

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

GUIDED BY HASHEM

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

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

Parshas Va'eira begins with G-d introducing Himself to Moshe with the name *Kel Shakkai* [spelling was modified out of respect for the actual name of G-d] (6:2-3) and telling him that the forefathers all knew Him as *Kel Shakkai*, but now He is *yud-kei-vav-kei* (as we don't know how to pronounce this name of G-d, we refer to this as Hashem).

What is G-d telling Moshe? What is the difference between G-d's different names, and what will now change?

Beth Lesch of Aleph Beta pieces together several clues that, when joined together, answer our questions. She points out that the first time *Kel Shakkai* is introduced is when G-d appears to Avraham (17:1). There, Avraham is instructed to walk before G-d. How does one walk before G-d?

Skip to Yaakov, who on his deathbed says, "The G-d before Whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the G-d Who has been my shepherd" (48:15). G-d leads his people as a shepherd leads from the rear. You see, to herd sheep, you don't lead from the front, for they will not follow. You lead from behind, and the flock senses movement from behind them and moves as a group.

It's the perfect metaphor for how G-d guides us, as *Kel Shakkai*, and asks us to be His sheep, under His protection.

The change in our *parashah* is replacing G-d's distinctive position of silently and subtly guiding us to leading the Jews out of Egypt with miracles and splendor.

G-d's attributes are used as needed, both in the times of the Exodus and in our current lives. Whether we're being gently guided or boldly led, G-d is always there when we need Him.

CRYING OUT FOR OUR BROTHERS

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, למה הרעות לעם הזה, למה, "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, "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 *Havayah*, 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 in 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.

We might draw an analogy to a child who challenges the parent's decision to punish the child's sibling. The parent will likely disapprove of the disrespect shown, but will, at the same time, appreciate the child's genuine concern for his or her sibling. Similarly, Hashem excused and even welcomed Moshe's cry, because it stemmed from a sincere love for Am Yisrael.

Hashem is waiting for us to cry out as we feel the pain of our fellow Jews in distress. He wants us to feel the suffering of every widow, orphan and bereaved parent, of every hostage currently being held by Hamas in captivity [published on 1/9/2024], and of every wounded soldier, to the point where we cannot tolerate the pain any longer, and we cry, "Enough!!" Our love for אחינו בני ישראל must lead us to shout out in pain, to come before Hashem and demand that He put an end to the suffering and bring us our redemption.

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 Wisnefsky

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?"

SEEKING 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."

PLEAING 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.

STAGES OF FREEDOM

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Therefore, say to Children of Israel, '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)

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

- *I will free you*: This first level refers to shunning evil. By shunning evil, we become free, unencumbered by its oppressive grip on us.
- *I will save you from their servitude*: This second level refers to doing good. By actively engaging in good deeds, we are saved from backsliding into enslavement to evil.
- *I will redeem you*: This third level refers to studying the Torah, since the Torah is the means by which we access G-d's infinity even while in this finite world, and are thereby redeemed from the limitations of nature.
- *I will take you to Myself*: This fourth and highest level refers to clinging to G-d Himself, whose essence transcends all categorization, both finite and infinite. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5678, p. 145) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

ETERNAL FREEDOM

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"Therefore, say to Children of Israel, '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)

G-d commanded Moshe to return to *Bnei Yisrael* and convey to them the famous לשונוֹת גְּאוּלָּה - "four expressions of redemption." These four promises begin with והוצאתי אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים - "I will take you from underneath the suffering of Egypt" (6:6).

Several *pesukim* later, after the אַרְבַּע לְשׁוֹנוֹת גְּאוּלָּה, Hashem proclaims, וידעתם כי אני ה' אלוֹקֵיכֶם הַמוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סַבְלוֹת מִצְרַיִם - "You will know that I am Hashem, your G-d, Who takes you from underneath the suffering of Egypt" (6:7).

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck, in Lahavos Eish, addresses the question of why Hashem twice promises to bring *Bnei Yisrael* מִתַּחַת סַבְלוֹת מִצְרַיִם - "from underneath the suffering of Egypt." Why is this repeated? Rav Druck explains by citing an insight from his father, Rav Mordechai Druck, regarding the text of our nightly *ma'ariv* prayer. We recall the miracles of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, and how יוֹצֵא אֶת עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם לְחֵירוֹת עוֹלָם - Hashem brought *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt, into "everlasting freedom." We must ask, how can we speak of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* as bringing us לְחֵירוֹת עוֹלָם, to a permanent, eternal freedom? Our nation has, unfortunately, suffered numerous exiles and periods of persecution throughout the millennia following the Exodus from Egypt. Even today, we suffer from terrorism and from worldwide condemnations when we try defending ourselves. In what way can we be said to have been delivered from Egypt לְחֵירוֹת עוֹלָם?

Rav Druck answered that slavery involves more than simply the inability to leave, and being forced to perform labor. Slavery eliminates a person's independent identity, by not allowing him to harbor his own ambitions, dreams and aspirations. A slave's entire existence revolves around the fulfillment of his master's will. He cannot decide for himself what kind of life he wants. He has no ability to choose, as he is entirely bound to fulfill his master's wishes. He lives without ambition, without the possibility of personal achievement or self-actualization.

In this sense, *Yetzias Mitzrayim* indeed brought us לְחֵירוֹת עוֹלָם. True, we would again experience persecution and exile. But once we left Egypt, we always recognized our power to dream and aspire to something different, to something better. Never again did we live with the slave mentality, with the feeling that we have no independent identity to mold, no special mission to pursue, no ability to pursue personal goals or actualize our unique potential.

Rav Druck explains that these are the two promises made by Hashem here in Parshas Vaeira. Hashem assured *Bnei Yisrael* that He would save them from the backbreaking slave-labor, but also from the loss of identity, from the

lack of a sense of mission. He would bring them לְחֵירוֹת עוֹלָם, to the everlasting freedom to chart their course in life, to pursue their ambitions.

Many people, unfortunately, deny themselves this freedom to dream and aspire. They convince themselves that they are stuck, when in truth they aren't. They decide, "This is just who I am, and I can't change." "This is my lot in life, this is how it always was, so this is how it will always be." We must recognize our לְחֵירוֹת עוֹלָם, that we are never stuck in place, that we can always change ourselves and choose a better life and a better destiny.

Hashem did not take us out of Egypt in order to be enslaved by our circumstances. He took us out of Egypt לְחֵירוֹת עוֹלָם, so that forever more, for all eternity, we will have the ability to choose who we want to be, and to chart our course accordingly. We are guaranteed to have this freedom, under all circumstances, at all times, and it behooves us to take full advantage of this power, and work to create for ourselves the meaningful, fulfilling lives that we are capable of creating.

LOOK FOR THE LIGHT

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"Therefore, say to Children of Israel, '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 Yisroel 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 Who took you out from under the burdens of Egypt." (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 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 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

"I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and I will give it to you for a heritage, I Hashem." (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

"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” (וַיִּצַו) 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 Henoah 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)

FEELING THEIR PAIN

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

“And these are the names of Levi's sons in order of their birth: Gershon, Kehas, and Merari.” (6:16)

Our *parashah* lists the names of the families of Reuven, Shimon, and Levi. However, if we look at the *pesukim*, we find that the verse speaking about Levi adds the words: “And these are the names...”

The Shelah HaKadosh asks why the words *שמות* are mentioned only in the context of the sons of Levi.

He suggests that the words *שמות* are an indicator that we should carefully examine the names of Levi's children and the reasons for them. They were all a reflection of the pain that Levi felt for his brothers who were suffering under the oppressive hand of Pharaoh and Egypt.

- *גרשון* is an allusion to the fact that *Bnei Yisrael* were strangers (*גרים*) in a foreign land.
- *קהת* is in testimony to Levi's teeth feeling blunt due to his brothers' suffering.
- *מררי* stands for the bitterness of slavery.

Although the tribe of Levi was not involved in the physical aspect of the slavery, Levi named his children with allusions to it so that during the dark days and nights, they would at least identify emotionally with their brothers' plight.

They may be powerless to change the situation, but that did not exempt them from feeling their brothers' pain.

Therefore, the Torah says, *שמות* - look at these names and take note. (This is not the same as Binyamin, who named his children after his personal suffering. Here, the *Bnei Levi* were acknowledging other people's pain.)

Hashem Himself acts in a similar fashion.

The Torah (Shemos 24:10) tells us that before *Matan Torah*, Moshe, Aharon, the Elders, Nadav, and Avihu all approached the mountain and ויראו את אלקי ישראל ותחת - רגליו כמעשה לבנת His feet was the likeness of sapphire brickwork.”

Rashi explains that the brickwork that Hashem kept under His feet was there at the time of the slavery in Egypt as a constant reminder of the trials that the Jews were experiencing.

The Egyptians forced the Jews to find the raw materials with which to build bricks and imposed on them an impossible daily quota. The bricks symbolized the Jews’ suffering, and therefore, Hashem kept a sapphire brick under His feet.

The time was not yet right for Hashem to bring the *geulah*; it was as if there was nothing He could do. However, that did not prevent him from identifying with their pain through the symbolism of the brick.

Through this action, Hashem teaches us a powerful lesson. Often, we face painful situations that we are powerless to change. We hear of someone’s misfortune, illness, or tragedy. We read of a community’s struggle or a country facing national disaster. We may be powerless to act, but that does not absolve us from feeling their pain.

No man should be an island, and at the very least, in the same way as Hashem always feels our pain, we should feel theirs as well. (L’shulchan Shabbos, p. 199)

SHARING THE BURDEN

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

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

The Torah interrupts the story of the Exodus to list the names of the heads of the tribes of Reuven and Shimon, as well as the names of the tribe of Levi (6:14-26), including finally naming Moshe’s parents (6:20).

Why does the Torah list only the leaders of Reuven and Shimon, while listing all the names of the tribe of Levi?

The Lekach Tov quotes the Shelah, explaining that because Levi was not subject to slavery, they wanted to share in the anguish of their brothers. They named their children after the nation’s challenges: Gershon representing being visitors in a land not their own, Kehas representing the blunted teeth of overworked people, and Merari representing the bitterness of their lives.

While this numeration was important in furthering the story about to happen, it was also meant to display the compassion that the people had for each other, a key ingredient in a people and in liberation.

FEMININE INFLUENCE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

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

In order to fulfill our Divine mission of transforming the world into G-d’s home (i.e., to “conquer” the world as the agents of holiness), we all - both men and women - must primarily draw upon those aspects of our personalities that are traditionally referred to as “male,” namely, our drive to engage the world as assertive agents of change. Nonetheless, it is the “female” aspect of our personalities - our desire to build nurturing homes, and, more generally, transform the whole world into G-d’s home - that motivates this “male” quest and empowers it.

This is why, although most genealogies in the Torah mention only the paternal line, the Torah here (and later, with regard to Aharon’s sons [Shemos 6:23] and Pinchas [Shemos 6:25]) also mentions the mothers.

It is therefore crucial that those in whom the female aspect of their personality is dominant - i.e., women - realize the importance of their influence upon men and utilize this influence in an inspiring and holy manner. (Hitva’aduyot 5731, vol. 2, pp. 44-45) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

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 was the same Aharon and Moshe to whom Hashem said, 'Bring forth the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt, troop by troop.'" (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 Wisniewsky

PERSONALIZED POTENTIAL

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"This was the same Aharon and Moshe to whom Hashem said, 'Bring forth the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt, troop by troop.'" (6:26)

Rashi comments that in some places Aharon is mentioned before Moshe while in others Moshe is mentioned first to teach us that they were equal. This is indeed surprising; Moshe was the greatest prophet and sage of all times, to such an extent that he was master of the whole world and Hashem chose to give His holy Torah to the world through him. If so, how can it be said that Aharon, for all his merits, was Moshe's equal?

This question can be answered in two ways: Firstly, although Moshe's power was greater than Aharon's, they were still considered equal because they were both needed for the redemption of the Jews. To give an analogy, even though one partner in a business has a greater role than the other, if the business could not function without both of them, they are equals in that sense.

Secondly, Aharon was considered Moshe's equal since, like Moshe, throughout his life he performed Hashem's will to the utmost of his ability and with complete faith. Even though Moshe's abilities were greater, and he was therefore given more significant tasks to perform, both of them dedicated themselves totally to the things they were given to do.

With this principle, we can explain a well-known story told by the Sages (Bava Basra 10b): Yosef, the son of R' Yehoshua, became weak and fell into a coma, appearing to be dead. When he revived, his father asked him, "What did you see?"

The son replied, "I saw an upside-down world; the superior ones were on bottom, and the inferior ones were on top."

Said the father, "You saw a world in which everything is clear."

On the surface, this story is difficult to understand. Why did the son think the world he had seen was upside-down? It would seem obvious that in this world we can perceive only what meets our eyes, while in the world of truth a person's real worth would be apparent.

Therefore, we must say that those whom we consider superior in our world are also thought to be superior there, but are nevertheless given a lower status; while people whom we consider inferior in this world are thought inferior there also, but still they occupy a more prominent position. This is what the son meant in reporting that it was an upside-down world. His wiser father, however, understood that Hashem judges each person according to his abilities and does not demand from someone more than he is capable of. Therefore, those whose talents are inferior but who manage to achieve their full potential are given a higher status in the next world than those with superior talents who fail to utilize them fully. Thus, a "superior" person might have a lower position than an "inferior" one, even though the former may have achieved much more than the latter.

Similarly, Moshe and Aharon, even though they differed in their abilities, could be considered equal since both achieved their full potential.

EACH IN THEIR PROPER TIME

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Similarly, Moshe and Aharon, even though they differed in their abilities, could be considered equal since both achieved their full potential.

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.

UNINFLUENCED HOLINESS

Be'er Mayim Chaim

"This was the same 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.

CONSISTENT LOYALTY

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

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

Before beginning the story of the עשר מכות, the ten plagues that Hashem brought upon Egypt, the Torah presents Moshe and Aharon's genealogy. It traces the family history of the tribe of Levi until the birth of Moshe and Aharon, and concludes, הוא משה ואהרן - "this is Moshe and Aharon" (6:27).

Rashi explains the meaning of this expression: הם בשליחותם ובצדקתם מתחילה ועד סוף. They remained loyal to their mission, and retained their level of piety, "from beginning to end," throughout their term as leaders of Bnei Yisrael.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe, in Shiurei Chumash, elaborates on the importance of this concept, of living with consistent devotion to one's values and principles under all circumstances. It is far more challenging than we might think to live with this kind of consistency even after one attains prominence, when one rises to a position of influence.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (2:4) tells that Yochanan served in the position of *kohen gadol* for eighty years, and toward the end of his life, he became a *Tzeduki* (heretic). He remained loyal for many years while serving in his distinguished position - but he ultimately changed, and betrayed his beliefs, showing us how challenging long-term consistency can be in a position of prominence.

Moshe and Aharon met this challenge, remaining true to their mission and their values מתחילה ועד סוף.

More generally, life takes us to many different places, and puts us in many different circumstances. Not always will it be easy to remain steadfastly loyal to our moral and religious values under all the many conditions that life places us in. Rashi here teaches us the importance of living with commitment ועד סוף, מתחילה ועד סוף, throughout our lives, in all the many different situations that we find ourselves thrust into.

Rav Wolbe himself embodied this teaching. He was a promising student in the Mir Yeshiva in Europe, but needed to leave during World War II because he had German citizenship. He ended up going to Sweden, living in a town that did not even have a *minyan* of religiously observant Jews. Despite these unfavorable circumstances, he continued learning and growing, developing himself into the towering, righteous Torah sage that he became.

Rav Wolbe cites his mentor, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, as observing that people often act differently when they change their clothing. When we are dressed more casually, we are more likely to act more casually, too, to be freer and less careful. And certainly, our behavior often changes depending on the company with whom we find ourselves. Rashi here teaches us to meet the challenge of ועד סוף, מתחילה ועד סוף, of consistent loyalty, of remaining devoted to our principles under all circumstances, in all places, in all stages of life, and in all the different frameworks in which we engage. We are to remain steadfastly committed to the Torah's laws and values at all times and places, ועד סוף, מתחילה ועד סוף - from beginning to end.

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

SEEING AND BELIEVING

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 - "He [Moshe] performed the wonders to the eyes of the nation, and they believed in him." He then quoted another *pasuk* from the *parshah*, ויחזק 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?"

MIRACULOUS MERCY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And Egypt 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

FILTERING OUR SURROUNDINGS

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"And Egypt 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.

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*.

NEVER TOO LATE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

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

As Moshe and Aharon prepare to face Pharaoh and free their people from slavery, the Torah somewhat casually divulges that Moshe was eighty years old, and Aharon was eighty-three (7:7). Why does the Torah need to interrupt the story just to share the brothers' ages and why now?

Oznayim LaTorah suggests that this interjection is placed intentionally to draw our attention to the fact that Moshe and Aharon embark on this monumental endeavor so late in their lives.

Although we are not expected to accomplish feats as tremendous as freeing the entire Jewish nation, the heroism is nonetheless inspiring. One can accomplish great things even in the last third of one's life.

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*" rather than "for *yourselves*"?

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 and cast it down before Pharaoh.' It will become a serpent." (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

"You shall say to Aharon, '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 *teshuvas 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

"You shall say to Aharon, '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.

INCREASING 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

PREREQUISITE OF GRATITUDE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And G-d 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.

ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

“And G-d said to Moshe, ‘Say to Aharon: Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt.’” (7:19)

Rashi (7:19) famously observes that the first two plagues - blood and frogs - were brought about not by Moshe, but rather by Aharon. It was he who struck the river to change the water into blood, and then later struck the river to produce the frogs. The reason, Rashi explains, is because the river had protected Moshe when he was an infant, and his mother hid him from the Egyptian authorities who sought to kill him in fulfillment of Pharaoh’s decree. It was therefore inappropriate for Moshe to bring a plague upon the river.

Similarly, as Rashi writes later (8:12), it was Aharon who struck the ground of Egypt to initiate the plague of vermin, because Moshe had used the earth of the ground to bury the body of the Egyptian whom he had killed for beating a slave.

Numerous *ba’alei mussar* have noted the crucial perspective on the quality of gratitude that this teaches us. Quite obviously, neither the river nor the ground - nor any other inanimate object - gains anything from people’s expression of gratitude. If it was deemed inappropriate for Moshe to strike the river or the ground, then we must conclude that gratitude is vitally necessary not only for the feelings of the benefactor, but also for the beneficiary. We express appreciation for those who have helped us or served us not only for their benefit, so that they will feel good about what they did - which, in itself, is certainly important - but primarily for ourselves, so we develop what we might call an “attitude of gratitude.”

We must become grateful people, and we are therefore required to acknowledge and express appreciation for that which others have done for us, in order to cultivate this mindset.

Why is this “attitude of gratitude” so crucial? Why is it important for us to develop this sense of appreciation?

Rav Yitzchak Hutner explained by noting that the word for “thanksgiving” - הודאה - also means “admission.” When we express gratitude, we are making a confession, of sorts. We confess that we needed somebody else, that we depended on the grace, goodwill and assistance of another person. This is part of what makes expressing gratitude so difficult - it is an admission of dependence, of a lack of self-sufficiency.

It is indeed humbling, and at times even embarrassing, to express genuine gratitude. But this admission is so vital for us, because this is what makes us humble. In order to properly serve G-d, we need to acknowledge and recognize our limitations, our reliance on His grace. And it is the central importance of humility as one of the foundations of the religious experience that requires us to sense and express gratitude. We are to show appreciation in order to become humbler and more attuned to our dependence on other people and on the Almighty.

EXPRESSING GRATITUDE

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

“And G-d said to Moshe, ‘Say to Aharon: Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt.’” (7:19)

Regarding the story of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, we find at least two occasions where the Torah teaches us the importance of *hakaras ha’tov* - having gratitude and showing appreciation for the good one has received.

In Parashas Shemos, when Moshe Rabbeinu was charged by Hashem with the mission of starting the process of the Exodus from Egypt, Moshe did not travel directly to Egypt from the desert where Hashem appeared to him at the burning bush, but instead took a detour and went first to visit his father-in-law, Yisro.

Why did Moshe Rabbeinu make this extra stop? Moshe said that when he arrived in Midyan, he was a refugee from Egypt, alone in a foreign land, and Yisro took him into his home, married him to one of his daughters, and sheltered him. He owed it to Yisro, as an act of *hakaras ha’tov*, to take leave of him properly.

So, even though the whole future of the *Bnei Yisrael* rested in Moshe’s hands, and even though he had been given a direct commandment from Hashem to begin the process, *hakaras ha’tov*, showing gratitude and appreciation to Yisro, came first.

The problem is that before Moshe arrived in Midyan to begin with, Yisro had been ex-communicated by the people of Midyan for rejecting their *avodah zarah*, of which he had been the high priest. As a result, both he

and his daughters were alone without any friends or support. So, when Moshe arrived in Midyan, a stranger who was unaware of their situation, it served Yisro's interests to invite Moshe in and to befriend him.

Perhaps this would be the opportunity to marry off one of his daughters. Hence, Yisro's kindness was not a noble act but one motivated by self-interest - and indeed, Moshe did marry Yisro's daughter Tziporah!

We see from here that the obligation to show *hakaras ha'tov* is so significant that it applies even to someone who acted well to you only due to their self-interest! We need not ask what the motivation was; we just have to show gratitude for having been the beneficiary of someone's actions.

In another instance of *hakaras ha'tov*, Rashi tells us that Moshe could not bring the plague of lice because it entailed hitting the dirt, and it was that dirt that saved him when he buried the Egyptian who had been attacking the Jew.

The problem is that the dirt didn't save Moshe, because people informed Pharaoh as to what had happened, and Moshe needed to flee. The ground did not end up really saving him, so why did he owe the dirt a debt of gratitude?

We see from here to what degree one needs to have *hakaras ha'tov*. If someone tried to help but was unsuccessful, one still needs to have *hakaras ha'tov* toward him for his effort.

Even if someone acts in self-interest, or even if he tries to help but ends up being unsuccessful, we still have a duty to be grateful, to show appreciation, and to have *hakaras ha'tov*. (Yagdil Torah, p. 103)

REASON FOR CREATION

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev

"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 *Knesset Yisrael*, as if to say: This - the Jewish nation - is why G-d created the universe.

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

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 and covered the land of Egypt." (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.

YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

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

The Torah describes the second plague leveled against Egypt as the, "plague of frog" (singular), not frogs (8:2). The Midrash explains that it started with one frog, and when the Egyptians hit it, the frog split into two, and those two also split when hit, and so on. Why wouldn't G-d just create a swarm of frogs as He does later with other plagues?

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig explains that the frogs multiplied as a direct response to the Egyptians' evil acts of hitting the frogs, demonstrating to the Egyptians that there are consequences to their choices and actions.

It is their cruel treatment of the Jews and the excessive hardship imposed on them that precisely precipitated this punishment, or the second plague, as we have come to know it.

The Egyptians may not have learned the lesson of compassion, certainly not by the second plague. We should strive to approach life with understanding and compassion, even if surrounded by the opposite.

SLEEP ON IT

Rabbi Ari Ciment

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

Rabbi Eliezer says: And don't be quick to get angry, and repent one day before your death. (Avos 2:10)

Most commentators interpret these two phrases in the above ethic as completely unrelated separate statements. But is there a possible connection? What does anger have to do with being able to repent before you die?

The verse states (Shemos 8:2), "And the frog went up and covered the land of Egypt." There is a Midrash Tanchuma, also brought in Rashi, that quotes Rabbi Akiva as saying that there was initially only one frog, but miraculously, as the Egyptians would smite the frog, many frogs came forth from that one frog!

Rabbi Yaakov Kanievsky, the Steipler Gaon, asked the obvious question:

If the abundance of frogs were a nuisance, why didn't the Egyptians simply stop smiting them once they realized that hitting them actually caused their multiplication?

The answer he gives in his *sefer*, Birkas Peretz (which I saw in Rabbi Yaakov Edelstein's B'Rinah Yiktzoru) is essentially that anger always muddles reason.

Though the Egyptians should have rationally stopped hitting the frogs, their anger made them out of control. Reason and really good intent can be squashed in one minute by one fit of rage.

I will add that it is likely no coincidence that this message of anger is taught to us by the צפרדע - frog. The word צפרדע can be broken up to mean צפר, "morning" and דע, "to know." One strategy I have learned that helps prevent anger in any situation is to "sleep on it" and "know the morning." The lesson of anger is indeed to דע - know, the צפר - morning.

When the Tanna in Avos says, "Don't be quick to get angry, and repent one day before your death," he is likely saying that anger leads us to lose control and eventually relinquish well-meaning and good intent.

In order to assure we will leave this world having done sincere *teshuvah*, repentance, we thus have to avoid anger, which is the root of losing rationality! Anger and repentance are thus very much connected.

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*.

MIRACLE MEMORY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The frogs will depart from you, as well as from your houses, your courtiers, and your people, and will remain only in the river." (8:7)

There had not been any frogs in the Nile before the plague. Why was it necessary for some now to remain in the river - and for Moshe to emphasize this to Pharaoh?

G-d wanted a reminder of this plague to be present in the Egyptians' source of sustenance, so they would recall at all times that G-d had the power to use their deity to attack them. This itself weakened their ability to oppose G-d's will in the future.

Similarly, by recalling daily our miraculous delivery from Egypt, along with all the other times that G-d has come to our aid throughout history, we slowly but surely weaken the power of evil (our inner "Pharaoh") over us, and liberate ourselves from the demoralizing effect of materialistic society (our present-day "Egypt"). We can thereby express our innate Divine potentials to their fullest. (Hitva'aduyot 5744, vol. 2, pp. 795-796, 826-830) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

POWER OF PRAYER

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Then Moshe and Aharon left Pharaoh's presence, and Moshe cried out to G-d..." (8:8)

After Moshe negotiates with Pharaoh for the frog plague to end, he leaves Pharaoh and "cries out to G-d" (8:8). Why would Moshe cry out to G-d to end the plague, rather than just ask Him? This question is amplified by the fact that Moshe doesn't even ask for the plague to end immediately, but on the following day. Especially since the urgency was not there, why does Moshe feel compelled to cry for it to end?

Rav Shimon Schwab suggests that Moshe's behavior showed the Egyptians and us that prayer has tremendous power and keeps us grounded, always reminding us that there is something greater. Prayer also connects us to others with similar requests and allows us to consider and empathize with others' needs.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch also points out that this was Moshe's first independent action as a leader, and G-d's granting this timely request has the added benefit of proving the power of prayer. Prayer provides a context to access and understand our own emotions and an opportunity to build a direct relationship with G-d in which we praise, ask, and thank. By praying, we reaffirm our sense of belonging to a people with purpose and our faith in G-d.

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 Wisniewsky

SLOWLY BUT SURELY

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"The sorcerers said to Pharaoh, 'It is the finger of G-d!' However, Pharaoh's heart became hardened, and he did not listen to them, as G-d had said." (8:16)

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Shapira asks why Hashem first brought two plagues that the sorcerers could imitate, i.e., blood and frogs, and only at the third plague of lice was it impossible for them to copy, so much so that they said, אַצבע אַלוקים הוּא. Why not bring the lice first to forestall any misunderstanding of what was going on?

The answer is a clear insight into human nature, and that is that when confronted with a truth that contradicts our own opinion, it takes time for that truth to sink in, even if the evidence is indisputable!

Had the lice been the first plague, then the Egyptians would have found a way to dismiss it out of hand.

Hashem first brought blood and then frogs because even though the Egyptian sorcerers could replicate them, the truth was slowly seeping in. They were aware that there was a difference between the blood and frogs brought through witchcraft and those created by Hashem.

Slowly, slowly, the truth sank in, to the point that at the plague of lice, they were ready to proclaim, אַצבע אַלוקים הוּא - "It is the finger of G-d."

It is the cumulative effect of little actions and thoughts that have a more significant and longer-lasting impact than a sudden major event of substantial proportions. (L'titecha Elyon, p. 127)

Rabbi Yechiel Bruckner explains that the rule of תדיר ושאינו תדיר, that something that is more frequent takes precedence, is one that governs all of our relationships:

- Our relationship with Hashem needs to be based on a consistency of service - תדיר.

- Likewise, the ingredients of a good friendship or relationship are not the one-off acts of kindness that we may perform for other people. Instead, we evaluate relationships by the "constant" actions, the תדיר, that more often than not go unnoticed.

Having said all that, the תדיר itself presents its challenges.

How do I keep a relationship fresh, spontaneous, and exciting, and avoid it becoming stale? If all I have are the constants, the תדיר, then, in essence, it is the same thing repeating itself over and over!

Once again, we turn to the rule of תדיר ושאינו תדיר and note that the law ends by saying, תדיר קודם, which means that תדיר does not eradicate the שאינו תדיר but rather that it takes precedence over the שאינו תדיר.

In any relationship, between man and G-d, or between man and man, there must be a תדיר ושאינו תדיר element. As the Gemara (Berachos 29b) notes regarding *tefillah*, a stale prayer is called, כָּל שֶׁאֵינוֹ יִכּוֹל לַחֲדָשׁ בֵּה דְבַר - one in which one cannot find anything new, exciting, or spontaneous to say.

In Parashas Bechukosai (Vayikra 26:10), referring to the blessings that will accrue if בחוקותי תלכו, it says: ואכלתם - "You will eat ancient grain and remove the old to make way for the new." We need to eat, consume, and remove the old attitudes that lead to stale and lifeless relationships, and make way for renewal, a renewing and refreshing of our relationship with Hashem and of finding new ways to connect with family and friends. (Otzar Chaim, p. 195)

In essence, therefore, every relationship needs to have at its core loyalty and consistency that is represented by the תדיר, which is קודם. However, we need to ensure that at the same time, every relationship has spontaneity and freshness, as represented by the שאינו תדיר, which is not ignored completely but is just secondary to the תדיר. (Seridei Aish, Haggadah shel Pesach, p. 10)

DON'T PROCRASTINATE

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"I shall make a distinction between My people and your people; tomorrow this sign shall come about." (8:19)

When warning Pharaoh about the impending plague of ערוב - wild animals, Hashem says that He will bring about a salvation that will set apart His people from Pharaoh's Egyptians and that this miracle will occur tomorrow.

In other words, the wild beasts would only attack the Egyptians and ignore the Jews.

The Divrei Yisrael quotes the Mishnah (Yoma 8:9) that says: האומר אחטא ואשוב אחטא ואשוב אין מספיקין בידו לעשות: "One who says, 'I will sin and repent [tomorrow], I will sin and repent [tomorrow]' will not get the opportunity to do *teshuvah*."

A homiletical interpretation of this Mishnah is that the *tzaddik* doesn't wait for tomorrow but repents immediately in case he doesn't get the chance tomorrow. Whereas the *rasha* sins every day, thinking, mistakenly, that he can always do *teshuvah* tomorrow.

It turns out, therefore, that the difference between a *tzaddik* and a *rasha* is their approach to "putting things off until tomorrow."

Thus, we can now understand the *pasuk* as follows:

- I will make a distinction between my people and your people - ושמתי פדת
- The sign of this distinction will be למחר יהיה האות הזה - למחר, i.e., what is their attitude toward tomorrow?

Is it that of the *rasha*, that we should sin today and put off *teshuvah* until tomorrow, or is it that of the *tzaddik*, who does *teshuvah* now, for who knows what tomorrow will bring? (Idis She'B'idis, p. 79)

The approach of the *tzaddik* brings with it the rewards of a better tomorrow.

LESSONS IN FAITH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And G-d did so, and a huge mixed horde came upon the homes of Pharaoh and of his courtiers; throughout Egypt the land was devastated by the mixed horde." (8:20)

The first nine plagues can be divided into three sets of three, each of which was intended to teach Pharaoh and the Egyptians something about the belief in G-d:

- 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. (Abarbanel on Exodus 7:15-8:12; Likutei Sichot, vol. 36, p. 34) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

OVERCOMING OUR NATURE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"But Moshe replied, 'It is improper to do this because it is an abomination of the Egyptians...'" (8:22)

While the fourth plague is wreaking havoc on the Egyptians, Pharaoh tries to coax the Jewish people into bringing their offerings (cows) to G-d in Egypt rather than permitting them to leave for the desert (8:21). Moshe rejects this proposal, saying, "It is improper to do this because it is an abomination of the Egyptians" (8:22). Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch wonders why this explanation is so vague: Is the abomination the fact that Egyptians worship cows or that Jews would slaughter cows in front of the Egyptians?

Rav Hirsch suggests that both explanations may be true and serve to highlight the dichotomy between the character of the Egyptians and Jews. While the Egyptians idolize and submit to nature (represented by cows and offering sacrifices to them), the Jews aim to overcome our nature and its control over our behavior. By offering the "idols" within us, we physically and symbolically conquer our desires and impulses to become more refined people.

STANDING TALL

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh

"And G-d 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."

ICEY SMOKE SCREENS

Rabbi Ari Ciment

"Those among Pharaoh's courtiers who feared G-d's word brought their slaves and livestock indoors to safety, but those who paid no regard to the word of G-d left their slaves and livestock in the field." (9:20-21)

If there is no wisdom, then there is no fear [of G-d]. (Avos 3:17)

1. What does wisdom have to do with fearing G-d? How and why is knowledge a prerequisite for fearing G-d?

2. When G-d warned the Egyptians in this week's *parashah* about the upcoming hail, the determining factor of whether the people stayed indoors was their belief (Shemos 9:20-21): "Those who feared G-d sheltered their servants and cattle into their homes. But he who did not pay attention to the word of G-d left his servants and his livestock in the field." The opposite of "those who feared G-d" shouldn't be "he who did not pay attention to the word of G-d," but rather "those who don't fear G-d!" Also, what does the plague of hail have to do with the lesson of fearing G-d anyway?

In the Passover *Haggadah*, when discussing the Four Sons, we learn that the opposite of the *rasha*, evil son, is not a *tzaddik* but rather a *chacham*. This teaches us an important lesson: Sometimes doing the right thing is merely a matter of being smart. A *rasha* is someone who is smart but not wise; he is given the tools and knowledge to easily choose the right path, but he negligently places a smokescreen that enables himself to get it wrong. The *rasha* has knowledge, and yet he is not a *chacham*.

Often, we fool ourselves and purposely cloud our judgment in order to enable ourselves to sin. At the basic level, true *yiras Hashem* is not something mysterious, in the clouds, or difficult to reach. It's not something that you can only grasp if you can read Rashi and Tosafos, or if you teach or learn Gemara every day. It can most often be achieved by not being purposely blind! By simply being careful, placing your attention on the task at hand, and not letting yourself be clouded with improper machinations or justifications in order to sin, anyone can achieve this goal. Rabbi Yerucham similarly says that "those who did not pay attention" is indeed the opposite of "those who feared the word of G-d" because not paying attention to your heart and creating smokescreens to enable sin creates ultimate disbelief.

And now, perhaps, we can understand our Mishnah in Avos. Indeed, the plague of hail teaches us this important lesson: אין חכמה, אין יראה - If there is no wisdom, i.e., if you let yourself be blinded to knowledge and create smokescreens to see certain things that are clearly wrong as acceptable behavior, thus enabling yourself to sin, then there is no fear of G-d. The absence of knowledge creates an unfaithful environment. We always say that fire is akin to Torah, and we know that the hail had fire enveloped by ice. The fire, representing Torah knowledge, is often only realized when you peel off the cool icy covering representing our evil tendencies to cover such clear fire.

Takeaway Messages: "Those who did not pay attention" is indeed the opposite of "those who feared the word of G-d" because not paying attention to the knowledge of what is right and creating smokescreens to enable sin creates ultimate disbelief. The hail perfectly symbolizes the challenge of recognizing our tendency to hide or obscure the hidden fire with a ground-glass "smokescreen" ice cover. The opposite of the *rasha* is thus clearly the *chacham*, and this led to our Tanna of Avos teaching: אין חכמה, אין יראה. Hail taught us how best to fear G-d - by paying attention!

ATTENTIVE HEART

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Those among Pharaoh's courtiers who feared G-d's word brought their slaves and livestock indoors to safety, but those who paid no regard to the word of G-d left their slaves and livestock in the field." (9:20-21)

Just after G-d's announcement of the heavy hail to hit Egypt, He warns the people to gather their belongings and bring them indoors (9:19). The Torah then discloses that those who feared the word of G-d brought in their belongings, while those that did not pay attention to the word of G-d left them out (9:20-21). If one scenario is that people feared the word of G-d, why is its inverse "those that did not pay attention," and not "people that did not fear G-d"?

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair points out that fearing G-d leads to reverence, while not paying attention leads to apathy. One can know there's a G-d and believe the Torah to be the word of G-d, but it takes internalizing one's knowledge and conscientiously adhering to the Torah's laws to cultivate mindfulness and awareness of G-d.

The Hebrew word for "pay attention," *sim lev* (literally, set your heart to it), highlights the idea that attention to our actions is so important, perhaps even more so than the actions themselves. The Torah teaches us that if we pay attention, our hearts will follow, and that will enable us to live more intentionally and passionately.

BATTLING THE FLAMES

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] - such as had not fallen on the land of Egypt since it had become a nation.” (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

NEVER TOO FAR GONE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Moshe said to him, ‘When I go out of the city, I will spread out my hands to G-d. The thunder will cease and there will be no more hail - so that you know that the world belongs to G-d.’” (9:29)

Moshe had to leave the city in order to pray to G-d because Egypt’s capital was full of idols (Shemot Rabbah 12:5; Rashi).

These idols were tangible symbols of the materialistic approach to life that characterized Egypt, which was antithetical to the notion that there is a G-d who is beyond the physical world and the natural processes that govern it.

It was therefore virtually impossible for Moshe to focus on G-d in an atmosphere saturated with the denial of His existence.

Nonetheless, when it came time to redeem the Jewish people, G-d Himself, as it were, came to take them out of Egypt.

This teaches us that when it is time for us to be redeemed, then, regardless of what depths to which we think we may have sunk (or what depths to which we may have indeed sunk), G-d will redeem us. (Hitva’aduyot 5721, vol. 2, pp. 214-217) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

EVIL MOTIVES

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.

MIGHTY MUTENESS

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

“And the wheat and the spelt were not struck, for they ripen later.” (9:32)

As an alternate meaning of the word אפילת, Rashi cites the explanation of Midrash Tanchuma that “wonders upon wonders” (פלאי פלאות) were performed so that these grains would not suffer. The Torah says explicitly that the flax and barley were struck because the flax was in its stalk and the barley was ripe, clearly implying that other crops were not struck because they were not ripe and in their stalks but rather soft enough to absorb the blows of the hail, as in Rashi’s first explanation. If so, why was it necessary to do wonders to save them? It would seem entirely natural that crops that had not yet sprouted or had not yet hardened into stalks were not broken.

It therefore seems that the miracle done here was simply bringing a plague that would not destroy unripe crops, although the Egyptians deserved to have all their crops destroyed. Instead, Hashem destroyed only the flax and barley, while sparing the wheat and spelt, itself a great wonder.

Equally wondrous is the fact that Hashem allows wicked generations to survive rather than destroying them, as He would certainly be justified in doing. In this vein, the Sages (Gittin 56b) interpreted the verse (Shemos 15:11), מי כמוך באלים ה’, “Who is like You among the mighty, Hashem,” by changing the word אלים, “mighty,” to אלמים, “mute” saying that his might is his muteness. This becomes a praise of Hashem’s muteness; even though people malign Him, He still allows the world to continue. This is a great miracle.

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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