

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

### Virtual Beit Medrash

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

*Summarized by Matan Glidai*

*Translated by Kaeren Fish*

**O**ur parasha begins with a most important message that G-d wants to convey to Bnei Yisrael via Moshe: "I shall take you to be My people, and I shall be your G-d... and I shall bring you to the land which I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov, and I shall give it to you as a heritage." (6:7-8)

These lofty words, speaking of redemption-the establishment of Am Yisrael as G-d's nation, and the inheritance of the land-fall on deaf ears. Bnei Yisrael "do not listen to Moshe, for anguish of spirit and because of hard labor" (verse 9). How can it be that such an important, meaningful message is not accepted or even given attention?

It seems that the verse should not be understood literally. Bnei Yisrael did hear Moshe's words, but they were so overwhelmed with their bondage and suffering that they were unable to absorb and internalize the significance of the message. They heard it only superficially, without understanding it in all its depth.

The Rebbe of Kotzk used to ask, concerning the verse, "You shall place these words of Mine upon your hearts" (Devarim 10:16): what does it mean to place words upon one's heart? His answer was that there are situations in which the heart is closed, unable to receive words; one may then place words only "upon" the heart, not inside it. When the heart opens up, then the words that a person has placed there will sink in.

The midrash provides a similar explanation for the repetition in the verse, "Say to the kohanim, the children of Aharon, and you shall say to them" (Vayikra 21:1): "For supernal beings, who have no evil inclination, a single utterance will suffice, as it is written: 'The matter is by decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones' (Daniel 4:14). But for the lower beings who possess an evil inclination-if only two utterances would suffice!" (Vayikra Rabba 26:5)

The midrash explains that Moshe was commanded to convey G-d's message to Aharon's sons twice, so as to contend with the evil inclination. In order to internalize things in this world-a world characterized by the constant, unremitting challenge of the evil inclination-things must be said more than once; only then may they trickle inwards. It was for this reason that Bnei Yisrael did not listen to Moshe. They heard what he said, but were not yet able to internalize his message. They would have to undergo a lengthy process of internalization before the tidings would be properly absorbed.

In Sefer Yirmiyahu (2:2), we read: "I remember unto you the kindness of your youth, your love as a bride, when you walked after Me in the wilderness, in an unsown land."

If Am Yisrael agreed to walk after G-d in an unsown land, then apparently they did ultimately absorb the message that G-d began to convey in our parasha. The process took time, but eventually the nation achieved the requisite state. In the beginning it was difficult to absorb the message because of the suffering and hard labor, the difficulty of abandoning idolatry (see Midrash Rabba 6:5), or perhaps because the message was too great. But eventually, after a process of inculcation, the nation succeeded in internalizing what G-d was telling them.

What we learn from this is that even if sometimes there are great matters that we are not able to absorb and internalize all at once, we must not despair. We must go over them again and again, and ultimately we will achieve our aim.

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### Wein Online

**P**lagues, miracles and natural disasters are all recorded for us in this week's parsha. They seem to make little impression, either on Pharaoh or even on the Jewish slaves. These events indicate how difficult it is to alter people's preconceived perceptions and mindset.

Pharaoh is not impressed by the plagues because his own professional miracle makers were able to replicate the first three plagues. He therefore attributes all of the later plagues to forces of nature or superior professional miracle-makers that Moshe has somehow employed. The Jewish people also are, relatively speaking, little impressed by the plagues.

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They are so despondent as to their continued condition of slavery and, in fact, to their worsening situation since the onset of the rain of plagues, that they have little hope that the plagues or Moshe can or will deliver them from Egyptian bondage.

One of the hallmarks of a slave mentality is the feeling of hopelessness and ingrained pessimism that is engendered into the psyche of the slave. Though completely understandable as to why this should be so, it is nevertheless most counterproductive to the drive for personal freedom and emancipation that is necessary in order to eventually become a person who is free not only in body but in spirit as well. .

The commentators, notably Ibn Ezra, state that this negative mentality persisted throughout the years in the desert of Sinai and was the contributing cause why that generation of former slaves could not enter the Land of Israel. For this reason we can understand the frustrations expressed by Moshe to G-d as recorded at the end of the parsha of last week. He is performing miracles left and right and no one seems to pay any attention to his feats.

Eventually Moshe comes to the realization that the Lord has been teaching him a basic lesson about human behavior. Great miracles, no matter how awesome and overwhelming, do not change human behavior and beliefs in any meaningful fashion. Pharaoh will be defeated only by force that strikes home to him personally - his first born child is killed and he is also in danger of being killed. It is not the miracle of the first-born killings that impresses him. It is the fear for his own safety that the miracle engendered that causes him to free the Jews, a decision that he almost immediately regrets. Miracles may raise Jewish faith temporarily but they do not form the methodology for developing lasting faith and commitment.

After all of the miracles, the Jews are still capable of making and worshipping a golden calf and rebelling against the rule of Moshe and G-d. Moshe realizes that no matter how many miracles occur, faith has to be nurtured and developed and maintained from the inside and not from outside circumstances and happenings.

Study, education, loyalty, and family become the keys to faith. At times miracles are necessary for the physical survival of the Jewish people. But the

spiritual survival of Jews is wholly dependent upon Jews themselves. That is what G-d meant when He compared the patriarchs' behavior to that of Moshe. They, to a great extent, did it on their own. Moshe learns to emulate them. So should we. ©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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).*

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**A**lthough the plagues may seem like random punishments, they are actually a Divine plan to teach the Egyptians some fundamental lessons.

Consider for example the first plague of water turning into blood. It can, as the Midrash points out, be seen as an attack on the Egyptian G-d-the Nile River. The point of this plague was to drive home to the Egyptians the true impotency of their G-d.

Alternatively, the plague of blood can be viewed as a measure for measure punishment. Since, as the Midrash adds, the Egyptians drowned Jewish children, shedding their blood in water, hence their water was turned into blood

The Maharal insists that the plagues reveal G-d's unlimited power. The first three are attacks from below-turning the land and sea against the Egyptians (blood, frogs and lice). The next three are attacks from the ground level (beasts, pestilence and boils). And the last three emerge from the heavens (hail, locusts and darkness).

Most important: the plagues do not reveal a G-d of vengeance but a G-d of compassion. The movement of the plagues is from the external (blood first attacking water outside the house) to that which is closer (the frogs which enter the home) to the body itself (lice affecting individuals).

Rather than increasing in intensity, the plagues then diminish in power, withdrawing once again to the external (beasts), moving to the inner home (pestilence) and finally to the body (boils). The seventh, eighth and ninth plagues repeat the same cycle. The plagues fluctuate and after each triplet, they give the Egyptians the chance to repent

Some commentators even insist that in reality there were only three plagues prior to the smiting of the first born as only the third, sixth and ninth plagues impacted directly on the bodies of the Egyptians. From this perspective, the first two of each triplet were in effect warnings for plagues three, six and nine.

Another display of G-d's compassion was the nature of the warning. Note that for the first, fourth and seventh plagues Pharaoh was warned near the Nile. For the second, fifth and eighth he is warned in the privacy of his palace. But for the third, sixth and ninth

there are no warnings, as the first two of each of the triplets serve that purpose.

Even the plague of the first born, the one that seems to be the harshest, was not random and it reveals a G-d who judges mercifully. After all, the elders were the priests, the leadership in Egypt, who, together with Pharaoh masterminded the enslavement of the Jews. G-d's mercy is manifested in that virtually all of Egypt was spared. Only the elders who had orchestrated the whole plan were attacked.

There is one other approach to the plagues that ought be noted. The story of Genesis is the story of a G-d unleashing his power to create the world. The story of the plagues is another display of that G-dly creative energy. Our rabbis say that "with ten sayings the world was created." (Ethics 5:1) And here, with ten plagues, a section of the world was being unraveled.

As creation was carefully carried out by G-d for a world that was potentially "very good," (Genesis 1:31) so too were the plagues a carefully designed plan by G-d to undo part of that creation which had gone wrong.

But when G-d undoes creation, he does so slowly. Indeed, all of these approaches to the plagues reflect a G-d who is reticent to inflict pain. It is a G-d of endless love who hesitates to destroy; and a G-d who, even when punishing, does so with the hope that those affected will examine themselves and learn from their mistakes. © 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.

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### **Taking a Closer Look**

“**A**nd I will also judge the nation that they (Avraham's descendents) will serve" (Beraishis 15:14). Egypt had to be punished for what they did to the Children of Israel, and their "judgment" lasted for 12 months (Eduyos 2:10, where it is compared to the judgment/punishment of other evildoers). These 12 months were the duration of the 10 plagues, indicating (as the Brisker Rav points out) that the purpose of the plagues was not primarily to convince the Egyptians to let us go, but to punish them for the atrocities committed against us. It is therefore not problematic that G-d "hardened Paro's heart" and prevented him from letting us go earlier (see Rambam's Hilchos Teshuva 6:3), as the issue wasn't whether or not Paro would let them go, but meting out justice.

If the plagues were the punishment the Egyptians deserved, then there must be a direct correlation between the sins they committed and the plagues. After all, G-d always punishes "midah kenegged midah," measure for measure. And, in fact, our Sages of blessed memory, as well as the commentators, do provide us with specific connections

between each of the plagues and the transgressions done against us by the Egyptians.

The first plague turned the Nile River (and all the water in Egypt) into blood. Although it was the first plague because the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, it was sent as a plague because the Egyptians had tossed our babies into the Nile (Midrash Hagadol). While certainly appropriate that their vehicle of death (or attempted death) literally became blood, it is also appropriate that life-sustaining water was taken away from the perpetrators. The Mincha Belulah adds that the fish died since they were fed these Jewish children.

Another reason given for afflicting the Nile was that the Egyptians prevented Jewish women from taking ritual baths in it, in an attempt to prevent any more Jewish children from being born (Shemos Rabbah 9:10). Not only was it appropriate that it turned into blood (ibid), but also that the Egyptians themselves were unable to bathe for 7 days (Midrash Lekach Tov).

Rabbeinu Bachya (7:24) quotes Rav Saadya Gaon deducing that they couldn't drink from the Nile, i.e. fresh water, but could drink salt water (presumably from the Mediterranean). If we dip things in salt water during the seder to remind us of how the Egyptians made our lives bitter, how fitting was it that the only water they could drink was salt water!

The second plague was the swarming frogs. The Midrash Hagadol says that since the Egyptians made the Jews make mud-bricks, that very same earth that they made us gather material from swarmed with frogs.

According to Midrash Tanchuma, they made us carry their business loads (i.e. moving inventory from where they were made to where they were sold), so their businesses were disrupted by the frogs (thus no longer requiring shleppers).

Midrash Vayosha (12) says that the Egyptians forced us to fish for seafood from the Nile for them, so G-d brought frogs from the Nile against them. (According to Tanna d'Vai Eliyahu, they demanded we catch swarming things for them to play with.)

"Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said that there was [originally only] one frog, which called to them (all the other frogs in the world, see Rashi) who then came" (Sanhedrin 67b). Paro's original fear (Shemos 1:10), which led to the suffering, was that the Jews would join Egypt's enemies and either leave or force the Egyptians to leave (see Rashi). It seems more than ironic that the Egyptians suffered so because the native Egyptian frog summoned foreign frogs to wage war against them!

Additionally, the constant croaking kept the Egyptians awake at all hours, much as the Egyptians kept the Jews awake and working for them at all hours (see Midrash Lekach Tov). The Abarbanel suggests that because the Egyptians didn't listen to the cries of

the parents whose sons were being taken away, they were forced to hear the endless croaking of the frogs.

Shemos Rabbah (10:6) tells us that the corpses of the dead frogs made Egypt smell because the afflictions of the Egyptians caused the Jews to smell.

The third plague occurred when the dust of the ground became lice. The Egyptians made the Jews sweep the streets and markets. By turning the dust particles-every last piece of dirt-into a louse, there was no more dirt to sweep (Shemos Rabbah 10:7, see also Tanna d'Vai Eliyahu 8:9). (Which would explain why the Egyptian magicians couldn't duplicate it even if the lice were larger than eggs; the point was to turn particles of dust into lice, and each particle was too small to apply black magic to.)

It could be similarly suggested that G-d therefore turned the earth that we would have had to make into bricks into lice. The Midrash Hagadol does indicate that the brick-making ceased after this plague.

The Jewish people are too numerous to count, like the dust of the earth (Beraishis 13:16), so when the Egyptians tried to destroy us, G-d punished them using dust (Torah Shelaimah 8:35).

Midrash Lekach Tov suggests that the Jews were prevented from bathing and lice were attracted to them; G-d therefore afflicted the Egyptians with lice.

Because the brick-making had stopped (the Midrash Hagadol continues), the Egyptians needed to find a different task for their Jewish slaves, so demanded that they go into the wilderness and trap bears, lions and tigers (oh my!) to use as weapons in a war. This led to the fourth plague, when G-d turned the tides and had the wild animals attack and destroy Egypt instead.

Another possibility brought by the Midrash Hagadol is that in order to find things for their slaves to do after there was no more brick-making, they made the Jews take care of their offspring for them. G-d therefore sent animals to snatch away the children (Midrash Tanchuma has the Egyptians forcing the Jews to transport their children from place to place). Midrash Lekach Tov says that the animals entered Egyptian homes and snatch infants from their cribs and killed them; this seems similar to when the Egyptians snatched Jewish babies to kill them.

There are additional Midrashic comparisons as well. Paro wanted to "mix" the descendants of Avraham (by killing all the males and leaving the females), so G-d sent a "mixture" of different animals to torment them (see Midrash Tehillim 78:11). Since Yehudah and Dan are compared to a lion, Binyamin to a wolf and Dan to a snake, and the Egyptians tried to kill them, G-d sent these (and other) wild animals after them (see Torah Shelaimah 8:67). The Egyptians were united in plotting against the Jews, so G-d united different species of animals to attack the Egyptians (ibid 6).

In all (the Midrash Hagadol adds), there were twelve different species of animals sent to destroy Egypt. This can be said to represent the 12 Tribes that the Egyptians tried to destroy.

Once there were no more children to take care of, the Egyptians wanted the Jews to take care of their animals for them. This (the Midrash Hagadol tells us) is included when it says that the Egyptians made the Jews do "every form of work in the field" (1:14). G-d therefore killed all the animals that were out in the fields in the fifth plague.

Without any animals to care for either, (the Midrash Hagadol continues) the Egyptians had the Jews heat water for their bathhouses. Well, instead of enjoying the feel of the heated water on their skin, G-d sent boils to make their skin itch and burn! Midrash Lekach Tov and Tanna d'Vai Eliyahu connect them by stating that because of the boils they could no longer tolerate taking a bath.

Also included in "every kind of work in the field" (the Midrash Hagadol continues) was planting gardens and orchards and taking care of them. G-d prevented the Egyptians from benefiting from this work by sending hailstones to destroy whatever grew.

Midrash Tanchuma tells us that the Egyptians threw (or threatened to throw) stones at the Jews, so G-d stoned them with hailstones.

The hailstones were made of fire and ice that miraculously coexisted. It can be suggested that G-d had these "natural enemies" unite to punish the Egyptians since all the different groups and nationalities (including the foreign captives) that usually are at each other's throats were united in their hatred of Israel and desire to destroy it. Additionally, just as Egypt went from being very friendly, treating Yosef's family like royalty, to treating them so poorly, so too did G-d send two extremes, burning hot fire and ice-cold hail, to punish them.

The above correlations between the plagues mentioned in our Parasha and the sins they were a punishment for are by no means complete, and further suggestions are welcome and encouraged (dkramer@compuserve.com). With G-d's help, the plagues mentioned in Parashas Bo, and how they match up with the atrocities committed by the Egyptians, will be discussed next week. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

“**W**hat's in a name?”, asked Shakespeare, arguing that a rose by any other name would still have the same fragrance. But our Bible and our Talmudic Sages seem to feel differently; a name is a kind of "calling card", a self-definition, which can often affect how we look at ourselves and towards which direction we develop our personalities.

"As is his name, so is he", teaches the Talmud. If this is true regarding regular mortals, a name which refers to G-d must have an even greater significance. Did we not read in last week's Biblical portion how Moses beseeches G-d to tell him His name? (Exodus 3:13)

Hence when we come to the opening of this week's portion, we must take G-d's name definition with utmost seriousness: "G-d spoke to Moses and said to him, I am Y-HVH. I revealed myself to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as G-d Almighty (E-L Shaddai) and I was not known to them by my name Y-HVH (Exodus 6:2,3).

<>What is patently difficult about these verses is that the Divine Name Y-HVH appears more than one hundred times in the Book of Genesis (for example, Gen. 9:26, Gen 15:7, Gen 28:13); apparently the patriarchs did know that Divine appellation. Hence we must explain that it is not the name Y-HVH that the patriarchs did not know, but it is rather the Divine activities reflected in the name Y-HVH that the patriarchs did not experience.

The Ibn Ezra and the Ramban maintain that E-L Shaddai refers to the powerful G-d of creation and nature who revealed Himself to the patriarchs without changing the natural order of the universe; Y-HVY changed the natural order of the universe in the plagues and the splitting of the Reed Sea in order to free the Israelites from Egyptian servitude. The difficulty with this explanation is that it has very little to do with the verses which follow, the Divine promise to bring them into the land of Canaan and the five expressions of redemption from Egyptian despotic cruelty (Ex. 6:4-8). What we would have expected to find is a forecast of the plagues, and the cataclysmic natural changes they would effectuate.

Rashi takes the name of E-L Shaddai to refer to the G-d of the Book of Genesis who made promises, but did not yet keep them; it is in the Book of Exodus that He begins to actualize the Covenant between the Pieces. The problem here is that although G-d promises the patriarchs the land of Israel many times in the Book of Genesis, the name E-L Shaddai appears only twice: Genesis 17:1 and 35:11.

Rav Elhanan Samet, basing himself on a fascinating insight of the Baal HaTurim, maintains that both the names E-L Shaddai and Y-HVH are bound up in promises made by G-d: E-L Shaddai guaranteed the patriarchs progeny (Genesis 17:1 "I am E-L Shaddai...and I will increase your numbers very much" and Genesis 35:11 "I am E-L Shaddai, be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a congregation of nations shall be effectuated - yihye- from you"), which He carried out, and Y-HVH which guaranteed the patriarchs the land (Gen 15:7, "I am Y-HVH, who has taken you out from the Ur Kasdim to give you this land as an inheritance" and Gen. 18:13 "I am Y-HVH....the land which you are lying upon I shall give to you and your seed") which He

had not yet carried out, since the Israelites are in Egyptian exile as the Book of Exodus opens. These are the two necessary building blocks of a nation: a fruitful family writ large, with common ancestors and traditions and a homeland which they can call their own.

Rav Samet also links these two names of G-d to the substance of the promises which they engender: progeny is built in to the natural order of things, to the powers of a G-d of nature who created a world of human, animal and plant propagation, whereas the conquest and retention of a land is bound up with historical process, the G-d of eternal history who was, is and will be (Y-HVH).

At this point, I would like to add one critical caveat. Progeny means that the Jewish people will never be destroyed, that there will always be Israelites in the world; it does not necessarily claim that we will be among the more mathematically numerous nations of the world. Much the opposite, our Bible teaches, "It was not because you had greater numbers than all the other nations that G-d cherished you and chose you; you are among the fewest of all nations. It is because of G-d's love for you and because He is keeping the oath that He made to your fathers" (Deut. 7:7,8).

Yes, the Bible tells us that we will be as grains of sand at the edge of the sea, but this may just be a metaphor for the fact that we will be trod and spat upon; yes, we will be as the stars of the heavens, but this too is a metaphor for the light of morality and peace which we must bring to a darkened world. And the Sfat Emet takes the famous passage wherein G-d takes Abraham outside to see the stars (Gen 15:5) to mean, "Look at the heavens and count the stars; it is impossible to count them... So shall be your progeny," that is to say, your progeny will always accomplish the impossible! Perhaps the very reason that we are forbidden to take a numerical census of our nation (Exodus 30:12) but must only count each person's offering is because we must think in terms of quality and not quantity, the qualitative contributions that our nation makes to the world rather than our quantitative numbers.

Finally, I would argue that the G-d of Genesis is E-L Shaddai, the Almighty Power and the sum total of all the powers of the universe (Elohim). He created the cosmos before there was any human beings on earth, He effectuated the Big Bang, He sets limits to every earthly creation, and He did it all by Himself. He is the G-d who revealed Himself to Abraham and his family and established with them a covenant and mission to perfect the world.

The G-d of Exodus is Y-HVH, literally He will effectuate and bring about redemption in history through the partnership of Israel and the nations of the world. E-L Shaddai is the G-d of creation and being; Y-HVH is the G-d of history and becoming. Center stage in Genesis is G-d alone; center stage in Exodus is G-d and Israel as we march the long, torturous but

guaranteed march to redemption. © 2007 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

### **MACHON ZOMET**

## **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

by *Rabbi Amnon Bazak*

**A**s is well known, the first of the Ten Plagues in Egypt was the plague of blood. Why was this the first plague, and what is its significance? Rashi explains that the first plague struck the Nile because "the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, and therefore G-d struck their deity and then struck at them directly" [Shemot 7:17]. However, this idea is not directly shown in the verses of the Torah, which might imply that there are other explanations for the significance of this plague.

It is difficult to ignore how many times the name of the Nile appears in the description of the plague of blood. It occurs fourteen times (this is significant with respect to key words, which often appear in a Torah passage as a multiple of seven). We can assume that the word appears this often in order to relate to previous occasions when the Nile was mentioned repeatedly-when Pharaoh decreed, "Let every son who is born be thrown into the Nile" [1:22], and in the story of Moshe hidden in the basket. This implies that the plague of blood is a classic example of a punishment of the type "measure for measure." Pharaoh filled the Nile with the blood of Jewish children, and now the Nile itself was changed into blood. The Nile, the site of a horrible blood bath, became a river of blood.

Specifically, there is a direct relationship between the plague of blood and the time when Moshe was placed in the basket. When Moshe is sent to Pharaoh before the plague, G-d commands him, "Stand opposite him on the bank of the Nile" [7:15]. This is very reminiscent of what happened to Moshe as a baby. "And she put it in the reeds on the bank of the Nile, and his sister stood far away, in order to see what would happen to him" [2:3-4]. (Note that the phrase "on the bank of the Nile" does not appear in connection with any of the other plagues.) This emphasizes the revolutionary changes from the time of Pharaoh's decree until the events of the plagues. When Moshe was hidden in the basket, there was no way for his family to directly oppose the evil decree, and the only thing that his sister could do was to passively stand by. But now the situation was different. Moshe is not afraid to stand up directly to Pharaoh and to take on the role of the one who gives the commands. The same Moshe, who was given his name in memory of the way his life was saved-

"For I have drawn him out of the water" [2:10] -- now stands and declares, "Egypt will grow weary of trying to drink water from the Nile" [7:18]. And this means that Pharaoh must at last understand that the

situation has changed, he must begin to understand the source of this new power and to act accordingly.

Pharaoh refuses to understand the new reality, and he is therefore struck with Ten Plagues, until he is finally willing to send Bnei Yisrael out of bondage. But his obstinacy continues until the very last blow-when the Red Sea is split-where the Egyptians are drowned in the sea, once again closing the cycle of measure for measure, in contrast to when the children of Yisrael were drowned in the Nile. Thus, we see that the structure of the Ten Plagues is clear. The beginning and the end-blood and the splitting of the Red Sea-are both linked to the Egyptian cruelty, with their decree to "let every son who is born be thrown into the Nile."

### **The Fifth Matriarch**

by *Dr. Eli Shussheim, Director of Efrat Association, Encouraging Births Among the Jews*

"And Amram took his aunt Yocheved as a wife" [Shemot 6:20]. Yocheved, the mother of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam, was in her mother's womb at the time when Yaaacov and his sons arrived in Egypt, but she was still counted in the total of seventy people who went to Egypt (see Rashi, Bereishit 46:15). This teaches us that an unborn fetus is considered a living person and can be counted among those who have already been born.

Yocheved was Shifra, one of the Jewish midwives mentioned in last week's Torah portion. As a reward for her actions together with her daughter Miriam (who was less than six years old!), the Almighty provided them with "houses"-the priesthood for (Aharon), the Levites (Moshe), and royalty (through Miriam, who was an ancestor of the dynasty of David). (See Rashi, Shemot 1:21.)

As a reward for saving all the children of Yisrael, Yocheved was privileged to establish the entire nation of Yisrael. While it is true that the sages list four Matriarchs, Yocheved, with the generations that followed from her offspring, can definitely take her place as a fifth Matriarch, since she was the mother of the most "elite" of all of the Bnei Yisrael.

In looking in detail at the passage of the Hebrew midwives in last week's Torah portion, we can see that it is first written, "And G-d did good for the midwives, and the nation multiplied and became very great" [Shemot 1:20]. Only in the next verse is it written, "Behold, since the midwives feared G-d, He made houses for them" [1:21]. One may wonder why the Torah does not tell us immediately that G-d rewarded the midwives by giving them houses. The answer is that the best privilege that the midwives could want was to see the nation multiply and become powerful. Only afterwards were they given their own private reward.

A midwife is also called a "chachama," a wise woman, because she has the ability to foretell what will happen in the future. Yocheved saw not only the

physical birth of the children, she also understood the future in that if Pharaoh's decree had been put into effect the entire Hebrew nation would have been destroyed. On the other hand, by supporting more births, she knew that she was helping the nation of Yisrael to grow and become great.

Yocheved can serve as a role model to this very day. To our great sorrow, we live in a generation where we destroy hundreds of children every week and thousands every month, while they are still in their mother's wombs, and we take away their right to live. We are obligated to rescue them and give them life. Now, just as it was then, this is the secret of the future and the fate of the nation of Yisrael.

#### RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

### Rav Frand

*Transcribed by David Twersky*

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**P**arshas Vaera contains the bulk of the Ten Plagues, beginning with the plague of Blood and continuing up to the plague of Locusts. The plagues begin with G-d's command to Moshe: "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt; over their rivers, over their canals, over their ponds, and over all their gatherings of water, and they shall become blood; there shall be blood in all the land of Egypt, and in the wood and in the stones.'" [Shmos 7:19]

Rashi on this pasuk [verse] teaches that it was Aaron, rather than Moshe, was commanded to initiate this plague because the Nile protected Moshe when he was thrown into it as an infant. Therefore, Aaron initiated the plague of Blood and the plague of Frogs (in which the Nile was also smitten). The Gemara comments on this: A person should not cast stones into the well from which he has drunk.

This is the principle of Hakaras HaTov [recognizing a favor]. We learn from here that Hakaras HaTov applies even when the doer of the favor is only doing what he is supposed to do anyway. The Nile merely floated the basket. That is the nature of water. It is a law of physics that something lighter than water floats on water. The Nile thus did not go out of its way to do anything special for Moshe. It just did what it has been doing since the beginning of time.

And yet, we still learn from here that there is an obligation of Hakaras HaTov. This dispels a common practice among people. It is the nature of people to say: "Why do I need to say 'Thank you'? Why do I need to have HaKaras HaTov? -- He had to do it anyway!"

Hakaras HaTov is not measured by the benefactor's efforts. It is measured by the impact on the recipient. When someone benefits from someone else—whether the benefactor did or did not need to provide the benefit, he did or did not have to do it, whether it was or was not a bother for him, the beneficiary has a

responsibility to recognize that he owes a debt of gratitude. The proof is the Nile River. It merely did what water does and yet Moshe Rabbeinu felt a sense of Hakaras HaTov.

#### **The Egyptians Remained Stubborn Against Their Better Judgment**

The plague of Dever [Pestilence] wiped out all the livestock of Egypt. However, none of the cows belonging to Jews died. Nevertheless, Pharaoh's heart was hardened. The plague did not have the desired effect.

By the next plague, that of Boils (Shechin), the pasuk says, "It will become dust over the entire land of Egypt, and it shall become a boil blossoming forth blisters upon man and upon animal throughout the land of Egypt." [Shmos 9:9]. Indeed, this is exactly what happened: "They took soot of the furnace, and stood before Pharaoh and Moses threw it heavenward, and it became a boil and blisters erupting upon man and upon animal." [Shmos 9:10]. The question is "What animals? What beasts?" Weren't all the animals killed during the previous plague of Dever?

Rashi addresses this question. Rashi says that the plague of Dever only affected the animals that were out in the field. Those people "who feared the word of G-d" brought their animals inside and they were spared from the plague of Dever. Therefore, at this point in time, only the people "who feared G-d" still had animals. But in the very next plague of Barad [Hail], Moshe again gave fair warning to the people: "Behold at this time tomorrow I shall rain a very heavy hail, such as there has never been in Egypt, from the day it was founded until now. And now send forth, gather in your livestock and everything you have in the field; all the people and animals that are found in the field and will not be gathered into the house—the hail shall descend upon them and they shall die." [Shmos 9:18-19]

The Torah continues: "Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem made his servants and his livestock flee to the houses. And whoever did not take the word of G-d to heart—he left his servants and livestock in the field." [Shmos 9:20-21]

The question cries out to us: Anyone who still had animals at this stage of the cycle of plagues was already proven to be one who feared the word of G-d. How then, can the pasuk teach that there were people who DID NOT fear the word of G-d who kept their animals out in the field during the plague of Barad?

I saw a very interesting insight on this question from Rav Elya Meir Bloch. The Torah is revealing to us a basic truth in human nature. It is true that during the fifth plague of Dever there were Egyptians who "feared the word of G-d" and brought their animals into the barns before the plague began. But by this seventh plague of Barad some of these same people stubbornly proclaimed "No! I refuse to take in my animals." The

difference is that in the warning before the plague of Dever, Moshe Rabbeinu did not challenge the Egyptians to bring the animals into their houses. He did not lay down the gauntlet and say (as he does by Barad) "You want your animals alive-bring them in; you want your animals dead, leave them out!"

During the earlier plague, people with brains in their head took appropriate precautionary action. They were not fighting the yetzer hara [evil inclination] of standing up to Moshe's challenge. However, with barad, when they were threatened, as much as their logic and brains told them to take appropriate precautions, their emotions would not allow them to follow through. This is human nature. We resist orders and coercion even when deep down, we know that listening to these "orders" would be the wisest path to follow.

People are willing to lose life, limb, and property, just so they can avoid admitting "Hashem is the L-rd." (Hashem hu haElokim). © 2007 Rabbi Y. Frand & www.torah.org

#### **RABBI BARUCH LEFF**

### **Kol Yaakov**

**W**e have a major problem with this week's Torah portion. In fact, it's a problem with the entire Exodus from Egypt. The problem is: Is G-d being truthful with Pharaoh?

Beginning back in Parshat Shmot (Exodus 5:3) and continuing this week in Va'eira (Exodus 8:23), G-d instructs Moshe to ask Pharaoh to release the Jewish People for three days only. "We will go on a three-day journey in the Wilderness and bring offerings to Hashem, Our Lord, as He will instruct us."

Lest we think that Pharaoh knew and understood that the three days would extend to more days, it is clear that he did not (Exodus 8:24): "Pharaoh said, 'I will send you and you shall bring offerings to Hashem, your Lord, in the Wilderness, only do not go far off!'" (Subsequently, Pharaoh went back on his word.) So was G-d playing straight with Pharaoh? Beyond the moral and philosophical problem of G-d telling lies, the Talmud (Shabbat 55a) states unequivocally, "The signature of G-d is Truth." Yet, it is difficult to fathom G-d asking Pharaoh for three days of freedom when we know that He intended all along to set the Jewish people free from Egypt forever. What can we suggest to resolve this troublesome issue?

There is no way out of saying that when G-d said three days, He meant three days-and three days only. Since Pharaoh rejected this 'Freedom-for-three-days-only Plan,' it never took hold and G-d was not bound by it. Therefore when the Jewish People do eventually leave Egypt, they leave forever.

So, we have resolved the problem-G-d is not a liar. But now we have another question. Why would G-d deal in such terms with Pharaoh? True, had Pharaoh

agreed, the Jews would have left for three days and then returned to Egypt. But we know that G-d did have in mind for the Jewish nation to exit Egypt, never to return. Why, then, would G-d initially want a temporary reprieve from Egyptian persecution before the ultimate Exodus? The answer teaches us something extremely vital for spiritual living.

If I asked you today to change your entire lifestyle overnight so that by tomorrow you'll be as learned and as pious as the greatest Torah leader alive, you would probably be unable to accomplish it. This is not because you are not a good person and don't have a great spiritual yearning. Rather, there are some challenges that are so overwhelming that they are virtually impossible. Perhaps, given a few years of profound growth, it would be possible, but it is not presently. People usually change and grow gradually. If someone takes on too much, too fast, the growth very often does not have any lasting effects.

G-d knew that Pharaoh was very attached to all of his possessions. The Jewish slaves were a major portion of his possessions. Asking Pharaoh to part from the Jewish nation-his slaves-forever would be a demand that Pharaoh would find impossible to agree to. G-d wanted Pharaoh to gradually realize that he would not perpetually own the Jews as slaves. Hence, He plans to take the Jews out for three days, have the Jews worship Him, and in this way Pharaoh will begin to get the idea that in the future, the Jews will serve G-d and not Pharaoh.

This 'three-days-only' request is one that Pharaoh would be able to answer affirmatively. Although, Pharaoh in the end refuses, he was at least capable of passing the test.

This temporary Exodus was also beneficial for the Jewish nation as well. They had spent many years in Egypt and had become adversely affected by the immoral Egyptian society. Had they been asked by G-d to suddenly leave Egypt, they would find it hard to abandon their cultural idolatrous leanings and serve only G-d. They, like Pharaoh, needed time to get used to the idea of the Jewish people leaving Egypt. They could only gradually begin to serve and worship G-d through His Torah. They were too attached to Egyptian idolatry to change without a 'three-days-only' interim reprieve from Egyptian culture.

We are all good people. We all want to reach our maximum spiritual potential. Yet, we sometimes move too fast for growth to last. How many of us leave Yom Kippur thinking we will never gossip again? And then that first violation happens when we aren't thinking, and we give up.

We have to learn to move more slowly. We have to utilize patience in our spiritual growth. And we have to remember that it doesn't matter how high up you are on the spiritual ladder-as long as you are moving up. © 2007 Rabbi B. Leff and aish.org