

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

When Paro (Pharaoh) "sent the nation out" (Shemos 13:17) of Egypt, he could have freed them completely, or he could have acquiesced in what Moshe had demanded from the very beginning, to "let us go the distance of a three-day journey into the desert to bring offerings to G-d" (5:3). Paro being told that the nation had "fled" (14:5) indicates that he had only given permission to leave temporarily. Had he given them permission to leave permanently, they would not be "fleeing," nor would it come as news to Paro that they were not returning. This is bolstered by the scenario described by Rashi (based on various midrashim) that Paro had sent officers to accompany the Children of Israel, who reported back to him that they had no intention of returning. Why would Paro send spies to make sure they would return if he had set them free completely?

On the other hand, that same verse indicates that Paro's intention was to let them go forever, as his response was to have a "change of heart." If he had never intended to let them go completely, it would not be a "change of heart" to want them to come back, as this would have been what he had allowed in the first place! Furthermore, the Egyptians express regret for having released them from their servitude (also in 14:5), indicating that they had been freed completely, not just granted permission for a religious retreat with the expectation that they would return afterward.

Rashi's explanation of Paro's "change of heart" supports this second possibility as well, as wanting them back was a change from Paro's saying "get up and get out" (12:31). As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and others point out, "tze'u" means to leave permanently (whereas "lechu" would have meant "go" with the intention of returning after accomplishing what was set out for, in this case the temporary "sabbatical").

Our sages also indicate that Paro meant full freedom, as, desperate for them to leave before he also became a victim of the 10th plague, he shouted (in a voice amplified by G-d to be heard throughout the entire Egypt) "you used to be my servants, but now you are G-d's servants; you are free, you are your own masters" (Yalkut Shemoni 208, Midrash Tehillim 113, Yerushalmi, Pesachim 5:5).

So which one was it? Did Paro set them free forever, as the second half of the verse and these sources indicate, or did he only let them take a break from their slavery, as the first part of the verse (and the decision to send spies along) indicates?

Before attempting to find a solution to this conundrum, there is one more puzzling midrash (Shemos Rabbah 18:10) that I'd like to point out. "[G-d] killed the first born of the captive because they (the Egyptians) would say to the captive locked up in prison, 'would you prefer to go out (be freed) and that Israel (also) be redeemed?' And he would respond, 'I will not go out from here forever so that Israel will not go out.' Therefore, they (the captives) were judged with them (the Egyptians)." Aside from this midrash also indicating that Israel would be freed completely ("redeemed"), the question posed to the captive seems completely out of place. For one thing, what does letting Israel free have to do with the captive going free? Why do they go together, as an all-or-nothing package? Even more puzzling is the fact that the Egyptians consulted with their prisoners before deciding what to do! They're experiencing plagues of (literally) biblical proportions, and before deciding whether or not to give in they ask those at the lowest end of the social structure what they would prefer? Why would the Egyptians ask their captives which they would prefer before deciding whether or not to let the Jewish People go?

If we combine what the Malbim (8:21) writes about polytheism with how Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky z"l explained (3:18 and 14:5) the request for a three-day journey and what (lehavdil bain chaim le'chaim) Rabbi Noson Weisz, shlita, wrote (Va'eira 5766) about Paro's reluctance to let have that religious holiday, we may have an approach to these issues.

Polytheism believes that each locale has its own specific deity or deities, and those living in that country would make them the object(s) of their worship. Moshe's request to leave Egypt to serve G-d was taken to mean that the Children of Israel wanted to worship a deity not connected to Egypt, with the plagues proving that G-d's dominion extends all over, including Egypt. Moshe's request for a three-day religious journey was designed to strengthen his nation's connection to G-d, allowing them to survive the full 400-year exile that had been decreed upon them. Only 209 years of that exile had passed, but the nation had become so assimilated into Egyptian culture (descending to the 49th level of "tumah") that without a spiritual reawakening they would

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not have been able to last another 191 years. However, this request also meant that they rejected the locale deities, and, by extension, the human representative of those deities, the king. Instead of Paro representing everyone in Egypt in his relationship with the Egyptian deities, their request was taken as a request that Paro only represent those native to Egypt; those who came from elsewhere would still fall under the dominion of the deity of their native land, and therefore still be represented by that corresponding ruler. Paro refused to step down from his role representing everyone in Egypt, and therefore turned down Moshe's request.

Had Paro been willing to accept this redefined role, and therefore allowed the Nation of Israel to celebrate a holiday unique to them, their connection with the One True G-d would have been strengthened not only through this religious experience, but because they would have been able to retain their unique identity for the remainder of the 400 year exile, and not become assimilated into the Egyptian culture. Paro's refusal necessitated their leaving completely.

After each successive plague, it became harder for Paro to deny Moshe's request. He tried explaining to Moshe why he can't let them go, even temporarily; how doing so was tantamount to leaving Egypt permanently. If they weren't going to be a part of the Egyptian society and culture, they had to move elsewhere. Moshe insisted that they could stay in Egypt while retaining their own identity, if Paro was willing to recognize that people can live in Egypt while not worshipping Egyptian deities (and as a result not have Paro represent them to these deities).

Throughout the process, Paro insisted that Moshe was requesting a complete break, while Moshe kept saying otherwise. Under the continuing duress of the plagues, Paro contemplated the repercussions of granting Moshe's request/demand, and realized that it affected more than just the Children of Israel. Other foreigners would also no longer be represented by him, and they would have to be allowed to return to their native lands to worship their own deities. They were therefore consulted with, to determine if they were willing to no longer be considered a part of Egyptian society, and no longer affected by its deities. They refused, preferring to stay in Egypt forever rather than having their relationship with its deities severed as a consequence of letting Israel go.

Finally, Paro gives in. Afraid he will perish with all the other firstborn, he tells Moshe and the rest of the nation that they are free to go. And, as he has insisted all along, once they are no longer represented by him (since they reject the Egyptian deities), they are granted complete freedom.

They leave, and Paro is left wondering what Moshe's intentions were. Moshe had said that they only needed a temporary break, not complete freedom; it was Paro who had insisted that the request was tantamount to asking to leave forever. Which would Moshe do - take the full freedom Paro had granted or return as he had offered to do. He therefore sent officers with them to see what would happen, and upon hearing that the nation had in fact "fled" and was not going to return, had a change of heart. Maybe he could live with only representing native Egyptians after all. He regretted having freed them completely, from releasing them from their slavery.

Should he chase them to bring them back? Hearing that they were trapped by the sea, he (with G-d's help) summoned enough courage to try bringing them back, setting the stage for the splitting of the sea.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Although the Torah often points out the infinite value of every human life, this week's parsha gives a clear message about the value of Jewish life. We are told that no one will be permitted to murder Jews with impunity.

In the Shirat Hayam (Song at the Sea), Moshe (Moses) and the Jewish people use three expressions to describe the downfall of the Egyptians. The Egyptians drowning in the sea are described as "they descended in the depths like stone." (Exodus 15:5) In a second expression, Moshe describes the defeat of the Egyptians in the following manner. "You sent forth Your wrath it consumes them like straw." (Exodus 15:7) There is one other image used to portray the drowning. The Jews sing out that "they sank as lead in the mighty waters." (Exodus 15:10)

One could claim that these phrases seem contradictory. Did the Egyptians sink like stone, like straw or like lead? Which was it?

Rashi notes that these variant similes are descriptive of different Egyptians who were punished in accordance with what they deserved. The most wicked were tossed around like weightless straw—they were allowed to brutally suffer. The best of the group drowned like lead, which of course sinks immediately—they suffered the least. Those who did not fall into any clear category sank like stones.

What emerges from Rashi is the precision of punishment, moreover, the clear statement that those

who were guilty of oppressing and murdering Jews would receive their due.

In 1956, Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik wrote that with the establishment of the State of Israel, "God...suddenly manifested himself." One such manifestation was that "Jewish blood is not free for taking, is not hefker." (Kol Dodi Dofek) During the Shoah, Jewish life, for most of the world, was worthless. It is said that in Hungary it was decided that Jews would not even be gassed before being incinerated. The cost of the gassing was a fraction of a penny. Even in death we were worth nothing.

With the establishment of the State, Rav Soloveitchik declared that one could sense God's presence in that Jews would be protected. No one would be able to spill blood in Israel without a strong response. The Jewish community in Israel was sending a message to Jews in the exile who felt more vulnerable-"Don't be afraid."

Even as we seek peace-Jewish life is precious. Even as we hope to enter into a new era for the Jewish State, one can only hope that Israel find peace while keeping true to the principle of "Jewish blood is not cheap." © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

This week's haftarah shows the effect of the Jewish nation's faith in Hashem irrespective of their level of mitzva observance. After the passing of Moshe Rabbeinu's devout disciple, Joshua the Jewish people were led by numerous judges. Their authority and influence was considerably limited and the Jewish people adopted foreign cultures and strayed from the Torah's ways. They typically fluctuated between sincere service of Hashem and repulsive idolatry. Hashem would respond to their abhorrent behavior and release one of the powerful nations to oppress them. The Jewish people would hear the message and sincerely return to Hashem until they succumbed again to foreign influences.

This week's haftarah speaks of one of those times when the Jewish nation severely strayed from the path. Hashem responded and permitted Yavin, the king of Canaan to capture the Jewish nation and annex her to his mighty empire. After twenty years of firm control the message hit home and the Jewish people began to repent. Hashem recognized their initial stages of repentance and sent the Prophetess Devorah to help them complete the process. They merited through her efforts an incredible miracle and Devorah composed a moving song of praise describing Hashem's revelations.

The miracle occurred when Devora instructed the leading Jewish general, Barak to select ten thousand men and charge into the Canaanite lines. Yavin gathered an army of hundreds of thousands and

planned a massive attack against the Jewish people. Hashem intervened on behalf of His people and created an illusion of enormous proportions forcing the Canaanites to flee for their lives. In the midst of this, Hashem sent blazing heat to the battle front and brought the Canaanites down to the Kishon Brook to cool off. At that exact moment, Hashem caused the brook to overflow and drown the Canaanites. Devorah sang about this miracle and said, "Kishon Brook swept them away-that brook of age my soul treads with strength." (Shoftim 5:21) Devorah referred to the Kishon as a brook of age seeming to relate it an earlier experience.

Chazal explain that this earlier incident was, in fact, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds recorded in this week's parsha. They quote an intriguing conversation between Hashem and the angel appointed over the sea of Reeds. Chazal reflect upon a verse in Tehillim (106:7) that indicates the Jewish people's imperfect faith while crossing the sea. Chazal explain that although the entire nation heard Moshe Rabbeinu's prediction of Egypt's downfall at the sea many found it difficult to accept in full. Hence, after the sea miraculously opened they entertained the possibility that Egyptians were also safely crossing and would continue their chase. The Jewish people felt undeserving of a miracle performed solely for their sake and reasoned that the sea split in numerous places. Hashem dispelled this fiction and instructed the angel over the Sea of Reeds to cast the dying Egyptians onto shore. When the Jewish people saw this they understood retroactively what truly transpired for them.

The angel, however, argued that the fish deserved their promised prize of thousands of Egyptian bodies and requested a replacement in the future. Hashem consented and informed the angel that the Kishon Brook would eventually sweep replacements into the sea and grant the fish their earlier present. (Mesichta Pesachim 115b)

The above discussion suggests a direct corollary between the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the overflowing Kishon Brook. It points to a missing dimension of faith at the sea that was ultimately rectified through the Kishon Brook. The analogy of the fish reflects the Jewish people's imperfect perception of Hashem's miracles. The splitting of the sea served a dual function-to rescue the Jewish people and to punish the Egyptian nation. The first function was fully accomplished however the second was not. Although the mighty Yam Suf waters delivered the Egyptians their fair share of brutal torture it did not drown them. In essence, the sea played an imperfect role in Hashem's miraculous scheme. This undoubtedly reflected the Jewish people's imperfect faith in Hashem's miracles and concern for His people. The angel of the sea responded to Hashem that the sea deserved a perfect role in Hashem's miracles and should be granted future opportunity for a perfect revelation of Hashem's might.

Hashem responded to the angel that the miracle of the Kishon Brook would serve this capacity in full.

In the days of the prophetess Devorah the Jewish people's spiritual level suffered serious decline. They shared similar feelings with the Jewish people at the Sea of Reeds and feel unworthy of great revelations. They recently began their long process of return and could not imagine Hashem performing miracles on their behalf. However, when Devora instructed Barak to select ten thousand men and charge into the massive Canaanite army he immediately accepted his role. He and his men demonstrated total faith in Hashem and believed wholeheartedly that Hashem would perform an open miracle solely on their behalf. Although their level of spirituality was far from perfect they displayed total faith in Hashem. This time they had no doubts and Hashem did not need to prove His involvement on behalf of His people. The sea was therefore granted its full role and its fish eagerly devoured the wicked Canaanites sent to it by the Kishon brook. This miracle was unequivocally clear and bore testimony to all of Hashem's absolute commitment to His people and total involvement on their behalf. Although their mitzva observance was far from perfect they were sincerely committed to rectifying it and deserved Hashem's grace and favor.

We learn from this the power of absolute trust in Hashem. Many question how the present Jewish people could deserve to witness the miraculous era of Mashiach. Our spiritual level is far from perfect and certainly does not warrant Hashem's intervention on our behalf. Let us draw strength and encouragement from our Haftorah's lesson and realize what Hashem expects from us. The road to return is undoubtedly long, however, Hashem only asks for sincerity. Let us resolve to follow Hashem's lead wherever He takes us and trust that He cares for us in untold proportions. In this merit we will hopefully be privileged to witness Hashem's greatest revelations ever to be seen, surpassing even those in Egypt and at the Sea of Reeds. © 2006 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

This week's Torah portion, also known as the Sabbath of Song since it features the song of the Israelites at the Splitting of the Reed Sea, always falls out very close to the semi-Festival of Tu BeShvat, known as the New Year for Trees (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1,1). This fifteenth day of the Hebrew month of Shvat signals the date when the majority of the rains have nourished the fields of Israel and when the diligent almond trees have begun to sprout forth their white and pink flowers; from this perspective, our optimistic nation already begins to sense spring in the air even in the midst of winter with the slow awakening of nature portending the beginning of redemption for which we all

yearn. The Biblical reading of the exodus from Egypt provides a national parallel to the rebirth of nature, and the song at the Reed Sea finds a sonorous echo in the early songs of the birds who now are beginning to return to roost.

We generally celebrate Tu BeShvat with a special "seder" in honor of the festival which features four cups of wine and fruits indigenous to our land as well as with the planting of fruit trees. Since fruits, and especially the seven species of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates for which the Land of Israel is specifically praised (Deut 8: 7-9), play a major role in these celebrations, it is interesting at this time of year to explore the religious symbolism of fruits, if indeed fruits contain a special message at all.

We have already taken note of the fact that our Biblical text poetically praises the Land of Israel in large measure because of its luscious fruits: "The Lord your G-d is bringing you to a good land, a land with flowing streams and underground springs, gushing out in valleys and mountains. It is a land of wheat, barley, grapes, figs and pomegranates, a land of oil - olives and honey dates. You must therefore bless the Lord your G-d for the good land that He has given you" (Deut 8:7-10).

Nevertheless, when Moses prays to enter the Holy and Promised Land at the end of his life, Rabbi Simlai Comments: "Why did Moses desire to enter the Land of Israel? Did he find it necessary to eat from its fruit? Did he find it necessary to be sated with its goodness? Certainly not! But this was Moses' desire: There are many commandments, which the Israelites must perform which can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel. I wish to enter the land in order that I may fulfill all of them..." (B.T. Sotah 14a). Our Talmudic Sage seems to be denigrating the idea that our desire for Israel be predicated upon the luscious quality of its fruit; it can only be predicated upon the special commandments and unique service of the Divine, which is only possible in Israel.

This is likewise the opinion of the fourteenth century religio-legal codifier of Jewish law, Rabbenu Yaakov Ba'al HaTurim, who rules that we are to delete the concluding, underlined words of the blessing which is to be recited after eating any of the five grains or five species for which Israel is praised: "Have mercy, Lord our G-d, upon Israel Your nation and upon Jerusalem Your city... so that we may rejoice in its rebuilding, eat of its fruit and be sated with its goodness...We thank you for the land and its fruit..." He argues, "These words are not to be said, for we are not to desire the land because of the good quality of its fruit but rather because of the commandments dependent upon the land which we can perform on it" (Tur Orah Haim Siman 208).

One of the major commentaries on the Tur, Rav Yoel Sirkus (known as the Bach), strongly disagrees. "Is it not true that it is the very sanctity of the

Land of Israel, which draws its nourishment from the sanctity of the Divine Presence 'who dwells in the midst of the land,' will have an effect on the fruits which emerge from the land?! ... And therefore it is proper that we include in the blessing 'so that we may...eat of its fruit and be satiated with its goodness,' because in the eating of its fruit we shall be nourished by the sanctity of the Divine Presence and its purity, and be satiated by its goodness."

I would add only one more point to the unique quality of the Land of Israel and its fruits. After the flood, G-d makes a clear division between the behavior of the people and the fertility of the land throughout the world: "... I will no longer curse the land because of the people because the nature of the heart of man is evil from his very beginnings..." (Genesis 8:19). The one exception to this rule is the Land of Israel. There is one view in the Talmud that a significant expression of the uniqueness of the Land of Israel is that the flood never reached it (B.T. Zevachim 113a). We recite in the second paragraph of the Shema that the produce of Israel is dependent upon the morality of its inhabitants, and the Bible iterates and reiterates that our right to remain on our land - and benefit from its produce - depends upon our morality and piety. Hence our ability to eat of the fruit of Israel is a direct result of our worthiness - and so our desire to eat the fruit of Israel is tantamount to our desire to be true children of G-d. Herein lies the true message of Tu B'Shvat - our desire to enjoy the fruits of Israel! © 2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This Shabat is called Shabat Shira the Shabat of song due to the great and beautiful song of Moshe and the people of Israel that comprises a central part of the Torah reading. All of the different communities of the Jewish people have devised particular melodies and intonations for the recitation of this song. The song is such an important part of Jewish history and traditional Jewish life that it is included in the morning prayer service every day of the year. This song has accompanied us throughout our long journey from the banks of the Yam Suf to this very day.

A song is composed of many parts. It has words, lyrics and it also has within it variant musical themes that appear when it is performed. It also has a melody a distinctive chord that more than anything else characterizes and identifies the entire song. Even when the lyrics become fuzzy in ones mind and the background music fades in our recollections, the melody of the song can still continue to haunt us, inspiring us and jogging our memories and senses. That is why this Shabat is still called Shabat Shira, because the melody of Moshe and the people of Israel has remained with us even though the words and

overall musical theme may have been forgotten by a large portion of the present-day Jewish world.

There was a Jewish professor of philosophy in Toronto in the latter part of the twentieth century by the name of Emil Fackenheim. He was a non-observant Jew who nevertheless wrote with great understanding and appreciation of Torah and Jewish tradition. I met him once and had an interesting conversation with him. He told me the same incident is recorded in one of his books that when he attended public school in Germany, the teacher insisted that all of the class sing Christmas carols. His father, though not an observant Jew, felt that this was unfair to the Jewish students in the class, especially to his little Emil.

So he went to the teacher to plead that the Jewish students be excused from singing these Christian songs. After a long discussion, the father and the teacher reached an accommodating compromise. The Jewish students would only hum the melody and not be required to sing the words themselves. Fackenheim, by now a refugee from German anti-Semitism and Nazi brutality, then said: We should not have even hummed the melody!

The main question in Jewish life today is What melody is being hummed? The prevailing melodies of the progressive Western culture are also injurious to our survival and well-being. There are Jews who still know the words to our great song but have forgotten the melody. They are being deprived of the true beauty and world-view of Torah and its value system. There are those Jews who no longer know the words but the melody of the song still haunts them. For them, at least, there is much hope that they will add the correct Torah words to their unforgotten melody. But, unfortunately there are those who no longer know neither words nor melody and disappear from Jewish life.

We, here, who are fortunate enough to remember everything about the song, its words, music and melody, are duty bound to teach the song to all with whom we may come in contact. Then we will hear the great song of Moshe and Israel sung again, loudly, clearly and melodically throughout Israel. © 2006 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YAAQOV MEDAN SHLIT"A

Adapted by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The first place that Bnei Yisrael reach after leaving Egypt is Mara: "They came to Mara, and they were not able to drink the water from Mara for it was bitter; therefore the place was called Mara" (Shemot

15:23). Further on, we read, "There He made for them a statute and judgment, and there He tried them" (15:25). It is not clear what exactly happened in Mara, and why this place is so important that specifically here we are told that God "tried" Bnei Yisrael. Mara appears, at first, no different from all the other places where Bnei Yisrael encamped on their way to Eretz Yisrael; indeed, in the list of the stations in parashat Masei, Mara appears alongside the other place names-Kivrot ha-Ta'ava, Sukkot, Refidim, etc.-with no indication of anything special.

However, closer inspection reveals that there is a difference between the complaint that is recounted to us here and all the other complaints that we encounter during the course of the desert wanderings. In every other complaint, we find, at some stage, an expression of the desire to return to Egypt: "We remember the fish that we ate freely in Egypt" (Bamidbar 11:5);

"If only we could have died by God's hand in Egypt" (ibid. 14:2); "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt" (ibid. 14:4). At Mara there is no mention or threat, on Bnei Yisrael's part, of returning to Egypt.

What is the significance of this detail? To answer this question, we must address a different one. The Midrash tells us that Bnei Yisrael, enslaved in Egypt, had reached the 49th level of impurity, but had not yet reached the 50th level, and therefore the Holy One was still able to redeem them. What was this 50th level, which Bnei Yisrael had not attained? It is difficult for us to know what the 26th or 42nd level were, but it seems that the 50th level-the point from which there would be no return-can be known. The case from which we deduce this level is the famous story (Avoda Zara 17a) about R. Elazar ben Dordaya, its message being that "It (i.e. repentance) depends only on me." In other words, as long as a person genuinely wants to return to God, to do teshuva, the possibility exists for him to do so.

We know that in Egypt Bnei Yisrael were engaged in idolatry, as described by the prophet Yechezkel (chapter 20). Nevertheless, two things would appear to separate this 49th level of impurity-which characterized Bnei Yisrael- and the 50th level, which they did not attain. The first is family purity: when the family is no longer pure and Bnei Yisrael are assimilated amongst and merged with the Egyptians, then, technically, there is no nation to redeem; everyone would be non-Jews or mamzerim. This, however, is merely a technical point. The more fundamental difference between the state of Bnei Yisrael on the 49th level of impurity and the final, irreversible step was that there remained a will to be redeemed. So long as Bnei Yisrael were not reconciled to their suffering, to their status as a nation of slaves, there was still hope for their redemption. And this they did not relinquish.

We may say, then, that the test of Bnei Yisrael at Mara was precisely this: were they still at the 49th level, and capable of receiving the Torah and being

redeemed, or had they reached the 50th level-an irreversible and irredeemable state? The fact that, despite their demand for water, they did not express any desire to return to Egypt proved that they passed this test.

In order to understand more deeply what happened at Mara, we must pay attention to the parallel between the episode of Mara and the procedure prescribed for a "sota"-a married woman suspected of adultery. In the latter case, the Name of God is inscribed and then blotted out in the water; if the woman is guilty, the water becomes bitter. At Mara, the water was bitter to begin with; according to the Midrash, a branch was inscribed with God's Name and cast into the water, and it became drinkable.

What exactly happens to a woman who is a sota, and who drinks the water? We are not speaking here of a person who is above suspicion. Yechezkel describes a sota and it is clear that she has been with a man other than her husband, and has already been warned once; the question here is simply whether she went "all the way" or stopped herself at the last moment before being defiled. The procedure is not meant to clarify whether she is virtuous and her loyalty to her husband is above question; she is clearly very close to deviation from marital fidelity, and what the Torah wants to establish is whether she is still able to do teshuva, or whether her actions have led to a situation where there is no possibility of return.

In a certain sense, as we have explained, this was the situation of Bnei Yisrael at Mara, where they had to pass a test and show whether or not they had reached the point of no return. The fact that the water became sweet- paralleling the water given to the sota remaining sweet-showed that there was still hope. Clearly, the nation here was not assumed to be pious and of great righteousness; nevertheless, the fact that the water did not remain bitter demonstrated that the path to teshuva was still open.

The final point we must clarify is the significance of the conclusion of the section on Mara: "If you will listen diligently to Me, to observe My commandments, My statutes and My teachings, all the diseases that I placed upon Egypt-I shall not place upon you, for I am the Lord, your Healer" (Shemot 15:26). Usually, conditions are presented in the opposite manner: if you do such-and-such, you will receive X, if you do not, you will suffer Y. Here, however, the promise is only that if you do such-and-such, you will not suffer Y. What is the meaning of this formulation? God gives no incentive here at all; all He tells us is that whoever observes the Torah will not suffer!

This question is such a deeply perplexing one that we are forced to propose a sort of "chesurei mechasra"-something is missing and we will fill it in. In Sefer Devarim, we find the covenant forged on the Plains of Moav, and there the conditions are formulated in the way we would have expected to find them set out

here. "It will be, if you listen diligently to Me" (Devarim 28:1) -- the introduction is exactly the same as in our case, but then we find a list of blessings that Bnei Yisrael will enjoy if they follow God. Only afterwards does the Torah go on to say, "But if you will not listen to Me" (Devarim 28:15) -- and then describes the curses that will befall those "who do not observe the words of this covenant." A review of these curses reveals that they are an exact parallel to the plagues of Egypt: "You will grope about at noon, as the blind grope about in darkness" (Devarim 28:29);

"God will strike you with pestilence" (Devarim 28:21); "God will place among you all the evil illnesses of Egypt" (Devarim 28:60); and ultimately, "God will return you to Egypt in ships, in the direction that I told you that you would not see again, and you shall be sold there as slaves and as maidservants, and none shall buy" (Devarim 28:68). In other words, this is precisely the elaboration of the covenant that we find in our parasha: "All the diseases that I placed upon Egypt-I shall not place upon you." Hence, I believe that the covenant that Bnei Yisrael accepted upon themselves at Mara is the covenant that they accepted later on the Plains of Moav; the Torah simply abbreviates here.

This being the case, we may conclude that the importance of Mara is twofold. First, it was proven there that Bnei Yisrael were still open to repentance and could still be redeemed, for they had not yet attained the 50th, absolute, level of impurity. Second, Bnei Yisrael accepted God's covenant there, with the understanding that if they would listen to God they would be showered with His blessings, and if not-"all the diseases which I placed upon Egypt" would-heaven forefend-be upon them also. (*This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Beshalach 5765 [2005].*)

RABBI MICHAEL ROSENSWEIG

The Art and Urgency of Prayer

“U-Paroh hikriv, va-yisui Benei Yisrael et eineihem ve-hinei Mitzrayim noseia ahareihem, va-yireu meod, va-yitzaaku Benei Yisrael el Hashem.”

The Torah reports (Shemot 14:10) that when Klal Yisrael confronted the pursuit of Paroh and his troops they responded to the impending danger by crying out to Hashem. While Unkelos renders "vayitzaaku" as a complaint (probably based on the ensuing criticism in the next pasuk, as the Ramban notes), most mefarshim conclude that the nation reflexively turned to Hashem in prayer in their time of crisis. Indeed, Rashi cites the Mechilta's comment ("tfsu umanut avotam") that Klal Yisrael invoked the example of the avot who perfected prayer as an indispensable vehicle for avodat Hashem. The Ramban (Sefer ha-Mitzvot) asserts that prayer as a response to

crisis constitutes a Biblical obligation. This paradigmatic episode apparently affirms that ruling.

However, several pesukim later (14:14,15), the Torah appears to reject Benei Yisrael's prayer solution in this particular context. Moshe informs the nation that Hashem will engage the enemy even as they are to maintain silence-

"Hashem yilachem lachem; ve-atem tacharishun". This remarkable statement is followed by Hashem's apparent questioning of the very propriety of prayer in this context-"Va-yomer Hashem el Moshe mah tizaak eilai; daber el Benei Yisrael ve-yisau." Is it possible that prayer, a central pillar in halachic life, a primary vehicle for man's interaction with Hashem, designated by Chazal as "avodah she-be-leiv", could ever be either superfluous, or even inappropriate?

A significant group of medrashim and mefarshim seem to reject this conclusion. Some actually interpret these pesukim as further underscoring the remarkable efficacy of prayer. Targum Yonatan ben Uziel suggests that the charge for silence was a call to even greater focus on prayers of praise and thanksgiving that would contribute to the Divine salvation. Unkelos argues that the silence conveyed that the prayers had already achieved their desired effect. Ohr Hachaim posits that Moshe intended to instill even greater confidence in the nation by indicating that they would have been deserving of salvation even without having embarked on the more ideal path of prayer. According to Targum Yonatan, Moshe's prayer policy was not rejected; he was simply being informed that the nation's effective supplications had made additional prayer superfluous. The Netziv, too, rejects the notion that "mah tizaak eilai" constitutes a critique. Hashem was merely informing Moshe that prayer was not a necessary component in this particular supernatural struggle.

Another group of mefarshim suggest that while these pesukim do not question the role or propriety of tefillah, they do provide an important halachic perspective. While prayer is always appropriate and even necessary, it is not always sufficient. As Chazal often note, it is important that prayer be joined by concrete action and effort (hishtadlut). During the yomim noraim period, we proclaim that the combined triad of teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah overturn a negative decree. The Orchot Chaim and others argue that these pesukim emphasize the inadequacy of prayer as a solitary solution, particularly in these circumstances. Klal Yisrael was vulnerable to the charge of being spiritually impoverished and unworthy of salvation ("halalu ovdei avodah zarah ve-halalu ovedai avodah zarah"). It was necessary for the nation to establish the sincerity of their dedication to Hashem and earn spiritual merit by a dramatic act of faith like plunging into the Yam Suf in order that their prayers might be effective.

Moreover, it is possible that an exaggerated reliance upon prayer that comes at the expense of other halachic obligations undermines prayer itself. [Just as *lilmod shelo al menat laasot* constitutes a flawed *lilmod*...] Tefillah constitutes an important component of the larger framework of *avodat Hashem*. Its profound themes and comprehensive range reflect this. Its integration and interaction with other *mitzvoth-moadim*, *tefilin*, *talmud Torah* etc.-further underscores this reality. Thus, the exclusive pursuit of tefillah in a context that also demands attention to other values is counterproductive. The stature and efficacy of prayer is diminished by its isolation from or competition with an integrated *avodat Hashem*.

According to the *gemara* (*Sotah* 37a) and *Mechilta* (also cited by *Rashi* 14:15) Moshe was not criticized for engaging in prayer at this critical moment but for lingering in prayer while the nation panicked, and sought concrete direction. This miscalculation reflects the need for tefillah to be augmented and integrated with other halachic values and considerations. The *gemara* (*Berachot* 34a; see also *Berachot* 32a and *Tosafot*) notes that we encounter the models of both lengthy and abbreviated prayer, and that both can be traced to different experiences of a single author, Moshe Rabbeinu. When his sister Miriam was suffering, Moshe instinctively recognized the propriety of succinct, direct prayer. When the nation's needs demanded a more complex and persistent approach, Moshe was attuned to that challenge as well.

The perspective of the *gemara* and *Mechilta* also establish that the form and method of tefillah is neither uniform nor interchangeable. Timing and context are significant factors in *avodah she-be-leiv*. Elaborate prayer may be inappropriate when succinct prayer is called for. Prayer focused on Divine praise and thanksgiving may not substitute for prayers of petition or expiation. Daily prayer and festival prayer demand different structures and emphases. Indeed, Chazal indicate that Hashem rejected celestial praise while the Egyptians were drowning. The *gemara* precludes the reciting of *hallel* on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, deeming it incompatible with the climate of Divine judgment.

Some authorities explain that these *pesukim* also convey the need to be rigorous and discriminating in the content and implications of prayer. The Ramban concludes that Hashem was critical of Moshe's prayers for salvation because He had already committed to a positive outcome. It is possible that this insight establishes more than the superfluous character of this tefillah. The *Shelah* asserts that the nation's tefillah was seriously flawed because it implicitly questioned Hashem's previous commitment. The Chasam Sofer posits that it is inappropriate to pray that there should be a messianic era, as the prayer implicitly challenges an existing tenet of our faith. On the other hand, it is entirely proper to pray that the arrival of the messianic

era be hastened. He argues that Moshe Rabbeinu was being told to focus on the method of victory-"*daber el Benei Yisrael ve-yisau*"-rather than on the outcome itself-"*lamah tizaak eilai*". [The Seforno suggests that the content of Moshe's tefillah was flawed from a different perspective, as it implied that the nation was not prepared to respond to the spiritual challenge.]

Furthermore, it is possible that the nation's prayer at this juncture was flawed precisely because it did not sufficiently qualify as an act of unconditional worship. The *pasuk* that records the initial response of prayer is immediately followed by a litany of complaints questioning the exodus from Egypt. The Ramban suggests that this juxtaposition motivated Uneklos to conclude that "*va-yitzaaku*" does not refer to prayer. The Ramban himself notes the view that prayer and complaint represent the diverse responses of different groups. However, he concludes that when the nation's prayers did not achieve immediate success, halting Paroh's advance, the disappointment produced a complete rejection of Moshe's leadership. While prayer as an unconditional act of faith and worship (*avodah she-be-leiv*) is always a positive phenomenon, prayer as an expedient panacea of instant gratification is deeply flawed, even counterproductive. At times, silence may be preferable to superficial and conditional worship.

The halachic principles that govern tefillah clearly establish the need for thorough preparation and thought. The *mishna* (*Berachot* 33a) records the extraordinary efforts of the early *chassidim*. Appropriate and efficacious tefillah is rarely haphazard. While prayer should flow from the heart, the halachah assigns great significance to the structure, order, and content of prayers. Prayer as an act of worship requires the elimination of any presumptuousness or over-familiarity by invoking the paradigms of "*Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzhak, Elokei Yaakov*", as *Rashi* in *Beshalach* notes. It even demands that we be circumspect in our lavishing of Divine praise (*Berachot* 33b, and see *Penei Yehoshua*). Different occasions and festivals call for different prayers and the accenting of different themes and motifs. While prayer is a core principle of halachic life, it is an act of faith and worship that requires intensive study and that needs to be integrated into our comprehensive program of *avodat Hashem*. Prayer is both indispensable and an art. © 2006 *The TorahWeb Foundation*.

