

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

The Message of Mt. Sinai

The first reference to Mount Sinai in the Torah, appears when our teacher Moses witnessed there a strange phenomenon. As he was shepherding his sheep he glanced up at the mountain and he saw a thorn bush that was burning but it was not being consumed by the fire. Our sages grapple with the meaning of this first encounter. Rashi states that the fire was a sign that G-d would be with the Jewish people even in hard times when they were slaves in Egypt. As an extension from the above, when a person grieves, G-d grieves as well. When the Jewish people are being oppressed in bondage Almighty G-d is with them.

A second interpretation relies upon an obscure Midrash that states that this burning bush was a rose bush. The significance of this reference is that though the Jewish people might be as difficult as thorns, there are nevertheless "roses" among them, and for them alone it is worthwhile to save them from their tyranny.

As an outgrowth of this interpretation one might further posit, that though within every Jew there are many "thorns", there are, nevertheless, "roses" as well. Our charge is to always search for the good -the "roses"-in each and every Jew. Rabbi Soloveichik states that in every Jew there is a "Ratzon Elyon" a sublime desire to do what is correct. When we look at people we must always search for the virtuous aspects that are in their character. Though there are Jews who demonstrate bad qualities, there is also within them the potential of doing noble acts. Our job is to seek out and to bring to fruition that potential.

There is a third interpretation- the view of Rabenu Bachya- that states that the burning bush represents the Torah. The Torah was given to the Jewish people to give warmth and support-to illuminate our lives and to provide us with the necessary tools to meet the challenges that we face daily; to offer comfort in difficult times.

However just as the bush was not being consumed so also the Torah should never be used as a vehicle of destruction. No one has the right to use the Torah as an excuse to denigrate anyone-Jew or non Jew. No one has the right to say that because he learns Torah he is by definition better than someone else! Only G-d has the right to judge anyone! Some of the

most incompetent people who led the Jewish people in times of need, were still referred to as leaders by our sages. The Talmud tells us that "Yiftach Bdor k'Shmu'el b'doro". Yiftach, who was perhaps not the best representative of Jewish leadership in his generation, was equivalent to the great prophet Samuel. We do not understand the ways of Almighty G-d, nor can we use the Torah as a means to laud ourselves and to step on other people because of their seemingly lack of religious observance. No one has the right to use the Torah as an excuse to degrade another person. This is symbolized by the burning bush not being consumed by the fire.

These lessons demand the attention of our teachers when they are actively involved in the instruction of Torah to our children. Rabbis who must berate others in the name of Torah- to show their superiority- are doing a disservice to our people. No teacher has the right to criticize any one -Jew or non-Jew- and use derogatory language all in the name of Torah. Too often teachers are quick to use insulting language to describe Jews who are less observant, or non-Jews in any situation. They make statements such as "guyesha Kop" or call Reform or Conservative Jews "Reshaim", wicked people, using the Torah as their basis. A teacher that resorts to this is in the wrong profession. We don't use Torah as an excuse to step on people and belittle them.

Secondly, teachers must have the ability and the desire to always look for the "rose" in every child. There is always good in everyone and certainly in all our Jewish children. Teaching is a serious responsibility. We have in our hands the power to destroy or to build. As Chaim Ginat so beautifully writes: "As a teacher, I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized or dehumanized".

These principals gleaned from the burning bush must guide us in our daily interactions with people and be inculcated into the hearts and minds of our teachers as they embark on the serious task of

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

How could it be that as the Jews left Egypt they despoiled the Egyptians (va-yenatzlu) and took their goods (Exodus 12:36). Based on this sentence, many anti-Semites have claimed that Jews are thieves, stealing from others. The mainstream response to this accusation is that the taking of Egyptian possessions was in fact a small repayment for all the years of Jewish enslavement.

There is yet another approach to the text that has far reaching consequences in contemporary times. Perhaps the Jews did not take from the Egyptians after all. Possibly the Egyptians, upon request of the Jews, willingly gave their property as a way of atoning for their misdeeds. This approach would read the word va-yenatzlu not as meaning "despoil" but rather "to save" (from the word le-hatzeel). In giving money to the Jews, the Egyptians' soul repented, and in some small way was saved.

To paraphrase Dr. J.H. Hertz and Benno Ya'akov, 20th century commentaries: an amicable parting from Egypt would banish the bitter memories the Jews had of the Egyptians. Jews would come to understand that the oppressors were Pharaoh and other Egyptian leaders as opposed to the entire Egyptian people. The gifts ensure "a parting of friendship with its consequent clearing of the name, and vindication of the honor of the Egyptian people."

All this has much in common with a burning issue which surfaced in the early 1950's. Should Jews accept reparation money from Germany? David Ben Gurion argued for accepting such money feeling that Germany should at least pay for their horror, for otherwise they would go completely unpunished. Menachem Begin argued the reverse. He held that the payment would be viewed as blood money, an atonement to wash away German sins. In his mind, this was unacceptable as nothing could ever obviate the evil of the Third Reich.

The Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes 1:9) proclaims that there is nothing new under the sun. The contemporary debate concerning recouping monies and plundered assets from the Germans and Swiss and others for their misdeeds during the Holocaust has its roots in the exodus from Egypt. Was va-yenatzlu, mandated as it was by G-d, a unique event not to be repeated, or, did it set a precedent to be emulated in order to give those connected with evildoers the chance to repent?

While I applaud the courage of those who have dedicated themselves to winning financial restitution for Holocaust survivors, I am deeply concerned. The fact that many people are not even familiar with this episode of the Exodus narrative clearly shows that our ability to remember the essence of the slavery in Egypt has not, in any way, been dampened by our successful recovery of Egyptian property. As we justly pursue the return of funds we must be careful that it does not become any type of obstruction to our ability to preserve the legacy of the Shoah - an event that was not primarily about stolen money, but was about something much more important, stolen souls. © 2007 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT"A

Summarized by Shaul Barth; Translated by Kaeren Fish

Last week's parasha ended with Moshe's complaint to G-d: "Why have You done evil to this nation; why have You sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, things have become worse for this nation, nor have You saved Your nation." G-d answers him: "Now you will see that which I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he shall cast them out of his land." Rashi criticizes Moshe for his complaint, suggesting that G-d takes a dim view of his outburst: "You are questioning My attributes-unlike Avraham, whom I told, 'For in Yitzchak[s] name] shall your seed be called' [yet he did not question why I then commanded him to offer Yitzchak; rather, he believed in My promise with perfect faith]."

I do not know why Rashi criticizes Moshe. Moshe wasn't objecting because it was difficult for him, or because he was lazy. He complained to G-d because he saw the suffering of Am Yisrael, and-as a good leader-he wanted to help them. So why suggest that G-d is displeased with his appeal?

Perhaps we may interpret Moshe's question in a different way. In Yehezkel 20, the prophet recounts that at the time of the Exodus, G-d came to Bnei Yisrael

and said to them: "Let every man cast out the abominations of his eyes, that you not become defiled with the idols of Egypt." In response, "They rebelled against Me and did would not listen to Me... Then I resolved to pour My wrath upon them, to exhaust My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I acted for My Name's sake..." In other words, they deserved to be destroyed, but in order not to desecrate His Name, G-d refrained from destroying them and instead He took them out of Egypt.

There were two modes or aspects of this redemption: ideally, G-d meant to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt through His mercy. But since they were not prepared to abandon their idolatry, they were not worthy of this mode of redemption. Therefore G-d took them out "for the sake of His Name," rather than because of their actions.

In light of this, we can understand that the Torah is really describing two different missions that G-d gave to Moshe-one in parashat Shemot and the other in parashat Vaera. It is for this reason that Moshe stands before G-d, after he has undertaken the second mission-which is supposed to involve unconditional redemption-and says: If You are continuing to punish Israel, and You are not redeeming them for the sake of Your Name, unconditionally, then "Why have You sent me?" Why did You give me the second mission, rather than continuing the first one, in which there was some purpose to punishing Bnei Yisrael for their sins?

Therefore G-d answers him, "Now you will see that which I will do to Pharaoh." In other words: perhaps you think that I am punishing them, but really I am readying them for the Exodus, for it is impossible to bring them out without any preparation at all. But "now you will see"-now I will bring them out, and it won't take as long as you think, because this mission is undeed unconditional; it is immediate.

We may view the two assignments to Moshe as paralleling two types of redemption. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 98a) derives that there are two types of redemption from a verse in Yeshayahu (60:22), "be-itah achishena": redemption "be-itah, at its time," and the redemption of "achishena, I shall hurry it." G-d wanted to redeem Israel by virtue of their merit-i.e., a redemption of "I shall hurry it." However, they sinned and continued worshipping idols, and therefore G-d "changed gears," as it were, and performed a redemption "in its time." This redemption would be a longer process, developing through negotiations with Pharaoh, followed by miracles and plagues. It is possible that were it not for their sins, they would have been redeemed immediately, in an instant. Yet since they did not merit this, G-d redeemed them only for "the sake of His Name," in a more gradual fashion, accompanied by the ups and downs noted by Moshe in his complaint to G-d. (*This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat parashat Bo 5762 [2002].*)

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha contains within it the story of the Jewish people, not just as it relates to the exodus from Egypt 3319 years ago but the story of the Jewish people as it unfolds throughout all of history as well. It is a story that is replete with both triumph and tragedy. There is much to rejoice about in the parsha. Finally after centuries of enslavement and torture the Jewish people as a nation emerge to freedom and responsibility. But there is also a great deal of tragedy.

A large number of Jews, having survived most of the worst of Egyptian slavery, die before the final exodus can liberate them. The reasons for this tragedy are discussed in Midrash but the ultimate reason, like all other seemingly inexplicable events in our history, lie with Heaven and not within the ken of our understanding. But that is not the issue that I wish to discuss here. Rather, it is the matter of the strange but almost constant juxtaposition of individual human tragedy with moments of national triumph, victory and joy.

The tragedies of thousands of families whose sons and husbands were killed or maimed in the Six Day War were subsumed in the national euphoria of that victory of arms. Apparently our emotions and history operate always on two different planes. One is the national struggle for success and survival. The other is the personal cost and pain of individual Jews in achieving that national success and survival. Are these two planes of emotions ever reconcilable? How are they to be viewed by us?

Jewish history begins with the Akeidah - with the near sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. This near tragedy turns into the cornerstone of Jewish history and merit. It is in the merit of the Akeidah that we base our prayers to G-d. The martyrdom of the many Jews over the centuries is constantly remembered by us in our appeals for Heavenly aid and mercy. It is the personal tragedy that apparently fuels and aids the national triumph and survival. Viewed in such a light, the tragedy of the many thousands of Jews who perished in Egypt somehow causes the eventual exodus to be hastened.

Since G-d's ways, so to speak, are beyond our ability of comprehension and understanding, no one can offer any comforting or logical reason why this should be so. But there is no denying that this personal tragedy - national survival mode, is a basic pattern of Jewish history, if not even a basic facet of the Jewish faith. It is difficult to assess the current Jewish world in accordance with this pattern.

There have been many who have stated that the State of Israel is a result of the Holocaust. I have never voiced such an opinion since it impinges upon G-d's omniscient qualities. Nevertheless, we are

witness to the sacrifice of the few or the many as the case may be that have led to the national benefit and deliverance of Israel and the Jewish people. So in remembering the exodus from Egypt we should also bear in mind the memory of those Jews who died there. It is a stark reminder of how things work out in our world. © 2007 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.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The 10 plagues are split between two Parashiyos, seven last week and 3 this week. Since they are usually broken up with the acronym "detzach, adash be'achav," we might have expected that the break would occur along similar lines. However, despite the last "word" of the acronym referring to the last 4 plagues, only three of them occur in Parashas Bo.

Last week I discussed how the plagues were designed primarily as a means of punishing the Egyptians "midah kenegged midah," measure for measure. The picture that emerged was not just one of a list of punishments that corresponded to the list of atrocities done. Rather, many of the plagues were a response to what the Egyptians had done after the previous plague ended. When the brick-making had ceased (after the 3rd plague), the Egyptians found a new task for their slave workers-caring for and/or transporting Egyptian children. G-d therefore sent a mixture of wild animals that snatched these children away, and there was no longer a need for the Jews to be forced to carry them around. Instead of leaving them alone, the Egyptians found a new task for them-tending to Egyptian livestock, so G-d sent a plague that killed their animals. They still couldn't bear to have their "slaves" remain idle, so made them draw and heat water for their bathhouses. They wanted to feel the soothing hot water on their skin, but instead the boils made their skin burn and itch, and they could no longer tolerate taking a bath. When the boils healed, they were smart enough not to make the Jews heat more water for them (knowing that G-d could bring back the boils), but still made them work in their fields, gardens and orchards. G-d responded by sending the hail that destroyed what was growing, thus preventing the Egyptians from benefiting even from what had grown beforehand.

Being that these plagues were a direct response to each new form of labor demanded by the Egyptians, it would seem that the slavery did not cease even after the plagues had started. There are opinions that the Jews stopped working once the plagues started, so while the plagues were still sent as a punishment "midah kenegged midah," it was for the

atrocities already committed before the plagues started, not additional ones. Midrash Hagadol (based on Mishnas Rebbe Eliezer), however, indicates that the hard labor continued even after the Egyptians started suffering from the plagues. Either way, the "measure for measure" aspect of the plagues continued for the last 3 plagues as well.

In one place (Bo 4), Midrash Tanchuma had attributed the plague of hail to the Egyptians having stoned the Jews, and correlates making them work in the fields and orchards with the locusts destroying everything that grew. In another (Vaeira 14), it splits the farming duties between both (making them grow their vegetables and fruits bringing the punishment of hail and making them grow their produce bringing the locusts). Midrash Hagadol continues its approach of the plagues being a response to what has just occurred, saying that when the hail destroyed the trees, those (presumably the poor) that usually collected what fell off the trees were overjoyed, as now all the fruit was accessible. G-d therefore sent locusts to eat everything, making sure that the punishment for making the Jews work in the fields stood.

The Abarbanel says that the Egyptians stole what had grown on land belonging to the Jews, so G-d sent the locusts to eat what grew on Egyptian land.

The Egyptians used to make the Jews stand near their dinner table with a candle on top of their heads, and threatened to chop off their heads if they caused the light to move (by moving their body or head). (Midrash Hachafetz adds that the Egyptians would use the light from these "human fixtures" when doing evening housework as well.) G-d therefore punished them with a plague of darkness, during which even thousands of candles (or the sun) wouldn't make things any brighter (Midrash Hagadol).

Rabbainu Chananel (quoted by Rabbeinu Bachya on Shemos 3:9) says that after the Children of Israel began to multiply, Goshen was no longer large enough to hold them all. Nevertheless, the Egyptians refused to let them spread out past Goshen. It can be suggested that the Egyptians' prison-like state that resulted from their inability to move during the plague of darkness was payback for keeping the Jews confined in the prison-like ghetto of Goshen. Midrash Tanchuma says that they literally put Jews in jail, and correlates it to the plague of darkness. Forcing Jews to be the overseers and enforcers of the labor, as well as hiring Jews to spy on their fellow Jews and report on them (the latter described by Midrashim as the "wicked" Jews that perished during the plague of darkness) must have created animosity between fellow Jews. It is therefore fitting that upon hearing about the forthcoming 10th plague the firstborn, in order to avoid their own deaths, started a civil war (killing 600,000 Egyptians in the process) when their parents refused to let the Jews go (see Midrash Tehillim 136:6).

Midrash Tanchuma says that the Egyptians wanted to kill Jews (not necessarily referring to tossing the infants into the Nile, especially since it correlates drowning in the sea to their attempts to drown Jews), so G-d killed their eldest children. Tanna D'vai Eliyahu ties the 10th plague to the attempt to have the midwives kill the male newborn and the drowning in the sea to tossing them into the Nile. Other Midrashim do connect the throwing of the infants of "G-d's firstborn" (i.e., the Jews) into the Nile with killing the Egyptian firstborn, while others connect the servitude of "G-d's firstborn" with the smiting of the firstborn. The latter seems pretty explicit, as G-d's message to Paro (Shemos 4:22-23) was that if he doesn't let His firstborn go, G-d will kill his firstborn.

Normally, a worker does work by day and rests at night. The Egyptians, however, made the Jews work by day and by night, so the harshest plague, when every family lost a loved one, occurred at night, and continued until the Jews left by day (see Shemos Rabbah 18:9).

Paro initiated the servitude when he himself took a shovel in hand to start the building of Pison and Ramsais, thereby drawing all the Jews (besides the Leviim) into the workforce. How fitting it is that the servitude ended with "Makas Bechoros," where G-d Himself came down and smote the firstborn, followed by Paro himself going from door to door trying to find Moshe to set them free!

Have you noticed that even according to Midrash Hagadol, who attributes plagues 4-7 to the new forms of work the Egyptians instituted after each prior plague, does not do so for the last 3 plagues? True, the 8th plague was described as a response to the joy felt by some because the 7th plague had given them access to fruit they otherwise wouldn't have had, but it wasn't a response to a new form of labor. And the 9th plague was not said to be a response to a new "job" either, only to a particular atrocity, one that occurred specifically at night, when they couldn't do at any of the other types of work (e.g. brick making) anyway. It seems likely that this was forced on the Jews early on, and not just after the previous plague (especially since no new form of work was described before the 8th plague either).

The conclusion that could be reached, therefore, is that after the 7th plague there was no more work, and the only thing Paro withheld was their ability to leave the country. The last 3 plagues were still a punishment for what the Egyptians had done, but not for what they were currently doing. We can now understand why the Torah may have grouped the last 3 in a separate Parasha, as the work itself ended at the end of the previous Parasha.

We have seen how each of the plagues was a punishment for atrocities committed by the Egyptians against the Jews. When G-d told Moshe that the

plagues would make Him known in Egypt (e.g. Shemos 7:5), it doesn't just mean to know that He exists, or that He is all-powerful. By showing that He punishes measure for measure G-d was making His ways known as well, how exacting and specific He is in dealing with our actions. When Yisro told Moshe that he "now knows that G-d is the greatest of all" (18:11) because He punished the Egyptians for and with exactly what they did, or tried to do, he may not have meant just drowning them in the sea the way they tried to drown Jewish infants in the Nile, but each and every one of the plagues as well. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

In this week's Biblical portion, we come to the end of the plagues against Egypt and the final preparations towards the exodus of the Israelites into freedom. After having read in great detail an anatomy of the heinous cruelty of the Egyptian despot as he delegitimized, enslaved, tortured and slaughtered countless Israelites, the "good guys" are now poised for triumph.

But how good are these "good guys"? Can we honestly say that the Israelites conducted themselves properly, with true honesty and integrity? Were they too not guilty of acts of duplicity, disingenuousness and exploitation? Did not the Israelites request, "each from his/her friend, gold and silver articles" to borrow in advance of their journey? (Exodus 11: 2, 3). Does not our Biblical portion close by reiterating the fact that the Israelites "borrowed from and took advantage of "the Egyptians, draining the Egyptians of their resources? (Ex. 12: 35, 36).

And would the Egyptians have even considered giving their silver and gold as a loan to the departing Israelites had they not believed the Israelites were only going on a "three-day-long U.J.A. mission" and would soon be returning to Egypt?! This had been the operative request which Moses and Aaron had initially made to Pharaoh: "The G-d of the Hebrews has revealed Himself to us," said (Moses and Aaron). "Please allow us to take a three day journey into the desert, and let us sacrifice to Y-H-V-H our G-d. Otherwise He may strike us down with the plague or the sword." (Exodus 5:3). And indeed all of the negotiations with Pharaoh were predicated on the temporary nature of their requested exit leave. For example, at the end of the seventh plague of hail, Pharaoh asks, "Exactly who will be leaving?," to which Moses ringingly responds, "we will go with our sons and our daughters, with our sheep and our cattle. It is (merely) a Festival to G-d for us;" but Pharaoh would only allow the males to leave for the three day period. (Exodus 10:8-11).

And what seems to add insult to injury is that the source of this three day "sleight of tongue"

deception is none other than the G-d of Israel, the Compassionate Lord of Truth: "Your (Moses) and the elders of Israel shall come to the King of Egypt and say to him, 'the Lord G-d of the Hebrews has chanced upon us, and now allow us to go for three days into the desert so that we may offer a sacrifice to the Lord our G-d" (Ex 5:18). And it was similarly G-d's idea to have the Israelites borrow gold and silver from their neighbors (Ex 11:1, 2). How can we justify not only a duplicitous nation but also a duplicitous G-d?

Interpretations which attempt to justify the Israelites and their G-d abound. The Ibn Ezra (his long - version interpretation to Ex. 10:10) suggests that Moses was only requesting that the Israelites would make their sacrifice at a place in the desert distanced from Egypt only by a three day journey, but not that they would actually return in three days. Even he (Ibn Ezra) admits, however, that Moses couched his words in such a way that Pharaoh would think they would be back in three days! The Abarbanel maintains that the three days was not a lie; it was merely an initial gambit to see if Pharaoh would at least allow the Israelites a temporary worship visa. Perhaps it was even a way to demonstrate to the Israelites precisely how cruelly possessive Pharaoh was. However, it is difficult to blind our eyes to the fact that the ability of the Israelites to "borrow" gold and silver from the Egyptians was based upon the assumption that they would soon be returning back to Egypt!

Rav Elhanan Samet, in his masterful Studies of the Weekly Portions, cites the Eleventh Sermon of the Rav, in which Rabbenu Nissim explains the necessity for the three-day request and the connected borrowing of the gold and silver: "The Almighty wished to effectuate a situation whereby the Egyptians themselves, by their own free will, would run after the Israelites into the Reed Sea drown therein." The goal of the Bible is to teach the Egyptians, and through the Egyptians the entire world for all future generations, that the enslavement of a people and the destruction of their children in the Nile River, were abominations which the one true G-d of Israel and the world would not tolerate. The only way in which the Egyptians would be seen as being punished for their genocidal crimes would be their drowning in waters similar to those Nile waters which had executed innocent Israeli babies. And only if Pharaoh felt he had been duped by the Israelites, only if the Egyptians had reason to run after them in order to reclaim their gold and silver, was there the good possibility that Egypt would not merely cry good riddance after the Israelites but would actually follow them to their encampment into the Reed Sea.

Rav Samet adds to this picture the words of an unknown commentary to Exodus 3:18 in the Rav Pininim Bible editions, who maintains that it is legitimate in warfare to utilize deceptive means to vanquish an enemy. If indeed freedom and justice are

to triumph over evil genocidal tyranny, the victory must be total and obvious to all. Let no one think one can vanquish evil by methodology of sensitivity and complete disclosure. Fire must be fought with fire, or else the enemy fire will win the day and destroy the world. This is what President Harry Truman taught the world when Nazism was vanquished at end of the Second World War. © 2007 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BENJAMIN YUDIN

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The Jewish nation was founded both individually and collectively in a miraculous environment.

Yitzchak was born of parents regarding whom the Torah testifies, "now Avraham and Sarah were old, well on in years, the manner of women had ceased to be with Sarah" (Braishis 18:11). The enslaved nation, even prior to the exodus, witnessed the wonders of Hashem in Egypt in conjunction with the ten plagues. They were escorted out of Egypt with the divine cloud by day, and by night with a pillar of fire. They walked through water on dry land and witnessed the Egyptians drown. At Marah, the bitter waters turned sweet by throwing a bitter tree therein, and seventy date palms granted them as they entered the desert.

The daily miraculous ration of man that nourished them rotted if kept overnight for the morrow, except Shabbos, when they were commanded to take a double portion which retained its freshness. The menorah was fashioned miraculously out of fire, as was the briach hatichon-the one middle bar inside the planks of the mishkan kept all the planks secure. For forty years they were surrounded by constant miracles. The great importance and significance of these miracles, teaches the Ramban in parshas Bo, is to impress upon the Jewish nation the close personal relationship that Hashem has with Bnei Yisroel. His hashgacha pratis-Divine intervention and concern for their welfare-is the cornerstone upon which the Jewish people is founded.

Sadly, but realistically, the nature of man is to forget. Not only do later generations forget the impact of miracles, but even the one to whom the miracle occurred is wont to forget. Case in point: when King Shaul hesitates to allow Dovid to fight Golyas, Dovid defends himself by sharing his prowess in defending the sheep from the attack of both a lion and a bear. Dovid said, "v'nasah she meihaeider-the lion or bear would carry off a sheep" (Shmuel I 17:34). The word is written "seh"-a sheep-but is read "zeh-this". The Vilna Gaon (in Kol Eliyahu) explains based upon the medrash, Dovid slaughtered the sheep after he saved it, and from its skin he made a vest which he wore constantly, enabling him to remember the miracle always. If not for the vest, Dovid would have forgotten. It is the "zeh" that he showed Shaul. Rav Yerachameal

Kron shlit" a in his sefer V'Talmudo B'Yado notes that while Moshe successfully prays for the recovery of his sister Miriam, he does not pray on his own behalf to have his speech impediment cured, as Moshe wanted to always remember the miracle of the angel directing his infant hand to the hot coals rather than the alluring gold (Yalkut Shimoni, Shemos #166). Had his speech defect been removed, he too may have forgotten the miracle.

If the direct beneficiaries of the miracle is prone to forget it rachmana litzlan, all the more so their descendants and future generations. To prevent this from happening, to keep the memory of the miracles fresh in the minds of all generations, explains the Ramban (ibid), many mitzvos have as their primary purpose "zecher l'yitzias mitarayim"-to remember the exodus from Egypt and its accompanying miracles and wonders. To offset the heresy that Hashem is removed from the activities of mankind, Hashem suspends nature, and has us incorporate His miraculous involvement as an integral part of many mitzvos. Thus, our donning tefilin, mezuzos on our doors, the many prohibitions of chometz coupled with the mitzvah of eating matzah, all keep the memory of the miracle alive and vibrant. Our annual immigration to the sukkah is explained by the Torah as "l'maan yadeuh dorosaychem" (Vayikra 23:43) -- so that your generations will know that millions of people were fed, clothed, and sustained miraculously for forty years in a desert environment.

The Torah (Devarim 6:16) warns "lo senasuy shall not test Hashem". The Ramban understands this to mean you are not to say that if Hashem is indeed in our midst, let Him prove Himself by performing miracles on our behalf. This is wrong on several levels, including a lack of trust and faith in the past performances and the inherent deficient manner of serving Hashem-based upon a reward. Moreover, while miracles are performed, it is not the desire of Hashem to perform open miracles regularly, and it is the way of Hashem most often to minimize the extent of the miracle. Thus, technically, notes the Ramban (Braishis 6:19), even many arks the size of Noach's ark would not suffice to house all the animals and their provisions for a year's time. Yet, by having Noach build a relatively large ark, the miraculous was couched within the natural order of things.

The Steipler zt"l in his sefer Chayey Olam suggests an interesting reason why miracles were the order of the day at the foundation of our people. They needed to learn the very important lesson of our connection to Hashem. However, the presence of open miracles diminishes the free will of man. In addition, having witnessed open miracles the level of expectation and accountability for man is raised, and even smaller infractions are treated more seriously.

Given the nature of man to forget the miracles, it can only serve to create obstacles on man's behalf.

In the bracha of modim, we recite thrice daily, "al nisecha shebechol yom imanu", we thank Hashem for Your miracles that are with us every day. It includes the natural phenomena around us most often taken for granted, such as the burning of oil. As R' Chanina said (Gemara Taanis), "the one who endowed oil with the ability to burn can cause vinegar to burn". It also includes the survival of the state of Israel, surrounded by multitudes of unfriendly Arabs. It includes His hasgacha pratis-direct involvement in our personal and communal lives as the many mitzvos of zecher l'yitzias Mitzrayim proclaim.

While belief in miracles is not one of the 613 mitzvos, it is the theme, and at the heart of, many mitzvos. © 2007 Rabbi B. Yudin & TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI ADAM LIEBERMAN

A Life Lesson

After G-d set seven plagues upon Egypt, Pharaoh's servants finally said to him: "How long will this be a snare for us? Send out the men that they may serve... G-d! Do you not know that Egypt is lost?" (Exodus 10:7)

The Egyptians had just experienced seven severe plagues that G-d set upon them. Even though Pharaoh had also witnessed all of it, he still remained stubborn in refusing to let all of the Jews go free. However, Pharaoh's servants-the ones who waited on their master hand and foot-had complete clarity: if the Jews were not freed, then Egypt and its inhabitants would be completely destroyed.

How is it that a king was unable to see what was so abundantly clear to everyone else?

The reason is that often we're much too close to a situation to be able to see it objectively. Since it was Pharaoh who was speaking directly to Moses, he was too emotionally charged with what was happening to "his" country. Too close to the forest to be able to see the trees. Pharaoh is like many of us who are too close to something in our own lives. We have the misguided belief that since we feel we know the situation the best, then we're also in the best position to know what should be done. Therefore, we won't entertain any other ideas or opinions.

It all comes down to objectivity. Whenever someone is emotionally immersed in something, then by definition he will have little or no objectivity. How often have you known someone who was involved in an unhealthy personal relationship but failed to see just how detrimental it was? And he justified being closed-minded to any other opinions because he embraced the notion that "no one knows the person like he does." And that's exactly why he can never be objective or act rationally. Anyone so close to a situation loses the larger picture and cannot see it clearly.

This is why it's imperative always to seek others out and sincerely ask for and hear their advice. Our human nature will oftentimes discount what other people are telling us. This is because if we embrace their viewpoints, then we have to admit to ourselves that we made poor choices and will continue to do so. This "saving face" mentality of not hearing good advice is why people continue to just rationalize their poor behavior instead of changing.

One can never grow or become great with this philosophy. The greatest men have always been able to admit their wrongs of the past and then, based upon a new perspective, choose to make healthy and productive choices.

So listen to those around you who know you well and whose opinions you value. But the ball will ultimately still be in your court, so fight the urge to justify your past actions and start taking good advice. While it might not be easy on your ego to do this, it will, however, make you great. © 2007 Rabbi A. Lieberman and aish.org

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

This Parsha relates both the final onslaught of the plagues and their predictable effect of forcing Pharaoh to allow the Jews to leave Egypt. The Parsha also teaches the main laws of "Pesach Mitzraim"-the laws of the first Passover. "Please speak into the ears of the people; let each man request of his fellow, and each woman from her fellow, silver vessels and gold vessels." (Exodus 11:2)

"Please speak"-Rashi: "The word 'nah' ('please' in Hebrew) can only mean [here] 'please.' I beseech you [Moses], please instruct them about this (i.e., that the Israelites should take the silver and gold vessels of the Egyptians) so that the righteous man, Abraham, should not say: 'He (i.e. G-d) fulfilled [His promise] that 'they will enslave them and afflict them' but the promise 'and they will afterwards go out with great wealth' He did not fulfill."

An obvious question here is: why does Rashi see the need to cite this Drash? The verse can be taken quite simply to mean that G-d told Moses to ask the Jews to take these vessels from their Egyptian neighbors because He had thus promised Abraham.

Can you see what is bothering Rashi and what impelled him to use the Drash? The word 'nah,' which means "please," is inappropriate here. Moses was telling the Jews to take the gold and silver of the Egyptians, their former slave-drivers (which would be but minor compensation for the years of slave labor). Why then must Moses "beseech" them? Telling someone to take gold and silver that can be justifiably claimed, doesn't usually need "beseeching"! One would have thought that the Jews would gladly comply even without Moses saying "Please."

The question, then, is: why does G-d use the word "please"? Rashi says that there was a special need to request the Jews to take the silver and gold. The need was that G-d had promised Abraham and He didn't want to be accused of not keeping His word to that righteous man.

The question can be asked-maybe you thought of it yourself-that G-d should be motivated to keep His word even if Abraham wouldn't make a claim against G-d, as the Midrash (& Rashi) put it. If G-d promises something, one would expect Him to want to keep His promise, whether or not anyone "catches" Him. Why do you think this emphasis had to be added-that Abraham will complain if the Jews don't take silver and gold? Is G-d more concerned with Abraham's opinion than He is with His own moral obligation to keep His word?

The answer can be understood by seeing the Talmudic source of this Midrash. It is in Tractate Berachos 9a. There it says that the Jews wanted so much to leave Egypt that they were willing to flee-even without taking the time to collect the gold and silver. They didn't trust Pharaoh and feared he might change his mind. So the sooner they got out, the better. In such a case, G-d would have no moral obligation to have the Jews collect their gold and silver; just the opposite, He would want to calm the Israelites and let them leave immediately, if they so chose. But only because of His promise to Abraham did He have to "beseech" Moses to be sure they stayed around long enough to collect the valuables and thereby "fulfill the promise to Abraham."

This Mitzvah given to the Israelites in Egypt as they were to leave their servitude was a precursor to another Mitzvah given to them at Sinai. That future Mitzvah would be relevant to them when they would be living in the Land of Israel and themselves would be owners of servants. In Deteronomy 15:13-15 we find these verses:

"When you send him (a slave) away free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. Adorn him generously from your flocks, from your threshing floor and from your wine-cellar-as Hashem, your G-d, has blessed you, so shall you give him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and Hashem, your G-d, redeemed you; therefore I command you regarding this matter today."

We see that the command and G-d's "beseeching" Moses had a future orientation. The whole slave experience in Egypt was to be a real-time lesson in being sensitive to the stranger and to the slave. Likewise was the taking of the Egyptians' valuables to be a lesson in how we are to treat those who serve us. When they leave, after their term of service is up, we are instructed to give them a going-away present. What we call today "severance pay" no doubt had its origins in this Mitzvah. © 2007 Dr. A. Bonchek and aish.org