

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Va'eira

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רפואה שלמה פעסל בת גאלדא / לזכות חילינו

UNBREAKABLE TRUST

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And G-d spoke to Moshe, and He said to him, 'I am Hashem. I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov...'" (6:2-3)

Rashi explains: "I can be trusted to properly reward those who walk before Me."

Mashal: There was once a king who wanted to find a suitable husband for his precious daughter. He devised a contest to find the mightiest warrior. His palace had one hundred flights of stairs. He announced that whoever would be able to climb all the stairs and reach the top within a half hour would receive his daughter as a wife. Naturally, all the mighty warriors tried; but they all failed. When they reached the thirtieth floor and saw that they only had fifteen minutes left to climb seventy more floors, they all gave up.

One fellow decided that come what may, he would not give up. He didn't know if he would reach the top, but he would go as far as he could in that half hour and wouldn't give up just because he saw that he couldn't reach the top in time.

Well, he reached the fiftieth floor with only five minutes left. The people were shouting up to him, telling him not to waste his time and effort, but he was insistent that he was no quitter. He reached the fifty-third floor with two minutes left and he couldn't believe his eyes. Right there on the landing was an elevator waiting for him! He took it up to the top floor and won the princess's hand with seconds to spare.

Nimshal: Hashem told Moshe, "I am Hashem." I am the One you should trust, for I will never let you down. The Avos - Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov - were not quitters. They recognized the greatness of Hashem, and they believed in Him. Although they did not witness the return of their descendants to the Holy Land, they never stopped believing that it would happen. Hashem was a bit disappointed in Moshe's initial reaction to his mission to take the Jews out of Egypt. "I am Hashem," He said. "If the Avos never stopped believing in Me, why should you?"

INHERITED FAITH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And G-d spoke to Moshe, and He said to him, 'I am Hashem. I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov...'" (6:2-3)

When it appears to us that something is wrong in the way G-d runs the world, G-d wants us to question Him. But at the same time, we must continue to believe absolutely in G-d's reality and goodness.

From where can we draw the power to believe in G-d so thoroughly that we virtually see Him even in the darkest moments of exile? G-d answers this question by saying, "I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov." The patriarchs and matriarchs possessed this unshakable faith, and we inherit it from them. If we nurture it properly, we, too, will "see" G-d even when His goodness is not readily apparent.

This faith enables us to live out the final moments of our exile yearning for its end - and demanding it! - while maximizing our use of its remaining moments. In this merit, we will hasten the Messianic Redemption. (Hitva'aduyot 5743, vol. 2, pp. 823-830) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SPEAKING UP FOR OTHERS

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

"And G-d spoke to Moshe, and He said to him, 'I am Hashem...'" (6:2)

Parshas Va'eira begins with Hashem's response to Moshe's protest after Pharaoh increased Bnei Yisrael's workload. At the end of the previous parsha, Parshas Shemos, we read that after Moshe and Aharon approached Pharaoh and relayed G-d's command that he allow Bnei Yisrael to leave, Pharaoh not only refused, but decreed that the slaves would have to find their own straw for producing bricks, making their work considerably more difficult. Moshe then turned to Hashem and brazenly shouted, "Why have You done evil to this nation, why have you sent me?"

Hashem now responded to Moshe. The Torah introduces this response by stating, *וידבר אלוקים אל משה ויאמר אליו אני ה'* - "G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him: 'I am Hashem.'"

This pasuk, curiously, undergoes two significant transitions. First, the pasuk begins using the verb *וידבר*, a term which Chazal understood as referring to harsh, critical speech. Fittingly, Hashem is called in this part of the pasuk *אלוקים*, the Name associated with *מידת הדין*, G-d's attribute of strict justice. But in the second part of the pasuk, we find the verb *ויאמר*, which refers to gentle, loving speech, and we find that G-d is called here by the Name of Havaya, which is associated with *מידת הרחמים*, G-d's attribute of mercy and compassion.

Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk, in Noam Elimelech, explains the meaning of these two parts of the pasuk, and the shift that occurs. As Rashi writes, G-d reacted angrily to Moshe's brazen complaint, his having questioned why G-d had sent him. This is why the pasuk begins with the verb *וידבר* and with the Name *אלוקים*. However, G-d then changed His tone, as it were, speaking to Moshe softly and with compassion, because He understood that Moshe spoke as he did out of genuine concern for the wellbeing of Am Yisrael, and empathy with their plight.

On the one hand, Moshe had no right to challenge Hashem the way he did. But on the other hand, he was reacting out of pain, being unable to bear the sight of his suffering brethren. He could not help but protest. And so, the *מידת הדין* was transformed to *מידת הרחמים*; G-d's harsh words of condemnation were transformed into gentle words of support.

This powerful insight by the Noam Elimelech should inform our attitude in responding to the hardship and suffering of the people around us. When we know of people who are struggling, we must be unable to remain silent. We must approach Hashem prepared to wholeheartedly accept His decision - but not prepared to keep quiet.

We are to say to Hashem: "I will unquestioningly accept Your final decision - but I must level my protest! This ill patient and his family are suffering. This wonderful person has been searching for years for a marriage partner. This wonderful couple has been trying for years to have children. I refuse to remain silent. I must object. They are pain - they need help."

This kind of challenge is welcomed by Hashem. Of course, we humbly lower our heads in submission, yielding to His decree and accepting His will, as difficult as this is. But we must never remain silent in the face of suffering, and must instead confront Hashem and demand that He alleviate the pain of our fellow Jews in distress.

REVEALING THE TRUTH

Reb Noson of Breslov

"I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov as Kel Shadai, but I did not reveal to them My Name YHVH." (6:3)

The argument between G-d and Moshe about redeeming the Jews was rooted in Moshe's perception of the truth. Though G-d sent him to redeem the Jews, Moshe was reluctant, believing that each person's perception of truth was too great an obstacle to overcome.

Moshe saw Pharaoh enslave an entire nation with false claims. He saw Dasan and Aviram advocate for the Jews as if they were interested in helping them. How could he ever undertake to reveal the real truth in the world?

Exasperated, he turned to G-d and said, "Why have You perpetrated this evil to Your nation?" (Shemos 5:22).

G-d rebuked him, "I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov." The Patriarchs were the first to reveal G-dliness in the world, but this revelation did not take place all at once. The revelation of truth is an ongoing process, one that can take many generations. However, each person is required to contribute his share.

"I did not reveal to them My Name YHVH" - for they knew only the Holy Name Shadai; they were not fully aware of G-d's Holy Name YHVH, which implies His true measure of compassion (see Rashi). That is, the Patriarchs were not privy to G-d's awesome levels of truth, yet they did not question G-d. But you, Moshe, have attained a higher and deeper revelation of G-d, and you question Me?

No matter how great a revelation a person attains, G-d and His truth remain unfathomable. G-d taught Moshe to continually seek the inner truth of whatever was taking place around him, and not to despair if he saw things getting more difficult. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 408)

PRICELESS PRAYERS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Children of Israel whom the Egyptians have enslaved..." (6:5)

In this verse, Hashem informs Moshe that He is finally ready to take the Jewish People out from Egypt. Rabbeinu Bachaya writes that in truth, the time of their salvation had already arrived before this time, however, they were not yet worthy to be redeemed. This changed when they gave a heartfelt cry to Hashem over the trouble that they were facing. This was the key to the Jewish People's redemption, and had it been utilized earlier, their redemption would have come sooner.

Moreover, Rabbeinu Bachaya (Shemos 2:23) concludes that the final redemption - our redemption - will also not come until we cry to Hashem in sincere prayer over the difficulty of our situation.

In fact, Sefer Be'er Mayim Chaim (Shemos 1:13) writes that Pharaoh understood this point very well, which is why he needed to trick the Nation into slavery rather than decreeing it upon them. For he knew that if they would have faced an open decree, they would have turned to Hashem, and He would have immediately answered them thwarting his plans.

The importance of sincere prayer cannot be overstated. It not only serves as the connection between us and Hashem, but as we have seen above, it is the only way that we can merit redemption. Thus, prayer is such an important element in our Divine relationship that Hashem will often place us in situations that require us to pray - not as a means of escaping difficulties but as a means to come closer to Hashem. Rav Hutner (Pachad Yitzchak, Pesach, Maamar 14) beautifully sums this up as follows: "The purpose of prayer is not to get us out of trouble. The purpose of trouble is to get us into prayer."

CRYING FOR SPIRITUALITY

Avnei Ezel

"And moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Children of Israel whom the Egyptians have enslaved..." (6:5)

G-d said, "I have heard the groaning of the Children of Israel on account of their enslavement (ma'avidim: lit., "have enslaved"), for the Egyptians have enslaved their spirit as well as their bodies."

When the Jews cried for help in their spiritual enslavement, G-d had no other choice but to answer their plea for help.

SEARCHING FOR THE LIGHT

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"Therefore, say to Bnei Yisrael, 'I am Hashem. And I will take you out from under the suffering of Egypt, and I will save you from your servitude.'" (6:6)

This part of the pasuk is the source for two of the four expressions of geulah.

Rav Yisrael Meir Druck (Eish Tomid) asks why the first of the four expressions of redemption, v'hotzeisi - "and I will take you out," precedes the second expression of geulah, v'hitzalti - "I will save you." Shouldn't it be the opposite? Klal Yisrael was saved by Hashem well before their actual departure from Egypt. The Jewish people were no longer slaves when Hashem afflicted the Egyptians with the plagues. Why doesn't the Torah state that Bnei Yisrael were saved and then that they were taken out?

Rav Druck explains, based on an explanation of the Chiddushei HaRim, that when a person is confronted with a difficulty or enduring a challenge, it is very hard for them to recognize that Hashem is with them. Typically, a person becomes consumed by the darkness that has filled their life, and they aren't capable of seeing Hashem's light. Therefore, while it is true that Klal Yisrael had already been saved before they were taken out of Mitzrayim, they were unable to appreciate what Hashem had done for them while they were still surrounded by chaos and anarchy. It was only once Hashem took them out of Egypt that they were then able to acknowledge and value the miracles that Hashem performed when He had saved them.

In life, it is often difficult to feel Hashem's warmth and love when one is experiencing a trying situation. Rav Druck is teaching us that no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, we must constantly remind ourselves to look for the light of Hashem. We must realize that Hashem is with us every step of the way, even in the face of darkness. If we are able to keep this approach in mind, we will certainly strengthen our emunah in Hashem, which will help to ensure that we can and will overcome anything that may come our way.

GETTING TO KNOW HASHEM

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"...and I will take you to Me as a people and I will be for you a G-d, and you shall know that I am Hashem, your G-d..." (6:7)

No human being can truly fathom the Divine - that is, Hashem's essence is unfathomable.

However, the Jewish people can come to know G-d through the Torah's light and the commandments because "the Torah and the Holy One, blessed be He, are One."

This is what is meant by the words "I will take you to Me as a people" and give you the Torah. Through the Torah, "you will know that I am Hashem, your G-d," since then you will have knowledge of the Shechinah's light.

REMEMBERING REDEMPTION

Rebbe Nachman

"...and you shall know that I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out from under the burdens of Egypt." (6:7)

A person must bring the knowledge of G-d and His miracles on behalf of the Jewish people into his consciousness. With that awareness, he can leave his personal exile. (See Likutey Moharan I, 21)

LAND OF THE TORAH

Yalkut HaChadash

"...and I will give it to you as a heritage..." (6:8)

The Hebrew word for heritage, morashah, occurs twice in the Chumash: in the above-cited pasuk in connection with the Land of Israel and again in Devarim 33:4 in connection with the Torah ("The Torah that Moshe commanded to us is a heritage of the community of Yaakov").

This is to teach us that our heritage, represented by the Land of Israel, can remain ours only if we conduct ourselves there in keeping with the statutes of the Torah.

Without the Torah, the Land of Israel has no justification for survival, as it is written: "And He will give to them the lands of the nations so that they may keep His statutes."

NEARING REDEMPTION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov..." (6:8)

The first four expressions of redemption allude to our past redemption from Egypt, whereas the fifth expression, "I will bring you," alludes to the future redemption. This teaches us that ever since the time that we left Egypt, Klal Yisrael have been slowly but surely approaching the Final Redemption.

SPIRIT OF TORAH

Rebbe Nachman

"Moshe told all this to the Jewish people, but they didn't listen to Moshe because of their broken spirits and the hard labor." (6:9)

The ruach ha'chaim (רוח החיים, spirit of life) is found in the Torah. But the Jews in Egypt had not yet received the Torah. Since they lacked the spirit of life, they suffered from kotzer ruach (קצר רוח, broken spirits). (See Likutey Moharan I, 8:9)

FAITHFUL PATIENCE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Moshe told all this to the Jewish people, but they didn't listen to Moshe because of their broken spirits and the hard labor." (6:9)

Kotzer ruach (broken spirits) can also be translated as "shortness of breath," indicating a lack of patience. The Jews didn't draw close to Moshe because they lacked patience.

Patience corresponds to faith, because a person will exercise patience and restraint knowing that G-d will be there for him. He doesn't need immediate satisfaction. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 132)

THE LEADER NEEDS FOLLOWERS

Sefas Emes

"[Moshe said to Hashem,] 'Behold, the Children of Israel have not listened to me; how then will Pharaoh hear me? I have sealed lips.'" (6:12)

As long as the Jews refuse to listen to their leaders, the leaders will be ineffectual, because all their power is derived from the people in their charge.

If the Jews had listened to Moshe, "his mouth would have been opened," that is, he would have become articulate, and his words would have left an impression even on Pharaoh. But since the Jews did not listen to him, Moshe was "of sealed lips" - he was unable to open his mouth to plead their cause effectively before Pharaoh.

PLEASING HASHEM

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and commanded them regarding the Children of Israel..." (6:13)

G-d takes pleasure in giving to the Jewish people. Consequently, by receiving G-d's favors, the Jewish people perform the will and command of G-d, since they give G-d pleasure, so to speak.

This is the underlying meaning of the verse (Shemos 6:7) "You will know that I am G-d, Who has took you out from under the burdens of Egypt" - "By bringing you out from under Egyptian oppression, and by you receiving My favors, you fulfill a mitzvah, since you give Me pleasure."

This is the implication of the wording of our verse, "He commanded them," which connotes a mitzvah, because by being taken out of Egypt by G-d, the Jewish people fulfilled a mitzvah.

The word for "and He commanded them" (ויצבם) is read here "and He caused them to fulfill a commandment." Thus, the verse can be interpreted to mean, "He caused the Jewish people to fulfill a commandment [i.e., the "commandment" of pleasing G-d] by taking them out of Egypt [and making them the recipients of His favor]." Analyze and contemplate this well.

LASTING IMPRESSION

Sefas Emes

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and commanded them regarding the Children of Israel..." (6:13)

Even though the Jews refused to listen, because of "their broken spirits and the hard labor" (Shemos 6:9), G-d commanded Moshe and Aharon to continue speaking to them. For G-d's words must, of necessity, leave a profound impression; they may not take effect all at once but eventually they must accomplish their purpose, for holy words can never be lost on humanity.

[Similarly, the Kotzker Rebbe teaches: In Shema, we say "These words (of torah) shall be on your heart." But wouldn't it be more correct to place them "in" your heart? At times, we may not be receptive to the words we learn, nevertheless, place them on your heart, so the moment your heart opens wide, they can fall right in!]

PROUD HISTORY

Reb Henschel Alexander

"These are the heads of their fathers' houses..." (6:14)

These words are actually a command: to make the Children of Israel realize that they came from such ancestry that they did not deserve to be in servitude.

THE EYE OF THE PATRIARCHS

Rebbe Nachman

"These are the heads of their fathers' houses..." (6:14)

"The heads of their fathers' houses" is a reference to the Patriarchs. The Patriarchs correspond to three colors of the eye (the white of the sclera, the red of the muscle, and the colored iris). When we invoke the merit of the Patriarchs, this in turn invokes Divine Providence, G-d's overseeing eye. More specifically, their merit illuminates the fourth color of the eye, the black pupil, which allows us to focus upon G-d.

Corresponding to these four colors of the eye, the Torah is divided into four parts: cantillations, vowel-points, crowns upon the letters, and the letters themselves. Like the Patriarchs, the Torah also serves to draw Divine Providence into the world. (See Likutey Moharan I, 13:4)

ATTAINABLE GREATNESS

Reb Alexander Zusia Friedman

"Amram took into his [household] as a wife his father's sister Yocheved, and she bore him Aharon and Moshe..." (6:20)

The Torah tells us that Moshe and Aharon were born like any other mortals, to normal human parents. They became prophets and leaders of the Jewish People due to their own actions and choices, not because they descended from on high like celestial angels.

From this we learn that every individual, through his own effort and free will, can reach even the highest spiritual levels - even as lofty as Moshe and Aharon.

LEAVING EXILE BEHIND

Reb Shmuel Mohilever

"It is the same Aharon and Moshe to whom Hashem said, 'Bring forth the Israelites from the land of Egypt...'" (6:20)

Just as in Egypt, where Hashem appointed two messengers to lead the Jews out of slavery, Moshe and Aharon, so too, will we have two emissaries by the final redemption, Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben Dovid.

Why will two emissaries be necessary? One to take the Jews out of galus and one to take the galus out of the Jews!

EACH IN THEIR PROPER TIME

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"This is Aharon and Moshe..." (6:26)

Moshe was the transmitter of the Torah that he received from G-d. The "Moshe" aspect of our lives is thus the study of G-d's Torah and the performance of His commandments.

Aharon was the first high priest. The "Aharon" aspect of our lives is thus prayer, for prayer reaches up to G-d as did the sacrifices that were offered up by the priests.

The Torah sometimes mentions Moshe before Aharon and sometimes mentions Aharon before Moshe. This teaches us that sometimes we need to first study the Torah or fulfill some commandment in order to properly relate to G-d in prayer. At other times, we might need to connect to G-d through prayer before studying the Torah or fulfilling its commandments, in order to study or act in selfless devotion to G-d. (Likutei Torah 3:88c) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

BE ALL YOU CAN BE

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"This is Aharon and Moshe... This is Moshe and Aharon." (6:26-27)

Rashi notes that in the first pasuk, Aharon is listed before Moshe, and in the next pasuk, Moshe is listed before Aharon. Rashi explains that the Torah alternates who is listed first to show that Moshe and Aharon were equal.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Darash Moshe) asks how Rashi could possibly suggest that Moshe and Aharon were of equal stature. The Torah tells us that there was no one who was comparable to Moshe! How are we to understand Rashi's comment?

Rav Moshe answers that Rashi isn't suggesting that Moshe and Aharon were equal in terms of their accomplishments. Rather, Rashi is explaining that just as Moshe fulfilled his role in serving the will of Hashem to the best of his abilities, so too Aharon equally fulfilled his mission and purpose in serving the will of Hashem to the best of his abilities.

Rav Moshe is teaching us a very powerful and important lesson. Hashem doesn't expect us to be someone else, nor will Hashem judge us relative to other people. The only thing Hashem expects from us is that we become the best people we can be. If we focus on continuing to work on ourselves to maximize our potential, then we are certain to accomplish great things and exceed even our own expectations.

UNWAVERING HOLINESS

Be'er Mayim Chaim

"This was the Aharon and Moshe to whom Hashem said... 'They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh... this was that Moshe and Aharon.'" (6:26-27)

Moshe and Aharon were found worthy of attaining the highest level of holiness and receiving the Divine gift of prophetic vision. And they remained on this high level even after their contact with the heathen Pharaoh - they remained "that Aharon and Moshe." Their holiness was so profound that they were not defiled even by the corrupt atmosphere prevailing at Pharaoh's court.

TAKING A STRONG STAND

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"G-d said to Moshe, 'Observe! I have made you master over Pharaoh.'" (7:1)

The purpose of Moshe's respectful yet forceful speeches to Pharaoh was to break the forces of evil when their powers were strongest.

Similarly, there are times in our lives when our inner "Pharaohs," i.e., our animal drives, seem to have the upper hand. At such times, the best way to overcome these drives is to channel our inner "Moshe" and rage against them, insult them, and humiliate them.

The same is true regarding our mission to oppose negativity in the world at large. Of course, we must always convey G-d's message in a pleasant and peaceful way, just as G-d commanded Moshe to address Pharaoh respectfully. But at the same time, we must approach our "Pharaohs" fearlessly and forcefully. If we remain true to G-d's message, we can break the power of darkness and help bring G-d's redemptive light to the world. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 16, pp. 74-76) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

ABILITY TO PERCEIVE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And I will increase my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt..." (7:3)

A group of Maskilim - "enlightened" irreligious Jews had heard of the greatness and wonders of the renowned tzaddik, R' Yitzchak Isaac Eichenstein zt'l of Ziditchov. They may have heard the reports, yet they still found it hard to believe what people said. As a result, they sent out one of their own to the court of the Rebbe of Ziditchov, to act as a "spy" - to observe and record all the happenings that went on and to verify their disbelief in the miracles that were purportedly done by the "wonder rabbiner." This man did indeed collect information and recorded his partial and slanted view of events in a popular Jewish newspaper, claiming that his initial assessment of the Chassidim and their Rebbe as fakers and dreamers was entirely accurate.

When a copy of this newspaper article reached the faithful of Ziditchov, they were shocked at the amount of irreverence given the great Tzaddik. They showed the actual article to R' Yitzchak Isaac, who, instead of becoming upset, reacted with a hint of amusement. The Chassidim asked him to explain his reaction.

The Rebbe responded by quoting words from Parshas Va'eira, "ויעש האותות לעיני העם ויאמן העם" - "(Moshe) performed the wonders to the eyes of the nation, and they believed in him." He then quoted another pasuk from the parshah, "ויוחזק לב פרעה ולא שמע עליהם" - "And Pharaoh's heart became hardened, and he didn't listen to them."

R' Yitzchak Isaac turned to the Chassidim around him and said, "We're talking about the same Moshe Rabbeinu, and these are the same miracles and wonders. But Bnei Yisrael chose to believe in the miracles of Moshe, and Pharaoh chose not to do so. Why?"

R' Yitzchak Isaac smiled and pointed to the newspaper. "It all depends on the eyes that view the miracles. If they're the eyes of true, devoted Yidden, they will believe. If, however, these wonders are viewed through the eyes of a Pharaoh - what do you expect?"

FILTERING OUR SURROUNDINGS

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"And Mitzrayim will know that I am Hashem..." (7:5)

The Torah states that Hashem told Moshe and Aharon that He was going to perform incredible miracles and exact judgment against the Egyptians, which would culminate with Him taking Klal Yisrael out of Egypt. He explained that He will do this so that "Egypt will know that I am Hashem."

The Slonimer Rebbe (Nesivos Shalom) asks, in the name of the Degel Machaneh Efraim, the following question: Why would Hashem perform so many miracles just to show the Egyptians Who is in control? Why should He care about the opinion of the Egyptians?

The Degel Machaneh Efraim explains that Hashem didn't perform all of the miracles for the Egyptians. Hashem demonstrated His power in order to strengthen the emunah of Klal Yisrael who had a little bit of "Mitzri" within them. After spending so much time in Egypt, with all the negative influences, Klal Yisrael needed chizuk. Therefore, Hashem performed all of these miracles so that the "Mitzri" left inside each person would come to know and recognize Hashem.

As we continue to live in exile, it is incumbent upon us to recognize the adverse effects of the influences of the world around us. We need to be sensitive to our surroundings and ensure that we keep our distance from that which will negatively impact us.

If we have this in mind, we are sure to remain focused on the values and priorities of the Torah, which will no doubt have a positive impact on our homes, our families and ourselves.

MIRACULOUS MERCY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And Mitzrayim will know that I am Hashem..." (7:5)

G-d refers to Himself here by the Name Havayah, which indicates how He is not bound by any limitations. One of the implications of this Name, therefore, is that G-d can be merciful; that is, He can exercise kindness even when the laws of logic would demand corrective punishment or vengeance.

In this context, the purpose of the plagues was to introduce the Egyptians to the concept of G-d's mercy. As worshippers of nature, the Egyptians were fully acquainted with G-d's power of apparently blind judgment, by which survival belongs to the fittest. However, the Egyptians did not yet recognize that G-d is greater than nature, and can override the unforgiving laws of nature when He sees fit.

Thus, what later impressed Pharaoh the most was Moshe's ability to stop the plagues, rather than to initiate them. The magicians of Pharaoh's court were indeed able to duplicate some of the plagues, for they knew how to manipulate nature to an extent, and were thus able to summon the forces of nature to wreak destruction. But the magicians could not reverse or check these forces. Only Moshe could do so - by invoking G-d's mercy through prayer.

We, too, should never doubt G-d's ability or readiness to overrule the natural laws of strict justice, invoking His mercy through prayer. (Toras Chaim, Shemos 396b-397a) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

NEW TYPE OF LEADER

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Moshe was eighty years old, and Aharon was eighty-three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh." (7:7)

The Torah elaborates in a very uncharacteristic manner, the ages of Moshe and Aharon - eighty and eighty-three respectively - when they appeared before Pharaoh for the very first time, demanding in the name of Hashem, that he let the Jewish people leave the servitude and bondage of Egypt. What is the significance of this seemingly unrelated information?

The Ba'al Akeidah, Chacham Rabbeinu Yitzchak Arama zt'l is incisive in his response: Up until this moment in the history of the world, a righteous individual paved the way to serving the Almighty through his just and proper actions. Through his good deeds and exemplary conduct, the tzaddik was recognized throughout the world as a servant of Hashem. We find this regarding Avraham Avinu where the pasuk tells us, "And all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him... For I know that he will command his children and his household after him, to keep the way of Hashem, to do justice and judgement."

With Moshe and Aharon, however, a new type of tzaddik and leader is revealed; a redeemer, who severs knots and has the ability to break chains. A teacher and guide, who leads the enslaved from bondage to freedom, splitting the ocean, bringing the nation to the height of holiness while receiving the Torah. From this point on, a new page in the history of Bnei Yisrael and all humanity has been opened. The Torah emphasizes this point and tells us the age of Moshe and Aharon on the exact day they spoke to Pharaoh, for on this day they took upon themselves a new role as leaders of Bnei Yisrael.

MIRACLE FOR ALL TO SEE

Reb Elimelech Lizhensk

"When Pharaoh shall speak to you, saying, 'Provide a sign for yourselves,' you shall say to Aharon, 'Take your staff...'" (7:9)

Why doesn't the text read, "Provide a sign for *them*?"

This turn of speech shows the difference between false miracles, based on deception and magic, and true miracles, which derive from a Divine force.

A false miracle is admired only by "them," by people who witness it as passive spectators. A true miracle, however, wrought by G-d, is acknowledged even by those righteous men through whose action it comes to pass.

By saying, "Provide a sign for yourselves," G-d implied that the miracle Pharaoh would witness would indeed be an authentic miracle.

"The miracle that I will perform in his sight," said G-d to Moshe and Aharon, "will seem a miracle even to you, the two righteous leaders through whom it will be brought to pass."

POWER OF SPEECH

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"When Pharaoh shall speak to you, saying, 'Provide a sign for yourselves,' you shall say to Aharon, 'Take your staff...'" (7:9)

At first glance, the word for "for yourselves" seems superfluous. Pharaoh should have said merely, "Provide a sign."

To resolve this question, we will preface the answer with a teaching of the Arizal, who writes that a person should believe that his speech gives pleasure to G-d and brings about positive results for the Jewish people (see Shaar Ruach HaKodesh 1). If he believes this, he will be careful not to talk nonsense, he will speak favorably about his fellow Jews, and he will engage only in discussions of Torah.

When a person does this, his speech will certainly give G-d pleasure, and, in turn, G-d will do his bidding. Thus, a person's speech engenders good things.

When Pharaoh said, "Provide a sign for yourselves," he meant, "We are familiar with the power of the Divine Name, but we are not convinced that you can carry out all you claim just through the power of your speech. So provide a sign to prove that you yourselves can perform miracles."

That is why G-d told Moshe to "say to Aharon, 'Take your staff and cast it before Pharaoh; it will become a serpent.'" In other words, demonstrate to Pharaoh that with the power of your speech, you can transform a staff into a serpent and a serpent into a staff.

ILLUMINATING THE PATH

Rebbe Nachman

"Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh; it will become a serpent." (7:9)

When Moshe began to perform the miracles before the Egyptians, Yochana and Mamre said to him, "Are you bringing straw to Afarayim [a place with abundant straw]?" In other words, "Are you bringing sorcery to Egypt, the land of sorcery?" Moshe replied, "People say, 'Carry vegetables to the vegetable market'" (Menachos 85a). In other words, Moshe was bringing his "wares" to a place where sorcery was appreciated.

In this Talmudic passage, the word Teven (תבן, straw) alludes to Tevunah (תבונה, understanding), which is associated with repentance. Afarayim (עפריים) is similar to Afar (עפר, earth). The Aramaic word for vegetables, yarka (ירקא), corresponds to repentance. And the Aramaic word Shkol (שקול, carry) is similar to mishkal (משקל, balance), which forms part of the phrase teshuvah ha'mishkal (תשובת המשקל, measure-for-measure repentance).

Thus, the Egyptians were asking Moshe, "Are you trying to bring Torah understanding to people [i.e., the Jews] whose spiritual level is low and earthly?" Moshe answered, "When people learn Torah, their speech in Torah learning illumines the paths of repentance, so they are able to perform exact, measure-for-measure repentance even if they are on a low spiritual level." (See Likutey Moharan I, 11:1)

INFLUENTIAL ENVIRONMENTS

Reb Meir Shapiro of Lublin

"Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh; it will become a serpent." (7:9)

Our environment has a profound influence on all of us. Even the most evil people can improve when they are exposed to good and noble people. Conversely, even the best people can turn into "serpents," bloodthirsty creatures, if they are put into an environment where corruption predominates.

Moshe tried to make Pharaoh understand that although the Jews were hated and oppressed in Egypt to such a degree that they had lost all resemblance to human beings, they could become the best and noblest among people if only they were freed from Egypt's corrupt atmosphere. To accomplish this end, Moshe showed him the "rod of G-d," the rod on which the Ineffable Divine Name was engraved. This was the rod by means of which the most astonishing miracles of all were performed. When it was cast "down before Pharaoh," i.e., when it was placed into Pharaoh's environment, it turned into a poisonous serpent, but as soon as Moshe took hold of it, i.e., as soon as it returned to Moshe's immediate environment, it was transformed once again into a "rod of G-d." Such is the strength of the environment's influence on us.

SINFUL SNAKES

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And Aharon cast his staff down... and it turned into a serpent. And Pharaoh also called his wise men... each one threw down his staff and they became snakes..." (7:10-12)

Hashem informed Avraham of the decree that his children will be exiled, enslaved and oppressed (Bereishis 15:13). If this was a decree from Hashem, why were the Egyptians punished for fulfilling what Hashem had already decreed to happen?

The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 6:5) explains that Hashem decreed that the Jewish People would be enslaved, but He did not force each individual Egyptian to take any part in the enslavement or oppression; every individual Egyptian maintained his free-will and could decide exactly how to act. Therefore, every Egyptian who was involved in the oppression was fairly punished.

The Ramban (Bereishis 15:14) disagrees with this explanation. He reasons that, if it was a decree from Hashem to subjugate the Jewish People, then any individual Egyptian who fulfills Hashem's decree is doing a Mitzvah! Therefore, concludes the Ramban, the Egyptians were only punished because Hashem's decree was to "enslave" and "oppress," and if they would have done this, they certainly would never have been punished. However, the Egyptians "threw their children into the Nile, embittered their lives terribly, and tried to destroy the entire Jewish People." All of this was far beyond what was included in Hashem's decree, and this is why they deserved to be punished.

The Be'er Yosef uses the approach of the Ramban to explain a puzzling Medrash regarding Moshe and Aharon's first meeting with Pharaoh. When Hashem instructed Aharon to throw Moshe's staff to the ground, it turned into a snake. Unimpressed with this "trickery," Pharaoh commanded his sorcerers to throw their staffs on the ground, as well as his wife and even children of four and five years old; and all of their staffs also turned to snakes.

Why did Hashem command Aharon to perform a miracle that was so easily replicable, what message was He trying to convey? Based on the words of the Ramban above, Hashem was saying that if the Egyptians would have only been like a staff in the hands of its master then they would not have been punished. A staff is inanimate and only hits as hard as its master wants to strike, with no additional force. If the Egyptians would have acted as Hashem had wanted them to, only hitting as hard as He had decreed - "enslaving" and "oppressing" - then they would have been rewarded. However, the Egyptians turned themselves into vicious snakes, using their own venomous aggression to harm the Jewish People far beyond what Hashem had conveyed to Avraham. For this reason, Hashem commanded Aharon to turn his staff into a snake, in order to show the Egyptians exactly why they were about to be punished.

REMAINING HUMBLE

Rabbi Shalom Schwadron

"...and the staff of Aharon swallowed their staffs." (7:12)

Typically, when one person vanquishes another and "swallows him up," it is common for the victor to "swell" with pride of victory.

When Aharon's staff swallowed those of Pharaoh's magicians, however, it did not grow thicker nor show any increase in size at all. It remained "humble."

This was a reminder that just as Aharon's staff did not thicken, so too, Aharon never did swell with pride nor change his humble nature after the great miracle that was performed through him.

FROM INDIFFERENCE TO ENTHUSIASM

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[G-d instructed Moshe to tell Pharaoh,] 'I am now going to strike the water in the river with the staff in my hand, and it will turn into blood.'" (7:17)

The first of the ten plagues was the transformation of cold river water into warm blood, signifying the transformation of cold indifference toward Divinity into warm enthusiasm for it. This had to be the first of the plagues, because indifference would have prevented the Egyptians from being affected by any further demonstrations of G-d's power and involvement in life.

A similar lesson applies to anyone striving to leave the slavery of their inner "Egypt" - the tyranny of their material drives and not-yet-refined bodily desires. Our first step in this process is to replace any cold indifference to all things Jewish and holy with warm, passionate enthusiasm for G-d, His Torah, and His commandments. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 1, p. 121) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Say to Aharon: Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt.'" (7:19)

Rashi explains that Hashem commanded Aharon, not Moshe, to smite the river because the river had protected Moshe when he was placed into it as a baby.

Later on, Aharon alone was told to hit the river to begin the plague of frogs for the same reason, and he also hit the ground to bring the plague of lice since the earth had covered up the Egyptian that Moshe had killed (Rashi 8:12).

The commentators explain that by preventing Moshe from hitting the river and ground, Hashem was teaching Moshe the correct attitude towards gratitude; namely, do not cause harm to things that have helped you.

Nevertheless, it seems strange that Moshe was told to be grateful to a river or the ground. After all, they do not possess any degree of free-will and cannot logically be given any credit for the consequences of their "actions."

Despite this, Hashem wanted that Moshe should feel a degree of gratitude within himself, regardless of who or what was on the receiving end of his gratitude. His sensitivities needed to be so great that the fact that the river and the land did not act of their own accord is irrelevant, because Moshe, as the leader of the Jewish People, had to perfect within himself the feelings of gratitude - even to inanimate objects.

Although this lofty level was reserved for Moshe, it is not to say that we are not capable of reaching a similar degree of appreciation, as we see from what the Gemara (Bava Kama 92b) describes as a "popular phrase" at that time: "Into the well which you drank, do not throw stones."

The fact that this was a "popular phrase" suggests that such a level is not merely reserved for the righteous of the generation; rather, anyone can achieve it with serious effort.

FOR THE SAKE OF YISRAEL

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Pharaoh turned and went home, and he paid no heed even to this." (7:23)

This will be understood based on the comment of our Sages on the verse (Vayikra 16:3) "With this shall Aharon enter the Kodesh [HaKodashim]." The Sages comment, "The word 'this' alludes to Knesset Yisrael" (Tikkunei Zohar 21 (56b); Vayikra Rabbah 21:6).

Aharon entered the Kodesh HaKodashim as the representative of the Jewish people, so it is as if he entered with all the Jewish people, who are therefore referred to by the word "this" in this verse.

But why, really, should the word "this" allude to the Jewish people? It is because all the worlds were created only for the sake of the Jewish people (Vayikra Rabbah 36:4; Rashi on Bereishis 1:1). This is why "this" alludes to Knesses Yisrael, as if to say: This - the Jewish nation - is why G-d created the universe.

A similar idea is expressed in the verse "This is the blessing with which Moshe blessed the Children of Yisrael" (Devarim 33:1).

Here, in our passage, Moshe declared to Pharaoh that the Jewish people were the prime reason for the Creation, but Pharaoh refused to believe it. Thus, the Torah says, "and he paid no heed even to *this*."

THE DANGER OF ANGER

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"And Aharon stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frog ascended." (8:2)

Rashi notes that the Torah does not use plural language when saying that the frogs ascended. Rather, the Torah writes that a single frog came upon Egypt.

How did one frog turn into a plague of many? Rashi explains that when the Egyptians saw the frog, they hit it and it split into two. Then, they hit it another time and it doubled again. This continued until Egypt was consumed with frogs.

The Steipler Gaon (Birchas Peretz) asks why the Egyptians kept hitting the frogs. Did they not realize after the first few times they struck the frog that it would keep multiplying?

The Steipler explains that when a person gets angry and frustrated, they lose their ability to think clearly. They start acting on impulse, even when logically what they are doing doesn't make sense. The Egyptians had gotten so fed up with the frogs that they kept hitting them out of anger, even though it only made things worse.

The Steipler is highlighting how anger can have severe, negative consequences. A person who is normally lucid and clear-minded can behave in a manner that is illogical, or worse, hurtful to themselves and others when they get angry. Let us ensure that we don't allow our emotions to get the best of us and work hard to prevent ourselves from acting in a way that we will most certainly regret later on.

ENABLING PRAYER

Chiddushei HaRim

"Moshe said to Pharaoh, '...Against what time shall I entreat [G-d] for you?' ...and Moshe cried out to Hashem concerning the frogs that He had brought upon Pharaoh." (8:5-8)

"Entreat" and "cry" are two of ten expressions used in the Torah to denote prayer.

The Sages taught that Egyptian oppression had sealed the Jews' lips so that they were unable to pray to G-d. But the ten plagues, one by one, abolished Pharaoh's tyranny, thus unsealing the Jews' lips and enabling them to make use of all the expressions of prayer.

Two of the ten plagues - the blood and the frogs - had already occurred, restoring to the Jews the use of the two expressions of prayer mentioned in the above pasuk.

RISKING IT ALL

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The frogs in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields died." (8:9)

The Torah previously mentioned that some of the frogs had gone into the ovens. What happened to them?

A frog's natural habitat is water; for a frog to jump into a piping hot oven is an act of the ultimate self-sacrifice.

G-d did not let this selfless act of obedience to His will go unrewarded: when it was time to end this plague, "the frogs in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields died" - but those in the ovens remained alive.

Similarly, our historical survival as a people is due to our willingness to comply with G-d's will no matter what the cost. (Yalkut Shimoni 182) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

STANDING TALL

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh

"And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh...'" (9:13)

Because he was a humble man, Moshe was accustomed to bow to all men in greeting. Therefore, G-d found it necessary to command him explicitly to "stand before Pharaoh."

"When you go before Pharaoh," G-d told Moshe, "stand erect before him and don't bow to him in greeting, for you must not show him even the slightest sign of respect."

BATTLING A CONSUMING FIRE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"There was hail and fire [lightning] flashing among the hailstones. It was an extremely heavy [downfall]..." (9:24)

Chazal teach us that Hashem struck the Egyptians with ten plagues, while at the same time bringing healing to Bnei Yisrael, with "medicine for the soul" by teaching them important lessons in faith... For example, from the Plague of Wild Beasts, they saw Hashem's hand in conducting the affairs of the world, punishing the wicked and protecting the righteous, for only the Egyptians were affected by the plague, and not Bnei Yisrael. This lesson was made even clearer when Pestilence struck, for although it was a contagious disease, it did not spread from the Egyptians' cattle to that of the Jews.

What moral could be derived from the Plague of Hail? R' Moshe Feinstein zt'l bases his answer on the Gemara (Kiddushin 81a) which compares the yetzer hara to a pillar of fire trapped inside the human body of flesh and blood. Man's mission is to bring that fire under control and not allow it to "consume" him by dominating his life. This quality was exhibited by the hail as well. Chazal tell us that the Plague of Hail consisted of fire intermingled with hailstones. The water of the hail did not extinguish the fire, and the fire did not melt the hailstones; these two disparate forces worked together to fulfill Hashem's command.

From this unique plague, we learn that man cannot excuse sinful behavior by claiming that it was impossible for him to overcome the "fire" that burned within him, that his behavior was merely dictated by human nature. The hail showed the Jews that the fire of the yetzer hara can indeed be subdued.

BALANCING FIRE AND ICE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"There was hail and fire [lightning] flashing among the hailstones. It was an extremely heavy [downfall]..." (9:24)

Water and fire derive from and express the Divine attributes of mercy and severity, respectively. Thus, the uniqueness of the plague of hail was its blend of ice and fire, Divine mercy and severity. Similarly, although this was a particularly severe plague, as indicated by the harsh warning preceding it, this very warning included merciful instructions how to avert it.

Only G-d can override nature and combine fire and ice. In the same way, it is only by rising above our natural limitations and connecting ourselves to G-d that we can be both strict and merciful at the same time - both for our own benefit and for the benefit of others. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 31, pp. 44-45) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

EVIL MOTIVATIONS

Chasam Sofer

"But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear Hashem, G-d." (9:30)

Some people have asked why the Egyptians were liable to punishment for having oppressed the Jews. Wasn't it decreed by G-d that the Egyptians should oppress them? However, the Egyptians didn't oppress the Jews because of this desire to carry out G-d's decree. They did it out of wickedness and hatred and for this they deserved punishment.

At one point, Pharaoh tried to justify his conduct, saying: "G-d is righteous and [so am] I..." (Shemos 9:27), meaning that G-d had been righteous in decreeing oppression for the Jews and that Pharaoh was righteous because he had been motivated solely by the desire to carry out the decree. But Moshe replied, "But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear Hashem, G-d." I know that you and your servants oppressed the Jews not because you feared G-d, nor out of a desire to fulfill His word, nor out of piety and fear of G-d, but only out of pure wickedness and cruelty. And this is why you deserve punishment.

HAFTORAH

THE TRUE MASTER

Kochav MiYaakov

"...Behold! I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt..." (Yechezkel 29:3)

An alternative rendering of this passage is: "Behold, I am above you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt."

Pharaoh always boasted of being the most powerful and absolute ruler on earth, with no one above him. In fact, he regarded himself as a deity, saying: "I do not know G-d." Therefore, G-d said to him: "Behold, I am above you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt." Know that I am your master and can deal with you as I see fit.

This may be likened to the case of a servant in a palace who boasts to a visitor that he is the sole owner of the palace, only to be interrupted by his master's arrival who says to him: "Don't misrepresent your position. I am your master and you are subject to my authority."

SPROUTING SALVATIONS

Avnei Ezel

"On that day I will cause a horn to shoot up from the House of Israel..." (Yechezkel 29:21)

The salvation of the Jewish people is like a plant, which can sprout up only after a seed has rotted away and it appears that no fruit could possibly come from it. Similarly, salvation and renewed strength can come to the Jewish people only after its fortunes have reached a low ebb and it would seem as if, G-d forbid, it were doomed to decay.

This is the implication of Yechezkel's statement in G-d's name: "On that day I will cause a horn to shoot up from the House of Israel."

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