naaseh ve-nishmah commitment the halachic ideals and principles that also transformed, expanded, and broadened their perspective and purview on all facets of life, the Torah (Shemot 20:14) remarkably uses the expression "ve-kol ha-am roim et ha-kolot". The capacity to hear, reflect, fully appreciate and internalize the Divine vision had reached transcendent proportions. The contrast to "ve-lo shamu mi-kotzer ruach u-meavodah kashah" could not have been more pointed!

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

At What Cost?

HASHEM said to Moshe, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch forth your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their canals, over their ponds, and over all their bodies of water, and they will become blood, and there will be blood throughout the entire land of Egypt, even in wood and in stone.'" (Shemos 7:19)

Say to Aaron: Since the Nile protected Moshe when he was cast into it, it therefore was not smitten by him, neither with blood nor with frogs, but was smitten by Aaron. — Rashi

And Aaron stretched forth his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. (Shemos 8:2)

HASHEM said to Moshe, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch forth your staff and strike the dust of the earth, and it shall become lice throughout the entire land of Egypt.' (Shemos 8:12)

Say to Aaron: It was inappropriate for the dust to be smitten through Moshe since it had protected him when he slew the Egyptian and had hidden him in the sand. [Therefore,] it was smitten through Aaron [instead]. — Rashi

Why was Aaron the one to deliver the first three Makos/Plagues on Egypt? Rashi spells it out very clearly. Moshe was saved by the waters of the Nile when he was placed there in a miniature Teva and discovered by the daughter of Pharaoh. The earth saved Moshe when he smote the Egyptian who was abusing a Jew and he buried him in the sand. The premise is, as the saying goes, "Don't throw a rock into a well that you drank from."

There is a gigantic question waiting to be asked here. The Nile is a river, a moving body of water. The water that saved Moshe is long gone and the plot of earth that saved him and helped cover up his deed was in a completely different place, and what would the water care

and what would the earth mind if Moshe himself delivered the blow that launched the plague. Water and earth do not have feelings.

A few years ago, a young boy threw some garbage out of the second-floor window of the Yeshiva. It was not well received down below.

My assistant principal spoke to the boy. He landed an important message and it made a strong impression on the boy and on me. He asked the boy, "Why did the Teva, the Ark of Noah need to have three floors? One was for the people on the top and the animals in the middle and the bottom level was for garbage. Why did they need that bottom floor for garbage? It would have been a much more luxurious, sweet smelling, and spacious trip for all if the garbage was just thrown out of the window. Why didn't they just throw the garbage out of the window? The world was completely flooded and being washed with the hot waters of the flood. It would not have soiled the earth in any noticeable way. Why not throw it out the window?!" That was his question!

The answer he gave was, "If they would have thrown the garbage out of the window, then it would have negatively impacted their character." The new world would be built by sloppy and careless people. It's not the environment but them at risk of being damaged.

The Sefer HaChinuch offers most often as the reason for a Mitzvah the principle, "HaAdam Nifal Achar Paulosov" – "A person is affected by whatever he does". I saw a statement like this, "It is easier to act your way into a better way of feeling than to feel your way into a better way of acting."

The Alter from Kelm explained that we are impacted by what we actually do and not by what we are theoretically doing. He recommends that a doctor should invest his spare time doing acts of kindness because although he is helping people with his medicine, his experience all too often involves afflicting. He can become cruel and callous.

A student of the Chofetz Chaim was offered one of two seats in a Polish bank. In one seat he would be receiving deposits and at another he would be cashing checks. The Chofetz Chaim advised him to rather be handing out money to people on a daily basis because then he would be exercising the muscle of giving. Even though at the other seat he is theoretically helping people save money but by taking cash all day every day he would become a taker. Yes, Moshe would be helping with each hit but at what cost?!

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perz

The Everlasting Covenant

One of the most revolutionary ideas in all of religious history, in all of Tanach, appears in this week's parasha.

Time and time again we see the idea of a brit, a covenant. Professor Daniel Elazar says that the most central idea that has the most to teach about how you organize society according to Jewish tradition is that of a covenant, which must be distinguished from a contract. Thomas Hobbes said human beings come together to protect their self-interest, he called it a social contract. In order to have a functional society, the way an individual can make sure nothing happens to them is for them to give up some of their rights to a central government to look after them. It is driven by self-interest, it is a contract which is there to protect us – we all need to come together to protect our own individual rights and needs. Prof. Elazar says that is so different from a covenant.

Rabbi Sacks says there are three differences between a social contract and a spiritual covenant:

1. Contracts are conditional – there are conditions and circumstances, and those circumstances can certainly change.
2. Contracts are time-bound. A covenant is everlasting.
3. Contracts are about mutual self-interest, about I and you, but a covenant is about us and we, creating an entity of deep commitment to each other.

Hashem says to Moshe that He will establish and fulfill His covenant which He made with our forefathers to redeem us and bring us out of Egypt. The connection between G-d and the Jewish people, this brit, this covenant, made consistently throughout history is that 'you are My people and I am your G-d.' Sometimes we err and break our commitments, but we don't break the covenant. At the heart of the Jewish people, says Elazar, is an everlasting commitment to G-d and to the Jewish people.

How critical this is today, despite the ups and downs, to invest in our relationships not for the sake of 'I' but for the sake of 'we'. May we all at the heart of our personal relationships and as a people, especially when facing so many challenges and such a divided society, we should know that what binds us together is this indivisible part of the unity of the Jewish people which is at the heart of the divine interaction, the everlasting covenant, with Hashem.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

All The World's A Wedding In a remarkable passage in the Talmud (Eruvin 54a) we find the Amora Samuel counselling his younger contemporary Rav Yehudah, hatof ve'ekhol, hatof ve'ishti, d'alma d'azlinan mineih ke'hilula dami – "hurry and eat, hurry and

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drink, for the world we are leaving is like a wedding." What an unusual simile: all the world's a wedding!

What did the Talmud mean by that?

According to some commentaries (Rashi and others), Samuel offered some sage and brooding advise: enjoy yourself with legitimate pleasures as long as you can because life is all too short, like a huppah which is put up and then quickly put away again; the wedding party doesn't last forever. There is, of course, much wisdom in that remark. Some of us tend to put off enjoying life's bounties, we begrudge ourselves G-d's gifts to us. We keep on saving for a rainy day so intensely that we fail to enjoy today's sunshine. What the Talmud means, then, is that what the Torah permits us to benefit from ought to be accepted cheerfully and happily. It is good Jewish doctrine.

There is, however, a Hasidic interpretation of this Talmudic dictum that is somewhat different, and that illuminates not only an obscure passage in the Talmud, but an obscure aspect of our passage through life. All the world's a wedding. At a wedding, there is much going on: food is eaten, drink is imbibed, cigars are smoked, toasts are exchanged, there is dancing to music and camaraderie and posing for photographers and admiring floral arrangements.... a great deal of motion and activity. All of it is enjoyable and exciting. However, all of this is meaningful only if there is a groom and a bride, and if he says to her harei at mekudeshet li. If there should be no harei at, if there should be no act of marriage, then all the rest makes no sense; it is a matter of going through grotesque, empty motion. Then the guests have come in vain, the eating is gluttony, the comradeship is irrelevant, the toasting is a meaningless gesture, the dancing is weird. With the harei at, everything makes sense; without it, nothing does.

So it is with life itself. It is filled with all kinds of diverse activities of every description. We work, make money, spend it, socialize, build families, join groups, experience joy and sadness. Does all this make sense? Does it have any meaning? The answer is: the world is ke'hilula dami, like a wedding. If we are conscious, throughout all these activities, of the ultimate purpose, of the goal, then that purpose unifies all our deeds and gives them meaning and inspiration. Without that purpose, we merely go through motions that are incoherent, dull, and utterly insignificant.

And what is that ultimate purpose? It is—the same as in a wedding—a marriage formula. Like the formula expressed by groom to bride, harei at mekudeshet li, "you are hereby married li, to me," so the Almighty has betrothed the people of Israel with the word li, to Me: in the words of Hosea, v'erastikh li le'olam, I betroth you to Me forever! The wedding of G-d and Israel, the intensely close and loyal relationship that finds its fulfillment through Torah and the Jewish way of Mitzvot, this is the purpose of all life. And if that purpose exists for us consciously, then all else we do somehow fits into the picture of a

meaningful life. Without it, we have a life that is like a wedding party without a bride and a groom, without a wedding.

It is no exaggeration to say that especially we of the 20th century stand in great need of this teaching that *alma...ke'hilula dami*, that life is worth living only if it makes sense, that it makes sense only if there is a purpose, and that the purpose is loyalty to God, the wedding of our talents and substance and destiny with the will of God as taught in Torah. For we moderns have developed with unsurpassed excellence the perfection of means—science, the exploration of nature, is a highly refined skill; business, commerce, and trade are complicated arts; communication and transportation are effected with consummate speed. We know how to do things like never before. The trouble is, we do not always know why we are doing them. We have elaborate technocracy in which we are so intoxicated with means that are efficient, that we have forgotten that ends are significant. Never before have we been able to go so fast; never before have we been so unsure of where it is we want to go in such a hurry. Indeed, all the world's a wedding!--and in our ever-smaller world of this century we have elaborate caterers, fabulous photographers, the most gifted musicians—and we have neglected to inquire whether a wedding is taking place. The Groom is absent, and the *harei at mekudeshet li* and the *v'erastikh li le'olam* are nowhere heard. And if there is no God, no Torah, no mitzvot, then all our efficiency, all our wealth, all our achievements, all our activities, are like the macabre gyrations of an intoxicated guest who dances alone in a darkened hall where the wedding has been called off. That is what Torah means for us—not just “religion” in the customary sense, but that which binds all the rest of existence together into a meaningful whole, and makes all the rest of life worth living.

What holds true for all of life generally is especially relevant to Jews as a people and to Israel as a sovereign state. From the very beginning, as Saadia taught, we have been a nation only by virtue of the Torah; we were given a Torah before we were given a homeland. Unlike other nations, we have been elected to be more than a natural group. We have been given a supernatural vocation: that of the kingdom of priests and the holy nation. God is our *hatan*, we his *kallah*. If we remember that, then our nationhood and peoplehood, our long adventure through history and our struggle to return to our home, all are graced with abiding meaningfulness. But if there is no *li*, if Israel will ignore God and Torah, the our peoplehood is a fossil, our nation and all its apparatus is hollow, our history a bitter joke.

It is this teaching which is implicit in this morning's Sidra. God uses four synonyms in informing Moses that He will redeem our people from slavery in Egypt—and it is to commemorate these *arpa leshonot shel geulah* that we drink, on Passover, the four cups of wine, the *arpa kosot*. The first three refer to our

physical and political liberations: *ve'hotzeti* (I shall take you out), *ve'hitzalti* (I shall save you), and *ve'gaalti* (I shall redeem you). The fourth and climactic one is of a different nature. The Zohar (ad loc.) refers to it as *shabha de'kula*, as the greatest of all. That is: *ve'lakahti etkhem li le'am ve'hayiti lakkhem le'Elokim*, I shall take you for Me as a people and I will be for you a God. One of the commentators (Keli Yakar) rightly points out that the word *lakahti* is often used in the Bible to mean not only taking in the usual sense, but in the marital sense, to “take” a wife—and notice too the word *li*! After saving you, bringing you out of Egypt, and redeeming you, says the Almighty, I will take you or marry you as my people! The Torah is our *ketubah*, and the mitzvot our acts of love and duty. That is why the Jerusalem Talmud applies to the fourth cup, the one equivalent to *ve'lakakhti etkhem li*, the verse *kos yeshuot esa u-ve'shem Ha-Shem ekra*, I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the Lord—for the purpose of *yeshuah*, the purpose and goal and aim of freedom and independence is: to call upon God, to live the life of Torah. No wonder that it is this fourth cup, the one symbolizing the spiritual destiny of Israel, that occasions, at the *Seder* table, the reading of *Hallel ha-Gadol*, the greatest and most beautiful praise (see *Ketav Sofer*).

The Halakhah too supports this point, that of Israel's Torah loyalty as the purpose for which it was redeemed. It tells us that between the first three cups—tokens of the first three synonyms, the symbols of political emancipation—and the fourth—representing Israel's communion with God— one may not drink any wine, *shema yishtaker ve'yishan velo yigmor et ha-hallel*, he may become intoxicated, fall asleep, and thus forget to recite the *Hallel*. Indeed, it is possible to become so intoxicated with the trappings of statehood, with the mundane problems of preserving freedom and security and a stable economy, that we forget the *Hallel*, we completely lose sight of the fact that all this is preliminary to the main goal: the fourth cup, the *Hallel*, the *ve'lakakhti etkhem li*, the marriage of Israel's destiny to God's Torah. And when that is forgotten, then all the rest is without meaning. For *alma...ke'hilula dami*, all the world's a wedding; and Israel certainly is.

That is why Orthodox Jews and even not-so-Orthodox Jews are engaged in a wide attempt to give our beloved State of Israel the stamp of authentic Jewish character. Our endeavor is not merely to obtain “rights” for observant Jews—for such rights are not violated if there will be, for instance, only one truly kosher dining room aboard the liner *Shalom*. Certainly we Orthodox Jews have more opportunity to observe our Torah in Israel than anywhere else in the world. Nor do we want to dictate to others how to live. That is an absurd and cruel charge; were it true we would insist on legislating kosher kitchens and Sabbath observance in every citizen's private home. We would be the first to oppose that. What we do want is to keep the collective character of the

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State of Israel Jewish. We want to see Israel's soul emerge as well as its body prosper. We want to offer it the fourth cup. We want to make sure that its tremendous and historic achievements on the battle-field and in immigration, in diplomacy and in finances, in industry and in science, are not disjointed, incoherent, and meaningless. We want to make sure that the feasting and the dancing culminate in the *li*, the consecration of our people to its prophetic mission, its spiritual destiny. A remnant of our people experienced the *ve'hitzalti*. We were saved from the tyrant's gas ovens. Then the D.P.s lived through *ve'hotzeti*—they were taken out of the accursed, bloody continent to the blessed Land of Promise. There we fought a bitter war, in 1948, and we were granted *ve'gaalti*, redemption from the aggressor's evil designs. Let us not stop now, only a few steps before the *huppah*. Now is the time for *ve'lakahti*, for the betrothal of Israel as a whole to the Almighty. If we succeed in granting Israel this authentic Jewish spiritual quality, then the whole enterprise called the State of Israel will be not a short-lived episode in the long story of the Jewish people (and there were other such before it), but a great and brilliant beginning of the *geulah shelema*.

In every aspect of life let us remember that lesson—that all the world's a wedding, that our activities and achievements are meaningful and enduring only if they are geared to an ultimate purpose, that of dedication to Torah, the betrothal of God and Israel.

If we will do that, then all life will assume perspective and proper proportion. And then the result will be—like that of a wedding—the attainment of true *simhah* or joy. For happiness can never be found by looking for it or brooding over it. It is an elusive prey. It simply does not exist by itself as a separate entity. George Bernard Shaw once said that “the secret of being miserable is to have leisure to bother about whether you are happy or not.” Happiness is the result of a full and meaningful and purposeful life. When all of life is harmonious, then, like a marriage which is harmonious, there will be *simhah*. Where there is the *li*, the consecration of man as the purpose of life, there all else assumes dignity, peace—and joy.

Hatof *ve'ekhol*, hatof *ve'ishti*, let us eat and drink and in every way enjoy the bounty of God's goodness to us—but let us never forget that *alma...ke'hilula dami*, that all the world's a wedding.

Home Weekly Parsha VAEIRA

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Lord, so to speak, bemoans to Moshe the lack of faith exhibited by him and the Jewish people during the moments of crisis in their encounter with Pharaoh and their Egyptian taskmasters. God points out that the previous generations of the founders of the Jewish people never wavered in their faith and belief that God's covenant would be fulfilled, no matter how harsh the circumstances of their lives were.

And now when the process of redemption from Egyptian slavery is already underway, whenever there is a hitch or a delay or an apparent reversal, the complaint immediately arises against God and against Moshe as well. Now the Torah itself clearly makes allowances for this behavior due to the bone-crushing physical work imposed on the Jewish slaves by their Egyptian taskmasters.

It is difficult to be optimistic when one's back is being whipped. Nevertheless, the Lord's reproof of Moshe and of Israel is recorded for us in strong terms in the opening verses of this week's Torah reading. God, so to speak, is pointing out to Moshe the existence of a generational disconnect. The previous generations were strong in belief and faith and possessed patience and fortitude in the face of all difficulties.

Moshe's generation, in fact many Jewish generations throughout history, demand action and that action must be immediate. Their faith is conditioned upon seeing and experiencing immediate results and the changed society and world that they desire. Otherwise they are prepared to abandon ship. That is what the prophet means when he chides Israel by saying that "your goodness and faith resemble the clouds of the morning that soon burn off when the sun rises."

Faith, to be effective, has to be long-lasting. Since mortality limits our vision and naturally makes us impatient, it is often difficult for us to see the big picture and witness the unfolding of a long-range historical process. Our generation, unlike those of our predecessors – even our immediate predecessors – has rightly been dubbed the "now generation." Instant gratification is not only demanded but is expected and when it does not happen our faith is sorely tested, if not even diminished.

Patience and faith is the essence of God's message to Moshe. Part of Moshe's leadership task will now be to instill this sense of patience and long lasting faith within the psyche and soul of the Jewish people. This daunting task will take forty years of constant challenges and withering experiences before it will see results and accomplishments. At the end of the forty year period - forty years after the Exodus from Egypt - Moshe will proclaim that the Jewish people have finally attained an understanding heart and an appreciation of the historical journey upon which the Lord has sent them.

Both patience and faith are difficult traits to acquire and they remain very fragile even after they have been acquired. But in all areas of human life – marriage, children, professional occupations, business and commerce, government and politics, diplomacy and conflict – patience and faith are the necessary tools to achieve success. That is the message that God communicates to Moshe and to Israel in all of its generations and circumstances in this week's parsha.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Birth of History VAERA

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

The parsha of Vaera begins with some fateful words. It would not be too much to say that they changed the course of history, because they changed the way people thought about history. In fact, they gave birth to the very idea of history. Listen to the words:

God said to Moses, "I am Hashem. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E-l Shaddai, but by My name 'Hashem' I did not make Myself fully known to them.

Ex. 6:1-2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Time was no longer going simply to be what Plato beautifully described as the moving image of eternity. It was going to become the stage on which God and humanity would journey together toward the day when all human beings – regardless of class, colour, creed, or culture – would achieve their full dignity as the image and likeness of God. Religion was about to become not a conservative force but an evolutionary and even revolutionary one.

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

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

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

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

The Importance of Having Children after the Terrible Massacre

Revivim Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

As after the Holocaust, also after the massacre, we must pray that we understand our role in a better world, and that families will bring many children into the world * Jewish law arbiters debated whether there is an obligation to immerse electric appliances that may get damaged if made wet, and one should act leniently, and use them even without immersion * A Jew is forbidden to make a wax figure in human form, but if a non-Jew made it for him, he is permitted to benefit from it, and even keep it in his home.

The Torah tells us that even after the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites and embittered their lives with hard labor, mortar and bricks and with crushing work, instead of the suffering leading to despair and reduced births, the Israelites continued to be fruitful and multiply – “But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out.” When the Egyptians saw that despite the servitude the Hebrews continued multiplying, they intensified the labor from dawn until dusk, so that they would be forced to sleep in the fields and not be able to have marital relations, and family life. The Egyptians’ goal was twofold: to exploit their labor, and in the process, make them despair, and annihilate them.

But the Torah teaches that when the foundation of life is firm, suffering – despite all the pain and distress – does not break life, but ultimately, strengthens it. When the power of life is weak, the reaction is to withdraw from life, and diminish. But when the power of life is strong, and breeds faith that good will defeat evil, the reaction is to be fruitful and multiply.

The Promise to Jacob Our Forefather

Jacob our forefather was also very worried before going down to Egypt that perhaps his offspring would be lost among the nations, whether through destruction, or through assimilation. Therefore, God appeared to him, as the Torah says:

“And God said to Israel in a vision by night...Do not fear going down to Egypt, for I Myself will make you a great nation there! I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself, will also bring you back” (Genesis 46:2-4).

And thus, we also learned the purpose of the Egyptian exile, from which we left with great wealth, as the family of seventy souls became a great nation with material possessions, the fruits of their labor.

The Maharal of Prague explained (Gevurot Hashem, Chapter 3) that the number of 600,000 men of military age, is the basic number for the

existence of a nation. Therefore, only after reaching this number, did God take Israel out of Egypt, and give them the Torah.

Today As Well

Today too, we pray that out of the suffering and mourning for all the murdered settlers and holy soldiers who sacrificed themselves to protect the Nation and Land – we will be strengthened in faith, and understand our role better. The life forces within us will prevail – singles will marry and more children will be born, thus continuing the heritage of the holy ones who sacrificed themselves for the strengthening of life.

Even today, despite the Holocaust, the State of Israel is the only scientifically and economically advanced country with a high birth rate – approximately three children per Jewish woman. In other developed countries, the birth rate is less than two children on average. The high number of children is not only because of the Haredi and religious population, but in all populations the birth rate is significantly higher compared to their counterparts in developed countries. In other words, even those called “secular” in Israel, are much more traditional than secular people in Western countries, and correspondingly, marry more, and give birth more.

Therefore, the hope that we will find comfort after the war through many children is a realistic hope, since family values and the commandment to be fruitful and multiply are honored among Jews, and on this basis, we can hope for added blessing. Just as it is said about wisdom, that one who is already wise can receive a blessing for more wisdom (Daniel 2:21), and one who is already mighty, can receive a blessing for more might. So too, a community that already looks favorably upon a family with children, can merit having more children.

Be Fruitful and Multiply

In her book “Yisrael – Eretz Ketana, Sippur Gadol” (‘Israel – Small Country, Big Story’), Sophie Shulman writes that Israel leads the world in fertility treatments. Of around six million people born from fertility treatments worldwide, 100,000 are Israelis. All this, is thanks to the special attitude towards the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, which leads to enormous financial investment in helping women who have difficulty conceiving.

Israel is the only country in the world that funds fertility treatments for women up to age 45 as part of national health insurance, and even a woman who already has one child is entitled to treatment to give birth to a second child. Most supplemental insurances provided by health clinics also fund treatments for a third child. The next country after us in number of treatments per capita is Denmark, and there, public health insurance covers only three rounds of fertility treatment, for one child only, and for women up to age 40. In Israel, even after age 45, it is possible to get assistance for fertility treatments with an egg donation.

Incidentally, overseas it is rare for homosexual men to father children, whereas in Israel, due to the influence of faith and tradition, even homosexual men make great efforts and invest huge sums in order to have children.

Is There an Obligation to Immerse an Electric Kettle?

After discussing weighty matters, I will continue with particular questions I have been asked, which to some extent, also express optimism and faith.

Q: We bought an electric kettle that was manufactured overseas. Is there an obligation to immerse it in a mikveh, when immersion may damage it? Someone told us that to prevent damage, we need to wait three days after immersion until it dries out completely. But we are still worried that immersion may damage the kettle.

A: First, the mitzvah to immerse eating vessels that belonged to non-Jews is from the Torah (Peninei Halakha: Kashrut 31:1). Its purpose is to effect a kind of “conversion” on the vessel, to elevate it from a level of a vessel intended for mundane eating, accompanied by desires and human weaknesses, to a level of a vessel intended for preparing foods through which Jews can connect to the values of the Torah.

The poskim (Jewish law arbiters) debated whether electric appliances require immersion.

The Strict Opinion

Some poskim rule strictly, holding that electric appliances have the same law as all eating vessels, that if purchased from a non-Jew, they must be immersed in a mikveh (Minchat Yitzchak 2:82; Shevet Halevi 2:57, 3; Mishnah Halachot 9:162; Risha responsa 1:3).

If there is concern that the appliance may be damaged, and one does not rely on the advice to dry it out for several days, one can avoid immersion by giving the appliance as a gift to a non-Jew, and asking him to lend it back, with no set end-date. Since the appliance belongs to the non-Jew, and the Jew does not want to purchase it, it can be used indefinitely without immersion (see Peninei Halakha: Kashrut 31:10).

In the past, poskim who ruled strictly, suggested dismantling the appliance and reassembling it, so that it would be considered made by a Jew, and not require immersion. Indeed, if the appliance can be fully dismantled such that it is no longer considered a vessel, it would not require immersion. But today, most appliances are molded and cannot be dismantled, so this suggestion is no longer practical. It should be noted that disconnecting the electric cord does not help, since it is external to the appliance.

The Lenient Opinion That Electric Appliances Do Not Require Immersion

On the other hand, some poskim say electric appliances are exempt from immersion, because they are operated by being plugged into a wall socket to receive electricity. There is a principle that anything attached to the ground is not considered a vessel and does not become impure, so it does not require immersion. Even if they are sometimes operated by batteries, we follow their primary use which is while plugged in. Furthermore, electric appliances are considered machines. For example, an electric kettle is a machine for heating water, and a toaster is a machine for toasting bread. The mitzvah is to immerse eating vessels, not machines (Chelkat Yaakov YD 61:43; Beit Avi 1:104; Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul; Tefila L'Moshe 5:25; Sicha Nachum 49:5; Rav Ganzel, Techumin 27).

It can also be argued that the Torah would not command immersing an appliance that may be damaged by water, since the purpose of the mitzvah is to render the vessel fit for a Jew to use, not to destroy it.

Therefore, in practice, it appears electric appliances do not require immersion.

The Wax Museum

Q: Is it permitted to make the wax figures in a wax museum? And is it permitted to visit a wax museum?

A: It is forbidden for a Jew to make the figures in a wax museum, since it is forbidden for a Jew to make a full statue of a person. But purchasing it from a non-Jew is permitted, since the prohibition against keeping a statue in one's home applies only when there is concern it may be worshipped.

If a Jew made the figures, some poskim say one should be stringent and not visit the museum, so as not to support transgressors, or benefit from their deeds (Avnei Yeshpoh 1:151). Others permit visiting, since once made, there is no prohibition to keep them (Asei Lecha Rav, vol. 5, short responsa 72). Today, in practice, the figures are made by non-Jews, overseas.

However, according to most Rishonim (early authorities), it is forbidden for a Jew to request non-Jews to make human figures for him, since in their opinion, the rabbinic prohibition of shvut (asking a non-Jew to perform forbidden labor), applies to all Torah prohibitions, just as on Shabbat (see Peninei Halakha: Shevi't 5:9). But if a Jew transgressed and requested this of a non-Jew, he is permitted to benefit from what the non-Jew made, since some Rishonim hold there is no prohibition of shvut in other prohibited matters, and therefore, there was no prohibition in the non-Jew's actions.

"Let Them All be Killed, Rather than Hand over a Single Person"

Q: In light of the war and discussions about the self-sacrifice required from the public to save an individual, why does Jewish law rule that if a group of people are threatened to hand over one of their number to be killed – they should all be killed, and not hand over a single person to be killed (Tosefta Terumot 7:23)? Wouldn't it be better if one were killed, and not many?

Similarly, regarding incest, why did our Sages say: "Women whom non-Jews told: 'Give us one of you, and we will defile her (rape her), and if not, we will defile all of you' – they should all be defiled, rather than hand over to them one soul from Israel" (Terumot 8:12)?

A: The prohibition of murder is an absolute prohibition that may never be violated, therefore, even to save many, it is forbidden to transgress the prohibition against murder. However, if one of them volunteers to sacrifice himself in order to save his fellows – he is called kadosh (holy). They Demanded Women to Hand One of Them Over for Rape

The same applies to the prohibition against incest, which is like bloodshed, and "one life may not be pushed aside to save another." In other words, one may not be sacrificed to save others. Even when they are all married, and one is single, the single woman should not be handed over (Knesset HaGedolah, Hagaot Beit Yosef 157:28). A woman who sinned and committed adultery multiple times should also not be handed over, because rape would affect her more. Additionally, perhaps she reconsidered and repented, in which case the harm to her would be much severer (Rashba, Kesef Mishneh Yesodei HaTorah 5:5).

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The 135th yahrzeit of Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, a man to whom each of us owes a personal debt of gratitude, is on the 27th of Teiveis.

Chumash and the Fall of the Ghetto-By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

From the time of the French Revolution and continuing into the nineteenth century, the ghetto walls that had kept the Jews isolated from the world around them gradually fell all over central Europe. A result of this was that, no longer required to be part of their insular and observant Jewish communities, many Jews began to assimilate into the world environment now open to them and to throw away their Judaism.

In Eastern Europe, although the Jews were still kept isolated from full advancement into secular society, different forces, most notably the haskalah, accomplished similar purposes of distancing many Jews from the observance of the Torah. Among the challenges posed by some of the more intellectual who had abandoned Judaism, was their misunderstanding that the Torah as presented by Chazal bore differences from that of the written Torah.

At this time, several new and highly original commentaries on Chumash appear. Among these are Hakesav Vehakabalah, by Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, the commentaries[i] of the Malbim to Tanach, the commentary of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, and the Ha'ameik Davar, the commentary of Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, known by his acronym as the Netziv. All four of these commentaries show the impact of the tumultuous times in which they were written, although there are major differences between their treatments of Chumash.

Hakesav Vehakabalah

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, born in 1785, a disciple of Rabbi Akiva Eiger, became the rav of the city of Koenigsberg, then in Prussia, in 1831 and remained in that position until his passing 34 years later. Koenigsberg was within Germany but far to the east, and therefore Rav Mecklenburg saw both the problems of assimilation and reform that were happening in Germany and those of the haskalah and other non-religious movements of Eastern Europe. Hakesav Vehakabalah was intended as a response to attacks on Chazal's understanding of Torah. In his introduction, he discusses the issues concerning the writing down of Torah shebe'al peh, quoting both the midrashim and the explanations of the commentaries on this question.

The explanations of Hakesav Vehakabalah are based on careful analysis of the root meanings and grammar of the words of the Chumash, using them to provide a clear interpretation of the pesukim, at times providing a Yiddish translation for a term. Although frequently he is highly original in his approach, he also often mentions the different approaches of the earlier commentaries and chooses the one that he demonstrates is the most accurate.

The first edition of Hakesav Vehakabalah was published in 1839. In his lifetime, three more editions were published, each including additional commentary or translation. He continued to add more to the work, and a further edition, including the author's additional notations, was published posthumously in 1880.

The Malbim

Rav Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, who became known by his acronym, Malbim, served as the rav of many different communities in Eastern Europe. A brilliant talmid chacham, a warrior against the haskalah, and a prolific author, he is remembered to posterity primarily because of his commentaries on Tanach and the essays that accompany those commentaries.[ii] His commentary on Yeshayah, which is the first volume that he produced, includes an introduction in which he elucidates the principles that form the basis for his commentary on most of Tanach. These include that there are never two terms in Tanach Hebrew that

mean the exact same thing, and that there are no repeated phrases or clauses. Each word in Tanach was chosen meticulously to provide a very specific nuance of meaning and that one must delve into the depth of this meaning. His works on Vayikra and Devorim are original commentaries to the midrash halacha on these seforim, in which he demonstrates how Chazal proved the correct halachic interpretation of each verse.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, born in 1808 in Hamburg, Germany, held rabbinic positions in Oldenberg and Emden, Germany, prior to becoming the Chief Rabbi of Moravia. Thereafter, he returned to Germany and established a Torah-committed community in Frankfurt. Towards the end of his life, after he had built a strong Torah community, he produced his commentaries to the Chumash, Tehillim and the Siddur. As he writes in his introduction, his commentary on Chumash was based on lectures that he had given on the subject, and he used the notes of attendees to those shiurim as the basis for his written commentary.

The Netziv

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin was born in the village of Mir, then in czarist Russia, in 1817. At the age of 16 he married the daughter of Rav Yitzchak of Volozhin, the son and successor of the founder and Rosh Yeshivah of the famed yeshivah in that city, Rav Chayim of Volozhin, the esteemed disciple of the Vilna Gaon. From that time until his very last months, the Netziv was associated with the yeshivah of Volozhin, where he eventually became Rosh Yeshivah, a position he held for almost forty years until the yeshivah was closed in 1892, because of the insistence of the czarist government that it secularize its curriculum. The Netziv authored many works, including a commentary on the She'iltos of Rav Achai Gaon, commentaries to all the halachic midrashim, a commentary on Shir Hashirim, responsa, and his commentary to the Chumash, called Ha'ameik Davar. Of the four authors we are discussing, the Netziv is unique in that his primary role was that of a rosh yeshivah, whereas the other three were communal rabbonim. All four of these gedolim were renowned poskim. But the Netziv was unusual as a rosh yeshivah in that he not only taught a daily Gemara shiur in which he went through the entire Shas (not only the so-called "yeshivish mesechtos"), but he also taught a daily class in the week's parshah. His discussion and his commentary were based on his personal analysis of the pesukim or from ideas that he heard orally from talmidei chachamim such as his father-in-law, Rav Yitzchak of Volozhin.

The differences among these commentaries

Notwithstanding the similarities of purpose among these commentaries, each reflects its author's unique contributions to Torah; thus, there are major differences among them. For example, the Malbim's commentaries to the book of Vayikra and to most of Devorim are not devoted to explaining the pesukim, but to demonstrating how the halachic droshah of the Torah shebe'al peh is based on a particular way of understanding the Torah shebiksav. He developed an extensive system that provides the underpinning of all of the halachic derivations. In his introduction to Vayikra, he writes that he had initially intended to write his commentary explaining this derivative approach to every droshah of Chazal. However, he discovered very early in the writing of his commentary that the length of such a work would become unrealistic. Instead, he wrote a separate essay that explains the principles with which Chazal operated, and in his commentary he referred to the appropriate part of this essay when necessary.

Rav Hirsch also maintained that proper study of Torah shebiksav will leave you with the conclusions of Torah shebe'al peh. He noted that the Torah shebe'al peh was actually taught to the Jews first.[iii] Moshe received all the laws of Torah shebe'al peh at Har Sinai and taught them to the Jewish people gradually. The completed Torah shebiksav was not received by the Jews until the very end of Moshe's life, immediately prior to the Jews entering Eretz Yisrael, or forty years after they had received the Torah shebe'al peh. This explains numerous passages in the Torah, including the commandment to slaughter animals ka'asher tzivisicha "as you were instructed," meaning the sets of regulations that had been transmitted to Moshe at Har Sinai and previously taught to the Bnei Yisrael.

Comparing Torah shebiksav to Torah shebe'al peh

Both Hakesav Vehakabalah and Malbim mention that a major purpose of their commentaries is to demonstrate that Torah shebiksav and Torah shebe'al peh are one. In the introduction to the first volume of commentary he wrote on Chumash, Vayikra, the Malbim mentions specifically the tragedy of the reform convention that took place in 1844 in Braunschweig (called Brunswick in English), a city in Germany about 40 miles southeast of Hanover. The Malbim writes that when he heard of what had happened at the reform convention, he decided that k'lal Yisrael required a new commentary on Tanach written according to the mesorah. He notes that among the points he will be demonstrating is that Torah shebiksav and Torah shebe'al peh are one.

Although Rav Hirsch's very brief introduction to his commentary does not emphasize this relationship between Torah shebiksav and Torah shebe'al peh, this foundation shows up literally hundreds of times in his commentary.[iv]

Uniqueness of Ha'ameik Davar

Of the four authors we are discussing, the Netziv's commentary is actually quite original in a surprising way, which requires that we explain a bit of history concerning traditional Torah commentaries. Among the early classic commentaries on Chumash, the Ramban, Rashi and many others assume that any explanation of the written Torah must fit the conclusions of our Chazal and the Oral Torah. This approach accords well with the approaches of Hakesav Vehakabalah, Rav Hirsch and the Malbim.

However, among the rishonim this approach was not universally held. The Ibn Ezra, for example, often explains pesukim unlike the halachic conclusion. He certainly felt that the concept ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto,[v] no verse is interpreted without its most literal explanation, means that the Torah can be understood on many levels, and that the most basic understanding, pshat, does not necessarily require that it be consistent with the other levels. Many later authorities and commentaries criticize the Ibn Ezra for his approach.[vi] Yet, the Netziv also utilizes the same method, at times explaining a pasuk in a way that does not appear consistent with the halachic conclusions that we find in Chazal.[vii] Such an approach was anathema to Hakesav Vehakabalah, Rav Hirsch and the Malbim.

Uniqueness of Rav Hirsch's commentary

The most obvious difference between Rav Hirsch's commentary and those of the others is, of course, the language. Whereas the other commentaries are written in traditional rabbinic Hebrew, Rav Hirsch published his commentary on Chumash, and, indeed, all of his other works, in German. Using the vernacular to present the Torah was not an original approach of Rav Hirsch. Rav Sa'adya Geon's commentaries to Chumash, as well as all his other writings, were written in Arabic, as were the Chovos Halevovos, the Kuzari, and many other writings of the early Sefardic rishonim. Similarly, the Rambam wrote all of his works, with the exception of the Mishneh Torah, in Arabic. However, using the vernacular as a vehicle for presenting Torah had fallen by the wayside in the hundreds of years since the era of the rishonim. With very few exceptions, Torah works were all published in Hebrew. As a young rabbi in Oldenberg, Rav Hirsch recognized the need to present the Torah in German. He certainly understood that he had a personal mission of providing Torah education to his generation, and to demonstrate that a proper understanding of Torah demonstrates its primacy over all of man's endeavors.

In Rav Hirsch's commentary there are instances when he wrote a comment in Hebrew. Invariably, these are the comments of a Torah scholar on a Talmudic discussion point that was not appropriate to the general audience for whom his work was intended. Yet, he was concerned that posterity should not lose the important halachic point he had realized. To accommodate this, he chose to write these points in scholarly, rabbinic Hebrew.

Aside from his use of German, there are many other ways in which Rav Hirsch's approach is different from the other commentaries that we are discussing. Rav Hirsch's commentary is not simply an interpretation of Chumash. He uses his commentary to demonstrate how the Torah should be used as the primary educational tool for man to grow as a human being. There is virtually not a comment of his on the Torah that is not explained as a moral lesson, what we call in our day a mussar haskeil. It appears that Rav Hirsch deliberately restricted his commentary to topics that provide us with a mussar haskeil. There are many occasions where he did not comment upon questions about pshat in a verse where it would appear appropriate for him to have done so. Apparently, he refrained from providing commentary where the conclusion would not provide any lesson one can utilize for personal growth.

Thus, Rav Hirsch viewed his commentary as a means of showing how to use Chumash as a lesson guide in what we usually call mussar and hashkafah. In this, his commentary is very different from the other three works we are discussing, all of which are devoted to providing a commentary on Chumash and not focused specifically on being works of ethical and moral development.

From a mussar perspective, Rav Hirsch's Torah commentary can provide a complete life-instruction manual on its own. We understand well why Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz told his students at Yeshiva Torah Vadaas that it would be worth their investment of time to learn to read German just for the sake of being able to read the writings of Rav Hirsch. (At the time that Rav Shraga Feivel advised his students to do this, no translation existed of Rav Hirsch's Chumash commentary in any language, nor were most of his other writings available in Hebrew or English.)

Rav Hirsch called his Torah hashkafah by the term Torah im Derech Eretz, the details of which he developed at different places in his commentary.[viii] Although the expression is often misunderstood and misinterpreted, Rav Hirsch used this term to mean that Torah and its observance is always the primary focus of a Jew's life, and that this can and must be done in all places, times and situations. Everything else that this world has to offer, including livelihood, education, culture, and social mores, must be subsumed within a Torah framework.

Reasons for mitzvos

One of Rav Hirsch's most innovative approaches is his explanations of the ta'amei hamitzvah. Of course, we all realize that a human being could never claim to understand why Hashem commanded that we perform a certain activity or prohibit a different one. Nevertheless, while performing the mitzvah, there are lessons that we can derive that may help us appreciate to a greater extent our role in fulfilling Hashem's mission for us on earth. The Sefer Hachinuch explains that the term ta'amei hamitzvah should be translated not as reason for a mitzvah, but as taste of a mitzvah. While observing or studying the laws of the mitzvos, an educational reason that we can utilize should assist the experience of the mitzvah. The concept of deriving educational reasons for mitzvos certainly did not originate with Rav Hirsch. In one place in his commentary,[ix] Rav Hirsch quotes dozens of sources where Chazal discuss what lesson one can derive from the observance of the mitzvos, and we have several rishonim, most notably the Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim and the Sefer Hachinuch, who devote much time to this study. However, Rav Hirsch added several dimensions to the concept of ta'amei hamitzvah. One dimension is that Rav Hirsch's explanation of a mitzvah must always fit every detail of the halachos, the laws of the mitzvah. In this detail, his approaches vary from those suggested by the Rambam and the Sefer Hachinuch, whose reasons often do not fit all the details of the mitzvah.

Based on this approach, Rav Hirsch first develops and explains all the details of a mitzvah according to the halachic conclusion, and then weaves an explanation for the mitzvah that fits all those halachic details. At times, he must first take controversial positions regarding details of the laws of the mitzvah, something he is not afraid to do.

Frequently, Rav Hirsch presents approaches to ta'amei hamitzvos that none of the major mitzvah commentators suggest. For example, Rav Hirsch presents brilliant approaches to explain mitzvos such as arayos, keifel, arachin, and tumah and taharah, and why we disqualify blemished animals and blemished kohanim from the service of korbanos. In the case of tumah, he notes that the foundation of most religions is the fear of death, and this is when the priest assumes his greatest role. Quite the contrary, the kohen, the Torah's priest, is banned from involvement with the dead. This is to demonstrate that the Torah's goal is that we grow and develop throughout life – when we are in the heights of our best health. To emphasize this, we need to distance the kohen, whose role is to educate how to live as a Jew, from death.

Rav Hirsch uses the same concept to explain a different, seemingly baffling area of mitzvos. Why is a kohen who has a physical blemish or injury forbidden to serve in the Mishkan or the Beis Hamikdash? Similarly, why is an animal with a similar impairment prohibited as a korban? This emphasis on physical beauty or selectiveness seems to run counter to the Torah's idea of equality. Everyone is equally responsible to develop a relationship with Hashem through His Torah.

Rav Hirsch explains that religions in general become the home of those who are challenged by society and cannot find their place. The Torah needs to emphasize that everyone's goal is to grow and develop in his relationship with Hashem. The only way to convey this message fully is to demonstrate that the physically impaired cannot perform service in the holiest of places.

Rav Hirsch develops an extensive analysis of the reasons for korbanos in general, and the different korbanos in particular. Based on the nature of its species, its age and gender, each variety of animal is used to explain the message and concept of each type of korban.

Rav Hirsch explains beautifully why someone who is caught stealing is required to pay back double, keifel, whereas a robber is not. One who steals when no one is looking undermines a basic understanding that a society needs in order to function – that I can rely on a degree of trust among my neighbors. Thus, his sin undermined not only the trust of the individual whose property was stolen but also that of society as a whole, thus requiring a double act of compensation.

Ta'amei hamikra

Rav Hirsch emphasized that his commentary is based on a careful understanding of the Chumash text. Read the verse very carefully and see what it teaches. Include in the study the ta'amei hamikra, what is colloquially called the trop, according to which we read the text and which includes rules how to break a pasuk into smaller units to understand it correctly. To Rav Hirsch, any interpretation of the verse must include a proper understanding of the ta'amei hamikra.

Grammar -- Dikduk and shoresh

There are several other ways in which Rav Hirsch's commentary is different from other approaches to study Chumash. People often note his original use of dikduk, particularly his development of understanding Torah ideas based on the principle of shorashim that are phonetic cognates. This idea, used by Chazal and by rishonim,[x] is that different consonants that are articulated by using the same part of the mouth are related to one another.[xi] Thus, there is a relationship among the guttural consonants (\aleph \aleph \aleph) that can be used to explain the meaning of related roots that use these or the labials (\aleph \aleph \aleph).[xii] Based on similar roots, Rav Hirsch develops a philosophic underpinning of the comparative roots, and then creates an associative meaning for each root. Often included within this system is a relationship pattern between similar consonants. For example, the

tzadi often reflects a more intense version of other similar sounds, such as the sin. Thus, there is a conceptual relationship between \aleph , which means to limit something for a specific purpose, and \aleph , which educates, shapes and disciplines the spirit. In literally hundreds of applications of these ideas, Rav Hirsch demonstrates an entire world of educational themes, each of which teaches a Torah perspective on the world.

The shoresh of a word can often explain to us not only why a specific term is used, but may sometimes provide educational and religious lessons. For example, when mentioning that Avraham Avinu moved his followers from Shechem to the mountain, the Torah uses an unusual word עֲזָזֵל vayateik, which Rav Hirsch translates as He gave orders to move on.[xiii] Rav Hirsch there notes that this root is used in various places in Tanach for apparently different ideas, but whose common thread is that someone or something is moved unexpectedly or forcibly to a setting where it did not belong originally. Rav Hirsch thereby explains that Avraham realized that his followers needed to be isolated from the society around them for him to succeed in educating them, but he needed to overcome their resistance in doing so. Thus, from the proper study of the root of the word used, we gain an insight into Avraham's pedagogic approach.

Rav Hirsch later notes that Avraham Avinu indeed took his followers with him to rescue Lot. This is seemingly an abrogation of his previous decision to have his followers live apart from society. The answer is that this was an emergency, and one cannot maintain separation under those circumstances. Again, we are provided with an education on how to run one's life according to Torah standards. Germaine to this discussion, I would like to take issue with a comment made by the late Dayan Dr. Isaac Grunfeld in his beautiful essay written as an introduction to the first English translation of Rav Hirsch's commentary to Chumash, by Dr. Isaac Levy. Dayan Grunfeld's writes that the Hirsch Commentary is devoted to presenting "the unity of the Written and Oral Law as one of the fundamentals of authentic Judaism." In this introduction, Dayan Grunfeld makes the following statement, "When Samson Raphael Hirsch began his commentary in 1867, he had the works of Mecklenburg and Hatorah Vehamitzvah of Malbim in front of him." I presume that Dayan Grunfeld has some mesorah that this is true. However, from my work on Rav Hirsch's commentary, and my comparison to the other two works, I personally am not convinced that this statement is accurate. My reasons are as follows:

When Rav Hirsch felt indebted to an earlier commentator, he always quoted his source. In the course of his commentary of Chumash, he quotes a wide variety of sources, including hisrabbe'im, Chacham Bernays and Rav Yaakov Ettlinger (the Aruch Laneir), the highly controversial Naftali Wessely, and such late works as Harechashim Levik'ah. Yet, there is not a single reference anywhere in his commentary on Chumash to either Hakesav Vehakabalah or Hatorah Vehamitzvah.

The answer is simple: Rav Hirsch's thrust in his commentary was different from theirs. His goal was not to demonstrate that Chazal's understanding of Torah was the most accurate. His goal was to show that the Torah can be used as a basis for all of man's growth in Torah, his proper personality development, and his hashkafah or world outlook.

There are places that Rav Hirsch leaves us with no explanation, whereas Hakesav Vehakabalah presents approaches that lend themselves perfectly to Rav Hirsch's style of commentary. I will give one example: Rav Hirsch has almost no commentary to the lengthy list of travels that the Benei Yisroel made through the desert. Yet, Hakesav Vehakabalah has a beautiful explanation of the names and travels, which lends itself perfectly to Rav Hirsch's use of Chumash to teach musar haskeil. Rav Hirsch himself uses other similar passages to teach musar haskeil, most noticeably the list of names of the descendants of Sheis. If he was in the habit of reading Hakesav Vehakabalah as part of his weekly reading, as Dayan Grunfeld implies, I cannot fathom why he did not use the opportunity to include these lessons in his Torah commentary and attribute them to Hakesav Vehakabalah, as he so often attributes explanations to earlier commentators.

Conclusion

Most of the innovations that have kept Torah alive in the last century are directly attributable to Rav Hirsch. Although Sarah Shenirer is the founder and basis of the Beis Yaakov movement, the originator of organized chinuch for women was Rav Hirsch, and his influence on everything related to the beginnings of the Beis Yaakov movement is axiomatic.

In most countries of the world, the majority of our Torah elementary schools and high schools include secular studies in their curriculum. This approach to Torah education is completely based on the framework of Rav Hirsch's education system.

The extensive use of the vernacular for teaching Torah is another gift to us from Rav Hirsch. Certainly, the success of the numerous publishing houses that print and distribute Torah literature written in English, French, Spanish, Russian and other languages is completely based on Rav Hirsch's producing his material in German. The existence in the modern marketplace of highly trained professionals, as uncompromising in their professional standards as they are in their Torah observance, is directly attributable to the teachings of Rav Hirsch.

Rav Hirsch was the quintessential borei'ach min hakavod. Clearly, he saw his mission in life as educating the Jewish world with the beauty of Torah and its mitzvos. Leaving Moravia for what appeared to be a moribund Frankfurt may have been a disastrous move professionally, but for Klal Yisroel it has been the savior, not merely of the central European Torah world, but of virtually the entire contemporary Torah world. Yehi zichro boruch.

[i] I refer to the commentaries of the Malbim because, although he wrote on the entire Tanach, a rare accomplishment, his treatment of the different parts of Tanach is so varied as to make it difficult to refer to it as one commentary.

[ii] On Chumash, the Malbim follows two different styles. As I mention in the article, his work to Vayikra and parts of Devorim is an explanation of the midrashei halachah, the Sifra and the Sifrei, in which he delves into Chazal's method of understanding Torah Shebiskav. On the other hand, his commentaries to other parts of Chumash bear close similarity to the commentary of the Abrabanel – he presents many questions on the topic at hand, and then weaves an explanation to answer them. Yet another style is presented in his commentaries to Esther and Shir Hashirim, in which he presents his own midrashic-style approach to these works. [iii] Commentary to Bereisheis 1:19 [iv] This point is the main thrust of Dayan Isaac Grunfeld's introduction to Rav Hirsch's commentary, which I will quote later in the article. [v] See Yevamos 28a [vi] See, for example, the second introduction of Yam shel Shelomoh of the Maharshal to Tractate Chullin. [vii] For examples of this, see his explanation of the law of shifchah charufah, Vayikra 19:20 and of the pasuk velo setamei es admasecha, Devorim 21:23. See there how the other three commentaries we discuss deal with this topic. [viii] See, for example, his commentary to Vayikra 18:4. [ix] Devorim 24:18 [x] For example, see Rashi, Vayikra 19:16, where he explains that the word רכלי stems from the word רגלי. [xi] A language specialist calls these words homorganic consonants. [xii] Those interested in seeing a systematic dictionary of Rav Hirsch's work in this area are referred to Matityahu Clark's Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, Feldheim Publishers, which Rabbi Clark writes is "based on the commentaries of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch." [xiii] Bereisheis 12:8. Translation is from the Haberman edition.

Rabbi YY Jacobson

The First Commandment: Find the Courage to Heal

"Let My People Go!" But Can They Let Themselves Go?

Three Boys -- Three boys are in the schoolyard bragging of how great their fathers are. The first one says: "Well, my father runs the fastest. He can fire an arrow, and start to run, I tell you, he gets there before the arrow." The second one says: "Ha! You think that's fast! My father is a hunter. He can shoot his gun and be there before the bullet." The third one listens to the other two and shakes his head. He then says: "You two know nothing about fast. My father is a civil servant. He stops working at 4:30 and he is home by 3:45!"

The First Commandment -- The Biblical account of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt has been one of the most inspiring stories for the oppressed, enslaved and downtrodden throughout history. From the American Revolution, to the slaves of the American South, to Martin Luther King's Let Freedom Ring, the narrative of the Exodus provided countless people with the courage to hope for a better future, and to act on the dream. Moses' first visit to Pharaoh demanding liberty for his people only brought more misery to the Hebrew slaves; the Egyptian monarch increased their torture. The Hebrews now would not listen any longer to the promise of redemption. Now let us pay heed to this seemingly strange verse in Exodus, in the Torah portion of Vaeira:

So G-d spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and He commanded them to the children of Israel, and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt, to let the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. [1] G-d is charging Moses with two directives: Command the people of Israel and then command Pharaoh the king. However, the verse is ambiguous: What did G-d command Moses to instruct the people? The message for Pharaoh is clear: Let the children of Israel out of Egypt. But what is it that Moses is supposed to command the people themselves?

The Jerusalem Talmud[2] says something profoundly enigmatic: G-d instructed Moses to command to the Jewish people the laws of freeing slaves. The Talmud is referring to a law recorded later in Exodus:[3] If a Jew sells himself as a slave, the owner must let him go after six years. He is forbidden to hold on to the slave for longer. This was the law Moses was to share with the Israelites while they were in Egyptian bondage.

The Basis for the Commentary -- The Talmud bases this novel and seemingly unfounded interpretation on a fascinating narrative in the book of Jeremiah: [4] Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: So says the Lord G-d of Israel; I made a covenant with your fathers on the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves, saying: "At the end of seven years you

shall let go every man his brother Jew who has been sold to you, and when he has served you for six years you shall let him go free from you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When I am living in active trauma, my relationships and emotions are guided and shaped by the trauma—the need to survive in a scary and unsafe world. How can I give up control? How can I celebrate otherness? How can I even connect with someone in a genuine and authentic way when I needed to put my heart on lockdown in order to survive?

I am simply not capable of truly celebrating another person's life and individuality, because I am desperate each moment for emotional oxygen; all I can think of is how to remain protected in a world that is dangerous.

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

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

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

As it turns out, this is a remarkable Talmudic insight. The first commandment ever given to the Jewish people was: Don't internalize what the Egyptians have done to you. Find the spark of freedom, the

inner Divine core, that no trauma can tarnish or paralyze; that part has remained free and will cherish conferring it upon others.

On a personal note, this week I attended the shivah of Avrumi Schapiro, Reb Avraham Yehoshua Heschel (son of the Noraler Rebbe from Benei Berak), 61, who passed away suddenly last Friday night in his home in Boro Park. Talking to his wife, Shoshi, and their beautiful children, I could viscerally feel the image of the person whom I knew for many years. Someone who felt empowered by empowering others; a person who came to life by bringing life, joy, and fulfillment to others. He mastered the secret of freedom and celebration – letting go and enjoying the laughter of others. Footnotes [1] Exodus 6:13. [2] Rosh Hashanah Chapter 3:5.

See the commentary of the Karban Heidah ibid. See at length Torah Shleimah Parshas Vaeira for all the commentary on this Talmudic statement. [3] Exodus 21:2 [4] 34:12-14 [5] See Meshech Chachmah (By Rabbi Meir Simcha Hakohen, the Rabbi of Devink and author of Or Samach) to Parshas Vaeira for his novel explanation, that there were Egyptian Jews at the times who owned Jewish slaves. Moses instructed them to set their slaves free. Cf. Torah Shleimah ibid for additional explanations.

Parashat Vayera by Rabbi Nachman Kahana

The Transformation from Moses to Moshe Rabbeinu

Last week's parashat Shemot ends with Moshe emotionally complaining to HaShem for sending him to Paro to demand the release of the Jewish slaves; the result of which only angered Paro more, increasing their torment and suffering.

This week's parasha Va'ai'ra begins with HaShem castigating Moshe for speaking out of turn.

Question: Was Moshe correct in voicing his grievances over the failed result of his missions?

I will return to this.

Shemini Atzeret (October 7, 2023): The Pogrom on the Jews Living Close to Gaza

In order to understand what happened on that grievous day when Israel's technically advanced security system was so easily breached, and 1400 Jews were brutally tortured and massacred, one has to understand the two parshiot Shemot and Va'ai'ra.

The Emancipator

When the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov sent his beloved Jews into slavery, He had already set the scene for their future emancipation and the personalities who would be empowered with its implementation. The emancipator would have to possess three characteristics:

1- An affiliation with the Jewish people (which leaves out an Egyptian).
2- He would have to be immune and invulnerable to the pomp and elegance of the royal court.

3- He would have to be able to admonish and castigate Paro without fear that it might cost him his life.

Enter the episode of the child Moshe. He was placed among the reeds of the river, found by princess Batya, returned to his mother Yocheved to be nursed, and at two years old was returned to Batya to raise him as a prince in the palace "under the nose" of the ruthless Paro.

The next time we encounter Moshe he is eighty years old. From the Midrashim we learn that Moshe filled important positions in the Egyptian government, including many outside of the land of Egypt. It would be logical to say that Moshe was aware of his Jewish background but was consciously an Egyptian.

Parashat Shemot relates that "one day" Moshe set out from the palace to inspect the outlying regions removed from the capital. He saw an Egyptian taskmaster smiting a Hebrew slave. Moshe was seized with wrath, killed the Egyptian, and escaped to the land of Midian.

Questions:

Why was Moshe shocked by the sight of an Egyptian smiting a Jew?
Did he not know that millions of Jews were being beaten daily?

If Moshe believed that he behaved properly in killing the Egyptian, why did he not bring the matter before Paro, instead choosing to flee the country?

Was it just a "coincidence" that in Midian Moshe found himself in Yitro's home, among in the vast expanses of Midian?

In the miraculous episode of the burning bush that was not consumed, our sages say that for seven days and nights Moshe was commanded to

return to Egypt to intervene in the violation of the Jews' "human rights" and Moshe refused. Is that possible?

How did it happen that Moshe could come and go from Paro's palace as he pleased? What is more, how could it be that Moshe severely rebuked Paro in an insulting manner, yet Paro did not lift a finger to punish him? In Moshe's first encounter with Paro upon his return from Midian, he warned the King: "I have told you to let My son (Am Yisrael) go and serve Me. If you refuse to let him leave, I will [ultimately] kill your own first-born son" (Shemot 4:23). Yet isn't it a fact that Paro had no first-born son, with the nearest thing to it being Moshe himself?

I suggest:

Moshe, as Paro's adopted grandson, was heavily ensconced in Egyptian culture. He had studied in excellent military and civilian academies, and all the "right people" in Egypt wanted to "rub elbows" with him.

We can assume that Amram and Yocheved, his biological and halachic parents did not receive visitation rights to teach Moshe the rudiments of Judaism, as it had been received from Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. Moshe was brought up as the beloved son of Batya and grandson of Paro and many in the royal court were probably aware of his Hebraic background.

Out of his love for Moshe, Paro distanced him from the harsh reality of the Egyptian regime that enslaved millions of Jews under heinous conditions. He had further appointed Moshe to run "his household" so Moshe would concentrate totally on the palace and royal court and not on what was happening outside. He did not want Moshe to wake up one morning and discover that his beloved grandfather Paro, was the "Commandant of Dachau".

Between Shemot 2:10, in which Batya adopts Moshe as a son, and the very next verse Moshe "is grown and begins to go out to his own people," spotting the Egyptian smiting the Jew.

What emerges from the text is that Moshe had been unaware that the Jews were being cruelly enslaved, and that on a daily basis many were being beaten to death. As noted, Paro had taken pains to distance Moshe from the harsh reality that reigned in Egypt due to the decree of Paro, himself.

Moshe's world was about to collapse. Not because he had killed an Egyptian but because of the sudden awareness that the man who had been like a father to him, who had educated and provided him with all of the world's bounty, Paro, was in fact a cruel despot who was subjugating an entire nation; and what is more, it was the nation of Yosef, who had saved Egypt.

Moses understood that he must approach Paro and chastise him. Yet that was a mission impossible for two reasons: Moshe understood now that the Egyptian economy was based on slavery, and all of Egypt's military and political power derived from its strong economic situation.

Moreover, Moshe was incapable of castigating Paro because he loved Paro and Batya and identified himself as an Egyptian. Moshe was left with no choice but to flee Egypt to escape the reality in which he was indirectly a partner due to his associations with the monarchy.

Moshe fled to Midian and without any intent found himself in the house of Yitro. Who was Yitro? The Talmud in Sotah relates that Paro had three advisors who were privy to the plan to enslave the Jewish People: Yitro, Bilam and Iyov. When Paro presented his plan, Bilam agreed immediately, Iyov remained silent, and Yitro fled to Midian.

Here "hashgacha pratit" (Divine Providence) directed Moshe, the escapee, to the home of Yitro, the escapee.

Yitro knew Moshe from Paro's palace, and Moshe knew Yitro, as well. In the cold nights of Midian, as Moshe and Yitro sat around the warm hearth, Yitro thought to himself that the only person who could influence Paro was his beloved Moshe, the man sitting across from him, yet Moshe had fled from his moral responsibility. Moshe thought to himself that the policy of slavery was largely facilitated by Yitro's not having opposed it, instead preferring flight. Moshe and Yitro were two men who had fled from their moral responsibilities, expected of anyone with a spark of integrity and fairness.

One day, Moshe was herding Yitro's flocks on Mount Chorev, i.e., Mount Sinai. Suddenly he noticed a wondrous sight – a burning bush

that was not being consumed. When Moshe drew near to the strange sight, he heard a voice telling him to return to Egypt, to approach Paro, to identify himself as a member of the Jewish People and to demand that Paro release the Jewish people. For seven days and nights he stood firm in his refusal, arguing by various means that he was not the right man for the mission.

And how indeed was it possible to refuse HaShem for even a moment, let alone seven days and nights?

As a rule, HaShem does not force spirituality on a person. Everyone is given free will to choose between good and evil. What happened there on the mountain did not involve HaShem's immediately commanding Moshe to undertake the mission, but rather His arousing Moshe's pure conscience. For an entire week, Moshe's conscience weighed upon him to do the right thing, to approach Paro and demand freedom for the Jewish People.

Moshe struggled to block out the truth within his conscience, but ultimately gave in and decided that he must return to Egypt. Once he made that decision, HaShem revealed Himself and appointed Moshe as His emissary until the day of his death on Mount Avarim.

Moshe returned to Egypt, to the palace of his childhood, to his "mother" Batya and to his "grandfather" Paro whom he so much loved.

One can only imagine what occurred when Moshe entered the royal palace after being away for decades. Paro hurriedly summoned Batya. Moshe approached them, and Batya ran to hug and kiss him, tearfully exclaiming, "Moshe, my son! Moshe, my son! Where have you been?" Yet Moshe did not respond. Then Paro alighted from his high throne and with a penetrating gaze said, in a tone of anger and pain: "Where were you? Not a letter! Not a single message! Look at your mother Batya who raised you from when you were an infant. Her eyes are red from crying over you!"

Paro waited for an answer that did not come. So, he said to Moshe, "What do you have to say, Moshe?" Moshe looked at Paro and at Batya, and with tears in his eyes, declared, "Let my people go!"

Paro was shocked by what he heard. "Let my people go?" What are you talking about? We are your people!"

Moshe gazed directly at Paro, raised his voice, and proclaimed, "The Hebrew slaves are my people! If you do not free them, the God of the Hebrews will kill your first-born son!" But Paro had no sons. In fact, Moshe was announcing that if Paro did not free the Israelites, he would no longer be able to view Moshe as part of the royal family. Paro could not bear the threat that Moshe would be cut off from him, but to the same extent he could not sabotage the economic infrastructure of his kingdom – his Hebrew slaves.

In order to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Moshe would have to trample Paro's glory and humiliate him in the extreme. But how could Moshe trample the man who had given him his life as a gift, and had raised and educated him as a son?

Moshe had come a long way to being the liberator of Am Yisrael, but there was one more hurdle that Moshe would have to overcome – the way Moshe related to Paro.

Moshe's attitude would have to sink from the heights of love to the depths of hatred. Paro's reaction to Moshe's request to allow the Israelites a number of days of rest, "in order to serve HaShem" (Shemot 5:1), was to increase the suffering:

"You are indolent!" retorted Paro. "Lazy! That's why you are saying that you want to sacrifice to HaShem. Now go! Get to work! You will not be given any straw, but you must deliver your quota of bricks." (Shemot 5:17-18)

At that moment, Moshe understood just how evil Paro had become. Moshe said: "All your officials here will come and bow down to me. They will say, 'Leave! You and all your followers!' Only then will I leave." He left Paro in great anger" (11:8).

At this point, Moshe turned full circle and was now in the position to smite the Egyptians with ten plagues, after replacing his deep feelings of love for Paro with a deeper feeling of disgust and hatred for the man.

At that moment the Egyptian called Moses became Moshe the messenger of HaShem and soon to become "Moshe Rabbeinu".

The connection between the Moshe episode and the killing spree on last Shemini Atzeret

Until October 7th there were many in the country who believed that peace between Jews and Arabs can come about if we would be a little more forth coming in our policies to them. Their position was based on the belief that people are basically good, and the two states can live in peace and harmony, like America and Canada.

The US State Department has traditionally been anti-Jewish even in the horrific years of World War Two when the gates to the "Golden Land" were double locked, and its opposition to the establishment of the Jewish State, and their present policy of two states between the river and the sea. Every thinking person understands that such an arrangement would spell the end of the Jewish state and all its inhabitants. Even now after the Arabs of Gaza and Judea-Shomron have shown their poison fangs the Secretary of State (A Jew, what else!) is demanding that we agree to the establishment of this terror state.

HaShem brought about the horrific events of Oct. 7th to exhibit the profound hate that the Arabs possess for the Jews, no less than that of the Germans. Interesting fact: there is no documentation of a Nazi committing suicide in order to kill a Jew, but the Arabs are proud of their suicide bombers. So, there is no amount of compromise that could overcome their enmity.

Our "leftists" had a shocking awakening when it became disclosed in a survey that nearly all of our Arabs support Hamas and the atrocities they committed.

Moshe had to experience the evil in the heart of Paro as a pre-condition to becoming the leader who would free the Jews, and our Israeli leftists had to experience the ingrained evil in the hearts of our neighbors.

We know now that there is no room for our Arab enemies in this country. The question we will have to deal with in the near future is if our political and military leaders have the courage to remove these devils from our midst, as did our father Avraham did when he expelled Yishmael and Hagar from his home.

Conclusion: Even the events of Shemini Atzeret 5784 can be led by the precedents set down in the Torah over 3000 years ago.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov,

Nachman Kahana

Drasha By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vaera Hitting Pay Dirt

There is a certain sensitivity displayed in this week's portion that serves as a lesson to mankind.

The first two of the 10 plagues that befell Egypt evolved around water. In the first plague, the waters of Egypt turned into blood. The second plague had frogs emerge from the water. In order to generate those miraculous events Moshe's staff struck the waters. Moshe, however, did not strike the water. He was told that his brother Ahron should do the smiting. After all, as a three-month-old child the waters of the Nile were Moshe's refuge as he was hidden in a reed basket from Pharaoh's soldiers who were drowning all Jewish males. It would not be fitting for one who was saved by the water to strike it.

The next plague, lice, emerged from the earth. After striking the earth with his staff, lice emerged, afflicting all of Egypt. Again Moshe was told not to be the agent of transmutation. After all, he must be grateful to the earth that hid the Egyptian whom he had killed.

Of course, the great ethicists derive from Moshe's behavior the importance of gratitude. "Imagine," they point out, "Moshe had to refrain from striking inanimate objects because he was saved by them years back! How much more must we show gratitude to living beings who have been our vehicles of good fortune."

Such morals deserve a homily to themselves, and there are countless stories of gratitude to accompany such essays. However, I am bothered by the simplicity of that message and the derivations that lead to it. Why is striking water or earth a display of ingratitude? Was it not the will of Hashem to have the dust and waters converted? Would it not be a great elevation to those waters or the dust to be transformed to higher components of G-d's glory? That being the case, wouldn't it be most

fitting that Moshe be chosen to elevate simple waters or lowly dirt into objects that declare the open presence of an Almighty Creator who shouts together with his humble servant, “Let My people serve Me”?

Rabbi Nosson Schapira of Krakow (1585-1633) once told of his most difficult case.

A wealthy businessman from Warsaw would do business each month in the Krakow market. On each visit he noticed an extremely pious widow huddled near her basket of bagels reciting Psalms. She only lifted her eyes from her worn prayer book to sell a bagel or roll. After the sale she'd shower her customer with a myriad of blessings and immediately she'd return to the frayed pages of her prayer book that were varnished with teardrops and devotion.

Upon observing her each month, the Krakow businessman came to a conclusion. “This pious woman should not have to struggle to earn a living. She should be able to pursue her prayers and piety with no worries.”

He offered to double her monthly earnings on one condition: she would leave the bagel business and spend her time in the service of the L-rd. The woman, tears of joy streaming down her face, accepted the generous offer and thanked the kind man with praise, gratitude and blessing.

A month later, when the man returned to Krakow, he was shocked to find the woman at her usual place, mixing the sweet smell of bagels with the sweet words of Tehillim. As soon as he approached, the woman handed him an envelope. “Here is your money. I thought it over I can’t accept your offer.”

“A deal is a deal,” he exclaimed. “We must see Rabbi Schapira!”

After the businessman presented his case, the woman spoke. “The reason this generous man offered to support me was to help me grow in my spirituality and devotion. From the day I left my bagel business I’ve only fallen. Let me explain.

“Every day that it would rain, I would think of the farmers who planted the wheat for my bagels. I would sing praises for the glory of rain as I felt the personal guidance of Hashem with each raindrop. When the sun would shine I would once again thank Hashem from letting the farmers harvest in good weather. When I would grind the flour and then sift it again I’d find countless reasons to thank the Almighty. When the bread would bake golden brown I’d thank Hashem for the beauty of the product and its sweet sell. And when a customer would come I’d thank both Hashem for sending him and then bless my patron, too! Now this is all gone, I want no part of a simple, all-expense-paid life.”

Moshe had a very personal relationship with the water and the dust. Each time he saw the Nile or tread upon the ground, he remembered the vehicles of his good fortune and used them to praise Hashem. Blood, frogs, and lice are surely miraculous, but they were not Moshe’s personal salvation. Striking the water or earth may have produced great national miracles, but Moshe would be left without the simple dirt that yielded piles of personal praise. When one forgoes marveling at a lowly speck of dust and chooses to focus instead upon huge mountains, he may never hit pay dirt. He may only bite the dust.

Dedicated in memory of A. Milton Brown by Mr. & Mrs. Ben Brown

Rabbi Yissocher Frand -- Parshas Vaera

Reconsidering Long Held Beliefs Made Moshe Appropriate for Leadership

This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1277 – Snow Shailos. Good Shabbos!

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

In addition, the parshios of Shemos, Vaera, Bo and Beshalach are the parshios of Yetzias Mitzraim. I always consider them one entity, so

therefore it is legitimate for me to speak about Parshas Shemos again this week.

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

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

The Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim asks four questions:

1. Rashi, on the words “asura nah” (Let me turn aside now) writes: “asura m’kan l’hisikarev sham” (I will turn from here to approach there.) Is this a kind of elaboration we need Rashi to provide? Why does Rashi need to provide this obvious inference, which really adds nothing to our understanding of these words?

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

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

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

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

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

Rabbeinu Ephraim al haTorah, who was an early commentary, makes this point in an even stronger fashion: Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand why Klal Yisroel should not be destroyed for being so contentious and slanderous vis-a-vis one another. According to Rabbeinu Ephraim, after witnessing these incidents, Moshe came to the conclusion that not only would Bnei Yisroel remain in Mitzraim and not come out, but that they would ultimately disappear.

Now, unlike the impression we get from a simple reading of the opening chapters of Sefer Shemos, Moshe did not flee to Midyan directly after killing this Egyptian. The Ramban writes that this incident of Moshe going out and killing the Egyptian took place when he was just twelve years old, or slightly older. When Moshe Rabbeinu came before

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

The explanation is that Moshe had concluded (as Rashi and Rabbeinu Ephraim mentioned) that Bnei Yisroel were doomed! His interaction with those two Jews that second day convinced him that the Jews were not worthy of redemption. That is why he could stay away for so much time with the firm belief that the Jews would never get out of Mitzraim. Moshe came to Midyan and then saw the Burning Bush. He saw that it was not being consumed. This was a miraculous event. There was a message over here. Klal Yisroel are like this thorn bush. Anyone who starts up with them is going to suffer! Hashem was sending Moshe a message via this miraculous sight: Against all expectations to the contrary, a thorn bush, representing the Jewish people, was not being consumed. Suddenly, Moshe Rabbeinu has an epiphany. Moshe says: Do you know what? Maybe, I was wrong! Maybe, my operating assumption for the past sixty-plus years that Klal Yisroel will never get out of Mitzraim was incorrect.

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

Moshe Rabbeinu said to himself "I will turn aside and investigate" (Asura nah v'er'eh). Moshe needs to talk to himself. He needs to convince himself. "Please, Moshe, check this out because maybe I have been mistaken. Maybe I am wrong!" This is why Rashi provides the seemingly unnecessary elaboration "Turn aside from here and go to there." (Question #1) This is not just a matter of moving six feet. This is a very important life changing moment. (Question #2) This is a matter of changing an entire philosophy and world vision. This is why Moshe uses the word nah (please) (Question #3), because Moshe needed to convince himself. People find it very difficult to admit that they have been wrong. Finally, that is also why the next pasuk says "And Hashem saw that he turned to investigate." The Ribono shel Olam saw that Moshe Rabbeinu was investigating. We asked, "What's the big deal about checking out a fire?" (Question #4) Sure. We would all check out such an incident. But if it meant having to reassess and possibly retract that which we have strongly believed for the last half century, that is not such a simple matter. This made an impression on the Ribono shel Olam because this proved to Him that Moshe Rabbeinu had the quality to be a manhig Yisroel (Jewish leader). The quality to be a manhig Yisroel is the ability to admit "I may be wrong. Maybe there is another way of looking at things. Maybe I made a mistake."

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

This happens to us as well. We have certain opinions, certain presumptions in life. There are certain things that we believe in throughout our lives. Maybe, just maybe, we are wrong. Everyone has opinions. They have opinions about Eretz Yisroel. They have opinions about secular education. They have opinions about women. People have

deeply ingrained presumptions about all different matters. We are all opinionated. And of course, we are always right. "It is my way or the highway. There is no other way!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hothouses of Anti-Semitism -- by Jonathan Rosenblum -- Mishpacha Magazine

Those halcyon days are long past for American colleges and universities. Bret Stephens began a recent column in the New York Times by posing a question to himself: Why can't I stop writing about the events of October 7 in Israel and their aftermath around the globe? He answered that his mother was a hidden child during the Holocaust, and he does not wish to worry about his own children being forced into hiding one day.

I know that many readers have had a similar question about my own particular obsession with the decline of America's universities and have wondered why I have devoted so much space over the years to the topic. After all, as one revered rosh yeshivah put it, our children do not aspire to go to Harvard or Yale.

In my own case, the answer begins with my own happy college experience at the University of Chicago. Among the other benefits of the education that I received there, I believe, were habits of mind that made it easier for me to become an observant Jew within less than a decade of leaving college. Though the University of Chicago of my college years no longer centered on the same Great Books curriculum of my parents' days in the Hutchins College, a great deal remained of the respect for the acquired knowledge of mankind over the centuries and the belief that the best way to pursue the big questions of life was to start with the wisdom of the ancients. That certainly made it easier to throw myself into the lifetime study of texts recording debates of two millennia ago.

Second, the assumption was that the truth is most likely to emerge from testing one's ideas against those of others, and listening carefully and respectfully to what others have to say, even if it goes against the assumptions of a lifetime. That attitude left my ears and heart open to hear the Torah.

But those halcyon days are long past for American colleges and universities. As Fareed Zakaria, who holds degrees from both Harvard and Yale, asked recently on CNN, how did American universities, which were once the envy of the world, go in eight years from being viewed as centers of excellence to becoming objects of ridicule pushing political agendas? In 2013, 74 percent of those polled thought a college education was important. Just six years later, that had fallen to 41 percent. Applications for early admissions to Harvard have plummeted 17 percent over the last year alone.

Recent history, George Will told a group of Princetonians for Free Speech in September, shows that in less than a decade, the legacy of elite institutions that took centuries to create "can be destroyed from within, not by outside forces. They can fall under the control of

people unsympathetic, and even hostile, to the universities' noble and timeless mission of free and fearless inquiry and disputation. And under the modern tenure system, this caste of hostile people can reproduce itself, reinforcing an authoritarian grip that cannot easily, if at all, be pried loose."

IN ANY EVENT, my lament about the lost higher education of my youth is trivial compared to what we have witnessed on campuses since October 7. No one, and certainly not any Jew, asks anymore, "Why should we worry about what happens on college campuses?" And that is the result of two events.

The first was the jubilant celebration on campuses across America on October 7, among both students and faculty, in the wake of inhuman savagery perpetrated by Hamas against Jews on the Gaza border. Even the Nazis yemach shemam did not kill Jews with a comparable bloodlust.

Yet tenured faculty at Columbia, Yale, and Cornell took to social media to proclaim their exhilaration over the slaughter of Jews. "This is what decolonization looks like," sneered one. These celebrations, it is important to remember, took place weeks before any Israeli military response against Hamas, and thus had nothing to do with sympathy for "innocent" Palestinians killed by the Israeli military. They were celebrations of the murder, rape, and torture of Jews, in the cruelest possible fashion, pure and simple. And they revealed that the universities are demonstrably producing large numbers of morally deformed people.

The second watershed event, in terms of public perceptions of elite universities, was the December 5 congressional testimony of the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania. In response to questioning by Congresswoman Elise Stefanik as to whether calls for genocide against Jews would violate their universities' codes of conduct, the three presidents each offered repeated legalistic variants of "it depends on context."

With that testimony, American higher education, said NYU's Jonathan Haidt, "hit rock bottom." Economist Tyler Cowan of George Mason University blogged that the three presidents "have ended up disgracing their universities, in front of massive audiences." And the normally soft-spoken foreign policy analyst Walter Russell Mead wrote in the Wall Street Journal that "the Ivies reel from the inept performance of their deeply mediocre leaders."

Even Harvard constitutional scholar Laurence Tribe, a man of the left, professed to finding "[Harvard president] Claudine Gay's hesitant, formulaic, and bizarrely evasive answers deeply troubling to me and many of my colleagues, students, and friends."

Though private institutions are not bound by the First Amendment, the university presidents tried to present themselves as First Amendment absolutists. That might conceivably have been a defensible position were it not for the hypocrisy involved. Harvard and University of Pennsylvania were ranked dead last and next-to-last, respectively, in the FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression) annual rankings of the free speech environment on campus. As Michael Barone noted, there was something a bit rich about universities that have elaborate speech codes and that punish both students and teachers for using the wrong pronouns or for insisting that male and female are binary categories suddenly defending the most offensive speech imaginable.

Dr. Jeffrey Flier, former dean of Harvard Medical School, offered, for instance, the example of lecturer Carole Hooven, who was subjected to public, personal attacks by people representing themselves as speaking on behalf of Harvard, after publication of a book on gender differences. Those attacks resulted in driving her out of a long and successful teaching career. Harvard's current president Claudine Gay was dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the time, and offered no support to Hooven. Indeed, Harvard's DEI bureaucracy largely came into being on Gay's watch.

What emerged from the testimony of the three college presidents, then, is that each of the universities in question has one set of standards in place for speech that may be deemed offensive at any level to members of favored groups and a completely different standard in place for speech that is not only offensive but threatening to Jewish students.

Tellingly, Harvard's response to the request by billionaire hedge fund manager and Harvard alumnus Bill Ackman for the names of the signatories to a statement of 34 Harvard groups placing exclusive blame on Israel for Hamas's October 7 atrocities, so that he could be sure not to hire any of them, was to create a special committee to protect the signatories from any adverse consequences in employment. The headline of the satirical Babylon Bee (which I have quoted before) fully captures the double standards: "Harvard student leaves class on microaggressions early to attend 'Kill the Jews' rally."

ANTI-SEMITISM IS A LIGHT SLEEPER, observed the late Irish statesman (and philo-Semitic) Conor Cruise O'Brien. And that has certainly proven to be the case since October 7 in urban America and around the world. FBI director Christopher Wray describes anti-Semitic incidents as having "reached historic levels." Since October 7, there have been 50 reported anti-Semitic incidents a day in London, a 1,350 percent increase over the year, according to the Metropolitan Police. French interior minister Gerald Darmanin says that the number of anti-Semitic acts in France has "exploded." And the Israeli embassy in Berlin recently compared the rise of anti-Semitic incidents to the Third Reich era.

The most frequent perpetrators are no doubt local Muslim populations, but the ranks of perpetrators are far broader. And everywhere, the hatred is far worse among the youngest adults. In a recent Harvard-Harris poll, 53 percent of Americans between 18-24 said that October 7 was justified by Israel's wrongs toward the Palestinians.

Those most likely to say so were also the most likely to know nothing about the history of Israeli-Palestinian conflict: e.g., that Gaza has not been occupied since 2005; that it is Hamas, not Israel, that limits the import of food and medical supplies; that far from committing genocide against Palestinians, the Palestinian population grew rapidly under Israeli rule, with life expectancy skyrocketing and infant mortality plummeting; that the Palestinians have been repeatedly offered a state since the original UN Partition in 1948; that far from being colonizers, Jews are indigenous to Israel, and purchased, not conquered, all the land on which Israel was originally founded; that at the time of the Second Aliyah of Jews, the land was desolate and largely unpopulated, and only when the Jews had drained the swamps and caused the deserts to bloom was a large Arab population attracted to live there; and that most of Israel's Jewish population today is descended from Jews of color ethnically cleansed from Arab lands.

But the animosity of the younger cohort extends far beyond Israel to Jews in general. In that same Harvard-Harris poll, a full two-thirds of the youngest cohort responded affirmatively to the statement, "Jews as a class are oppressors and should be treated as oppressors." That was in stark contrast to all older cohorts. Over half of that cohort answered that universities should tell those who call for the genocide of Jews that they are free to do so, and that they should suffer no adverse consequences for violating university rules.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt recently sought to answer the question, "Why Antisemitism Sprouted So Quickly on Campus." The US Department of Education has already opened investigations of numerous universities under Title VI, on the grounds that they have created or tolerated a hostile environment for Jewish students. Those investigations threaten federal funding for the schools in question, including four Ivy League schools (Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, and Cornell, each of which has a large number of Jewish students), equally prestigious Stanford and MIT, three of the main branches of the University of California system (Davis, San Diego, and UCLA), and three large state schools (Rutgers in New Jersey, Washington, and the University of Illinois-Chicago campus).

Haidt placed the principal blame on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) regimes that are now ubiquitous on virtually every university campus. The terms themselves sound benevolent enough, and there are no doubt some well-intentioned, non-radicalized individuals serving in the massive DEI bureaucracies.

But when one begins to unravel the underlying assumptions of the DEI bureaucracies, their dangers become clear. Most inimical is the term "equity," which has come to mean that any time an identifiable group is not equally represented in the allocation of societal goods (e.g., admission to elite universities) or societal punishments (e.g., school discipline or imprisonment), the only admissible explanation is discrimination, i.e., systemic racism.

Almost the entire younger cohort subscribes to this theory. In response to the question, "There is an ideology that white people are oppressors and nonwhite people and people of certain groups have been oppressed and as a result should be favored at universities and for employment. Do you support or oppose this ideology?" Almost four-fifths of those polled in the 18-24 cohort supported it.

According to that ideology, success is inherently suspect, and any group that is disproportionately successful — Asians, Jews — can be assumed to have gained their success unjustly or by theft from some other less successful group. (Only the rosters of NBA basketball teams, which are disproportionately black, represent a true and legitimate meritocracy, in the eyes of DEI theorists.)

Asians and Jews are anathema to those same DEI theorists because they disprove the theory. Both groups were subject to severe discrimination in America, and in the case of Jews, long before arriving on these shores. Most members of both groups arrived without English and virtually penniless. And yet both have thrived.

That explains why it is so foolish for Jewish students on campus to look toward the DEI bureaucracies for protection. Those manning the DEI bureaucracies have typically been radicalized by their teacher college training, and are overwhelmingly hostile to Jews and to Israel. For instance, Sima Shakhshari, currently a leading candidate for a senior position in the University of Minnesota's DEI department, denies that Hamas repeatedly raped the women it killed on October 7 and those taken captive, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. She compared the charges against Hamas to those against the Scottsboro boys, young blacks lynched by a Southern mob for having whistled at a white woman in the 1930s.

One DEI official who was solicitous of the concerns of Jewish students was Tabia Lee, a black woman hired to supervise the DEI office at a Silicon Valley community college. She told black economist Glenn Loury on his podcast that when she approached her supervising dean and asked what the school was going to do about the legitimate complaints of the Jewish students, she was told, "We are going to do nothing." When she pressed for an explanation, the answer was: "Jews are white oppressors. We have to decenter whiteness."

Haidt describes in the article cited above and in his book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, written together with Greg Lukianoff of FIRE, the ways that DEI distorts critical thinking, harms the mental health of its adherents, and provides an ugly and untrue vision of human relationships. The DEI mindset uses group identity as the exclusive lens through which to view human beings, and leads to what Haidt terms one of the three great untruths to which today's young are so prone: Life is a battle between good and bad people. (He juxtaposes that view to that of the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who described good and evil as dividing every human heart, not dividing between different identity groups.)

In the Manichaean DEI universe, people are either good (victims) or bad (oppressors), and all human relationships can be framed as power relationships — dominance versus submission, oppressor versus oppressed. The good can do no wrong, whether it be BLM looters or Hamas butchers; their victim status has deprived them of all agency.

Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela humanized their opponents, and drew support by engaging in what Haidt terms "common humanity identity politics." DEI advocates, by contrast, engage in "common enemy identity politics," and seek to change their societies by uniting disparate constituencies — what is known in woke jargon as intersectionality — against a specific group of oppressors.

The latter form of identity politics, he notes ominously, is the "ideological drive behind most genocides," and is increasingly driving anti-Semitism on the left. The Manichaean worldview of a cosmic battle between good and evil leaves little room for civil discourse, and encourages shutting down the speech and ideas of those deemed oppressors. "As long as this way of thinking is taught anywhere on campus [much less everywhere], identity-based hatred will find fertile ground," Haidt warns.

Haidt is but one of those calling for the dismantling of the regnant DEI regimes. Others include Bari Weiss, founder of the Free Press; Professor Alan Dershowitz; Professor Steven Pinker of Harvard; and David Bernstein of the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values. We shall consider next week the chances of those calls being heard, or whether those named and many others are likely to continue as latter-day Cassandras, whose dark warnings went unheeded. And if the latter proves the case, and the present universities cannot be reformed from within, what the alternatives are.

PARSHAT VA'ERA -- "ANI HASHEM"

Should Bnei Yisrael's redemption from slavery be unconditional?

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

AND

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

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

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

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

GETTING BETTER, OR GETTING WORSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ANI HASHEM

Review the opening line of God's response to Moshe (see 6:2), as it appears to contain a rather superfluous statement: "And Elokim spoke to Moshe, and told him: **ANI HASHEM**".

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

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

"Therefore, tell Bnei Yisrael:

ANI HASHEM,

and I will take them out from their suffering in Egypt...
 and I will save them from their enslavement,
 and I shall redeem them with an outstretched arm....
 and I shall take them for Me as My Nation
 and I will be their God... then they shall know that:

ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM

who has taken them out of Egypt.
 And I will take them to the Land...
 and I will give it to them as an inheritance...

ANI HASHEM."

(see 6:6-8, read carefully!)

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

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

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

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

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

A STATEMENT, or A COMMAND?

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

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

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

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

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

'TO BELIEVE' OR 'TO OBEY'?

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

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

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

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

* They did not **COMPREHEND** what he said.

This would also seem unlikely, for nothing in Moshe's statement seems particularly complex or intellectually demanding.

* They did not **PAY ATTENTION** to what Moshe told them.

Based on its context, this seems to be the simplest understanding; the problem only being that this is not what the word "sham'u" usually implies.

* They did not **BELIEVE** (or accept) what Moshe told them.

Even though this is the popular interpretation (of this pasuk), this translation is problematic as well, for the Torah should have used the phrase "ve-lo he'eminu", as this is the word Chumash usually employs to describe belief – just as it did to describe Bnei Yisrael's original belief in God's first promise of redemption - see 4:30-31.

* They did not **OBEY** what Moshe told them.

Although this is the most common translation of 've-lo sham'u' elsewhere in Chumash [see for example Devarim 28:15 & Vayikra 26:14], such a translation in our context seems entirely untenable, as Moshe's remarks contained no commandment or imperative for the people to obey!

Or did they?

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

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

A PROOF FROM YECHEZKEL

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And you shall say to them... on the day that I chose Israel ... [va-ivada lahem -] when I made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt... and I stretched out My Hand to them saying ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM".

[Compare with Shmot 6:3 & 6:6]

"... on that same day ["nasa'ti et yadi"] I lifted out My Hand to take them out of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey" (Yechezkel 20:5-6),

[Compare with Shmot 6:8 and 3:7-8].

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

TAKING 'EGYPT' OUT OF THE JEWS

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

"And I said to them [at the time of Yetziat Mitzrayim]: -

"Each man must rid himself of his detestable ways and not DEFILE himself with the fetishes of Egypt - [for] ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM" (see 20:7).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A LOGICAL 'KAL VA-CHOMER'

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

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

Then, Moshe retorted [employing a 'kal va-chomer'], saying: "hein Bnei Yisrael LO SHAM'U eilai – [If even B.Y. did not 'listen' to me] – ve-eich YISHMA'ENI Pharaoh - why should Pharaoh 'obey' me?" (see 6:10-12).

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

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

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

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

TO KNOW or TO INTERNALIZE

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

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

THE FIRST TWO 'DIBROT'

This interpretation can help us appreciate the deeper meaning of the first two of the Ten Commandments that Bnei Yisrael receive when they arrive at Har Sinai. The first commandment: "ANOCHI HASHEM ELOKECHA asher HOTZEITICHA me-eretz Mitzrayim..." (see 20:2-3, compare w/6:6!) is simply a more emphatic form of "Ani Hashem"; and the next commandment: "lo yihiyeh lachem elohim acherim al panai..." - not to follow any other gods – reiterates this warning that accepting God requires the rejection of decadent cultures.

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

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

A DIFFICULT MISSION

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

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

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

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

[See Ramban's interpretation of this pasuk!]

SOME HELP FROM SEFER VAYIKRA

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

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

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

"And God spoke to Moshe: speak to Bnei Yisrael and **TELL** them ANI HASHEM!"

Do not act as the Egyptians do... and do not follow their customs. Follow My laws instead... for ANI HASHEM ELOKEICHEM.

Keep My laws, for by them man lives... ANI HASHEM" (see Vayikra 18:1-5).

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

A THEME IN SEFER SHMOT

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

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

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

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

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

[This topic will be discussed in greater detail in our shiur on Parshat Beshalach.]

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

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

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

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

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

ELIYAHU AT LEIL HA-SEDER

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ADDITIONAL NOTES AND SOURCES

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

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

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

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

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

It is worth noting that we find two different approaches in the Midrashim as to why Bnei Yisrael resorted to avoda zara: either for theological reasons, or due to circumstances they deemed out of their control. The Torah Shleima quotes a "Midrash Aggada" that Bnei Yisrael lacked faith and claimed that Hashem did not

have the ability to save them. They thus resorted to avoda zara, on ideological grounds. The Midrash Hagadol, by contrast, records the following response of Bnei Yisrael to Moshe's call for their return to monotheism: "Where do you find a slave who acquires for himself two masters? We are slaves to Pharaoh; how can we violate his decrees - we are afraid!" Their subjugation to Pharaoh precluded the possibility of their service to Hashem.

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

VE-LO SHAM'U EL MOSHE

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

BELIEVE

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

PAY ATTENTION

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

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

CONSOLATION

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

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

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

TESHUVAH IN EGYPT

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

'Ani Hashem'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Several *mefarshim* interpret the phrase as a source of encouragement for Bnei Yisrael, underscoring Hashem's unlimited power that enables Him to redeem them. This approach appears in various forms in the commentaries of Rashi, *Seforno* and *Abarbanel*. The *Ibn Ezra* posits a slight variation of

this approach, that 'Ani Hashem' emphasizes the nature of the Almighty's promise; as He is God, Bnei Yisrael may confidently trust that He will fulfill His guarantee of redemption.

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

"Va-yetzavem El Bnei Yisrael..." (6:13)

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

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

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

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

Tzror Hamor.

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

Inviting Eliyah Hanavi to the Seder

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

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

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

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

Parshat Vaera: Rise of a Leader

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PARASHAT VA-ERA (not):

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

MOSHE'S BIRTH AND SALVATION:

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

SHEMOT 2:-3 --

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

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

PARALLEL #1:

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

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

PARALLEL #2:

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

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

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

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

CREATION:

What is the parallel between "Va-yar Elokim ki tov" and "Va-teireh oto ki tov hu"? Both are stories of creation: the story of

Creation itself clearly deals with "creation"; the story of the birth of Moshe heralds creation in a more subtle way:

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

SALVATION:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A ROUGH BEGINNING:

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

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

DEFENDING A FELLOW JEW:

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

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

The way Moshe deals with the brutal Egyptian demonstrates his powerful sense of justice. The Torah tells us that before killing the Egyptian, Moshe "looked this way and that way," but wherever he looked, "he saw that there was no one" to witness what he was about to do. Of course, there is someone right in front of him -- the very Jew whom he is saving -- but since Moshe thinks of this Jew as part of his team, "there was no one" there -- no one to be concerned about. But Moshe is wrong, and he realizes this with surprise the next day when implicitly threatened with exposure by a Jew. It seems that the very Jew he was trying to save (who else could have told the tale?) could not keep the secret, and Moshe's brave act exposes him to danger.

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

BREAKING UP THE FIGHT:

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

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

PARO'S MOTIVATION:

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

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

MOSHE AND YA'AKOV:

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

YA'AKOV	MOSHE

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

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

HASHEM APPEARS:

We now move on to Moshe Rabbeinu's first meeting with Hashem -- the burning bush. Hashem hears the cries of anguish of Bnei Yisrael, the Torah says; Hashem "remembers" His covenant with the Avot (forefathers), the promise to make their descendants into a great nation and to give them the Land of Cana'an. After giving us this peek into Hashem's thought process, as it were, the story continues with the flaming bush which attracts Moshe's attention.

SHEMOT 3:1-4 --

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

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

SHEMOT 3:5-6 --

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

because he was afraid of LOOKING at Hashem.

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

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

SHEMOT 33:18 --

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

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

"REMOVE YOUR SHOES":

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A SUDDEN DEATH THREAT:

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

SHEMOT 4:24-26 --

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

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

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

SHEMOT 4:21-23 --

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

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

Jewish houses. This blood is to come from the Korban Pesah, the sacrifice that Bnei Yisrael are commanded to offer on the afternoon before they are to be redeemed from Egypt.

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom

Parasha Va'era: Making Sense Of The Plagues: The Education Of Pharaoh **By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom**

INCONSISTENCIES WITHIN THE PLAGUES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. “I WILL HARDEN PHARAOH’S HEART”

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

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

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

Why did God harden Pharaoh’s heart?

There are two parts to this question:

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

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

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

III. THE S’FORNO’S APPROACH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV. THE PROCESS OF AN ATTITUDE-SHIFT

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

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

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

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

#3: Kinim (lice)

Warning: NO
Where: n/a
When: n/a
Message: n/a
Vehicle: STAFF

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

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

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

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

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

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

Note the following:

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

V. A FOUR-STEP EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

As we all know, attitudes which are dramatically shifted in one shot are often just as easily shifted back. In order to

permanently and effectively educate someone, we need to use slow and even steps, giving the student time to digest, reflect and integrate the new information in such a way that a new attitude may be adopted.

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

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

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

In much the same way, Pharaoh had to:

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

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

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

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

VI. EACH STEP: THREE "SIGNS"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VII. R. YEHUDAH'S *SIMANIM*

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

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

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

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

SET #1: THE EXISTENCE OF YHVH

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

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

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

SET #2: THE SPECIAL POWERS OF YHVH

Now that Pharaoh realizes that YHVH exists and that He has powers (at this point) akin to those of the Egyptian gods (and even surpassing them, as his wizards had already bowed out of the competition), the time had come to impress upon Pharaoh God's unique power. Unlike the gods of the Egyptians, who are distant but need a human intermediary (wizard) to trigger the plague with a vehicle (staff) – God is ...in the midst of the land. This is demonstrated by plagues which, unlike the first three, do not come out of the ground (river, earth), but from the environment. In addition, Mosheh no longer uses the staff – the message here is that God Himself is present and it isn't Mosheh's staff that triggers the plague as much as Mosheh's command/request.

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

SET #3: THE SUPERIORITY OF YHVH

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

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

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

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

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