

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

Hakarat Hatov – Appreciating the Good

In each of the first two books of the Torah we are introduced to the beginnings of the Jewish people. In the first book of Breishit, the focus is on the family; the three patriarchs and their families- the striving and the bickering within the families. The second book of Shemot begins with the emergence of the Jewish people as an entity, their rise to greatness and their perceived threat and eventual expulsion from the land. It is a story of love and hate, jealousy and adoration. Breishit in essence deals with the beginnings of the family of the Jewish people, while the book of Shmot stresses the initial stages of the formation of the great nation of Israel.

The bridge between both books is the dramatic account of Joseph and his brothers; his rise to power and his innovations in the land of Egypt. Because of his efforts, Shmot begins with the surfacing of the Jewish people as a powerful nation, and finally "there arose a new king of Egypt who did not know of Joseph"-or at least he pretended that he did not know-and the persecuting of the Jews leading to their final ouster from the land.

A dominant theme in the book of Shmot, is the attention to the importance of "Hakarat Hatov", recognizing the good. The Torah references times when Pharaoh did not recognize the good that Joseph had brought upon Egypt, while at the same time spotlighting the sensitivities of our teacher Moses in refusing to punish the Egyptians with the plagues of blood, frogs and lice, for the waters saved his life when he was cast onto the Nile as a baby, and the land rescued him by providing a place to bury the Egyptian that he slew, ultimately saving his life. This theme of "Hakarat Hatov" appears in other instances in this story as well and brings home the lesson of the importance of this attribute in a Jew's daily life.

An added display of the reaction of Almighty G-d when one denies "Hakarat Hatov" can also be seen in the way G-d punishes Pharaoh.

Pharaoh denies Joseph's existence. He rejects any good or benefit that the Jews of Egypt have bequeathed his land. He snubs their existence. G-d's response for this obvious lack of "Hakarat Hatov",

recognition for the good, is that the land of Egypt would be inundated with plagues, each a symbol of how Egypt would have appeared had Joseph not been there during the famine to save it.

The blood represents the lack of water; this leads to the frogs and amphibians engulfing the land in search for water. As a consequence of the lack of water, lice befell the people. Wild animals then ascended upon the land for there was no food to be found and they had no alternative but to seek their sustenance within the vulnerable population of humans. Further, when there is no food the cattle and livestock die (Dever, Pestilence). All these unsanitary conditions lead to boils (Shichin). Finally the hail and the Locusts destroy all the remaining food leaving the land barren and in darkness, ultimately leading to the death of children, the very future of Egypt's existence.

G-d needed to show Pharaoh how his land would have looked had Joseph and all the Jews not been there. The result was desolation and emptiness; total destruction.

In essence, this is also the cycle of Jewish History throughout the ages. Despite contributions of the Jewish people, and their work to better society, they are often taken for granted and are not given the proper Hakarat Hatov, recognition of the good, that they so deserve.

One has only to look at the amount of discoveries in science and medicine, the Arts and in education to appreciate the vital role that the Jews have played. Yet they are constantly ridiculed and blamed for all of the world's troubles, very often becoming the scapegoats for societies.

This is the story of the book of Exodus. And this story is the basis for all the stories of the Jewish sojourn in world history.

In each land that we visit we grace it with our knowledge and drive. We improve their society. When finally we are chased out, often the land we sojourned in is left void and empty. One need only look at the land of Israel after the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash. Only the Jews were able to eventually return in the late 1800's and till the soil and make it fruitful and beautiful; a land flowing with milk and honey.

The message of the importance of Hakarat hatov therefore becomes apparent. Its lack is a plague

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which also affects Jews as well. It stems from a feeling of entitlement and the wielding of power and influence.

How many of us thank the schools that our children attend and receive such a fine education? How many of us thank their teachers, their Rabbis and the people who work so hard to keep the doors of the Day School or Yeshiva open? How many of us thank our parents for all their love and support? And yes, how many of us thank the simple person who performs menial tasks like cleaning the bathrooms at the airport or in our offices? A simple "thank you" would go a long way!

And a simple "thank you" would bring our redemption that much closer! © 2009 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the Principal of the Bess and Paul Segal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford. Any comments can be emailed to him at ravmordechai@aol.com

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The story of the exile and enslavement of the people of Israel comes to a violent end in this week's parsha. The question that is raised and is discussed by the major Torah commentators is why does the story end this way with the drowning of thousands of Pharaoh's Egyptians?

Especially in the current "humanitarian" climate of war without casualties and equivalent moral worth between both sides of any struggle - the master and the slave, the victim and the criminal perpetrator, the terrorist and the civilian society - the end of this story seems to be oddly disconcerting. Was there no more humane or non-violent method for the Lord to end this story of the enslavement and deliverance of the Israelites from oppression?

It appears from the simple reading of the parsha that the Lord has a point to prove. There are times in human history when only the complete destruction of the evil ones makes the desired impression on humankind. This lesson is never a permanent one and hence such events recur with regularity throughout human history. Germany and Japan were completely destroyed - violently and brutally so - in World War II.

For a while this lesson was assimilated into the behavior of humans and countries. In our time it has

almost been completely forgotten in the jumble of hatred masked as 'do-goodness' that currently prevails in our world. If evil is not exposed, confronted, punished and at least temporarily destroyed then the necessary forces of good and progress so necessary for the advancement of the cause of civilization in the world will suffer a mortal blow.

The people of Israel celebrate their deliverance from bondage and from Egyptian persecution by singing a song of triumph and deliverance. In fact this Shabat derives its title - Shabat Shira - the Shabat of song, from this great song of Moshe and Israel.

This song is recited daily by Jews the world over and is part of the daily morning prayer services. It is granted such great importance in order to remind us that the destruction of evil is not a thing of the past, an historical event alone. The power of freedom of choice which G-d implanted in the world and the human race presupposes the possibility of the existence of evil in world society.

The forces of good must always rally their strengths and abilities to counter evil and attempt to destroy it. And we should never delude ourselves that this is a peaceful matter of discussion, compromise, and non-violence. Ghandi's non-violent approach in India ended in a civil war that killed millions. Evil is never overcome by making nice to the tiger.

So the Lord impresses us with this truth so that we should not delude ourselves regarding the true nature of the struggle. The messianic era promises us a world of peace and the end of violent struggles in this world's society. But until that time arrives, may it be shortly, the struggle exists with its all of its violent overtones and details. © 2009 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“G-d will fight for you; you must silently hold your peace" (Exodus 14:14)

The Exodus from Egypt and the miracle of the splitting of the Reed Sea has fired our imagination for 4,000 years. Hence, it is not surprising that one of Hollywood's great directors, Cecil B. DeMille, capped his career with his grand finale film, The Ten Commandments. Yet despite the dazzling display of special effects, which was one of the most powerful visual experiences ever presented, the oft-heard comment made by filmgoers upon leaving a movie that the "book was better" also applied in this case; our "Book of Books," the Bible, was better.

The Bible remains better because, in addition to describing the historic events which provide the

basis for the powerful images illuminating the movie screen, the Bible explores and amplifies the emotions felt by the Israelites leading up to the miracle, the groundwork for the Divine lessons that G-d desired to teach His people. In this way, the miracle of the splitting of the Reed Sea becomes not only a once-in-a-nation's history extra-sensory experience, but rather a watershed phenomenon that helped form the psyche of our nation in its development from slavery to freedom.

Chapter 14 of the Book of Exodus, the central account of the Splitting of the Sea in this week's Biblical portion of Beshalach, is actually divided into two almost equal parts (verses 1-14, 15-31), as magnificently analyzed by R. Elhanan Samet in his 'Studies of the Biblical Portions.' From an initial perspective, the first half catalogues Pharaoh's aggressive military initiative to return the Israelites to Egypt, the stark fear of the Israelites, and Moses' ringing promise, "G-d will fight for you; you must silently hold your peace" (14:14). The second half describes the miracle at the Sea and the stunning, upset victory of the Israelites.

What adds to the profundity of the Biblical text is that twice in the first half of chapter 14 we are told the precise location of the Israelites in the desert: the very opening verse (14:1) informs us that G-d told Moses to "turn back [the Israelites] and camp before the Temple of Horus (probably "per cheru" a generic term for the shrines of the idol Horus), between the tower and the sea, facing the Master Idol of the North..." and then again, only nine verses later, "the Egyptians overtook them while they were camping at the sea, near the Temple of Horus, opposite the Master Idol of the North." What is remarkable about this twice mentioned geographic location is that it is given to us in relation to the positions of two major idolatrous centers, a rare occurrence for the Bible of ethical monotheism.

Furthermore, how are we to understand the total paralysis of the Israelites in the face of this Egyptian danger? Even after G-d informs them that He "will triumph over Pharaoh and his entire army, and Egypt will know that I am G-d" (14:4), the Hebrews seem devastated by the Egyptian armies and virtually resigned to their deaths in the desert (14: 10-12). What adds to our [the reader's] frustration is the Biblical report that Pharaoh took "...six hundred chosen chariots as well as the whole chariot corps of Egypt, three times the amount of all of these" (14:7). Does this mean another 1800 chariots? Josephus writes that besides the 600 war chariots, there were 50,000 horsemen and 200,000 foot-men (Antiquities 2:15:3), and even though this seems to be a truly high number, remember that the Israelites were 600,000 men, and they emerged from Egypt armed with weaponry (Exodus 13:18). Why didn't they face the Egyptians in war, fighting for their freedom?! This is the critical question of the Ibn Ezra, and our question as well. Why does the possibility of Israel's fighting back not seem to

be an option for these newly-freed émigrés? The sad truth is that fighting isn't even on Moses' radar screen: "G-d will fight for you; you must silently hold your peace" are the words of the prophet.

Enter the second half of chapter 14, with a Divine rebuke to Moses and a Divine charge to the Israelites: "And the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to Me in prayer? Speak to the children of Israel, and let them get moving" (Exodus 14:15). It is not by accident that the precise geographic location of Israelites is between the Shrine of Horus and Master Idol of the North, and that in Hebrew the Shrine of Horus is "pi hahirut", which can also be translated to mean "by the mouth, or cusp of freedom (herut)." G-d is telling Moses as well as Israel that they are no longer slaves to Egypt and neither are they enslaved to Egyptian idolatry! Idol worshippers believe that human beings are powerless pawns, manipulated by the all-powerful idolatrous G-ds whose petty feuds control what happens on earth; the most that the people can do is bribe, or propitiate, those G-ds!

The message of Israel to the world is dramatically different. Our G-d is a G-d of love and justice who has created us in His image and as His partners. He is the G-d of history - "I will be what I will be" - and history is a partnership between G-d, His chosen nation and the world. G-d may be the leader of the orchestra, but we humans must play the instruments - and whether the result in the world is silence, cacophony or a magnificent symphony will depend, in great measure, upon us. Hence G-d charges Israel with diving into the waters of the Reed Sea if they truly wish to be free; active partnership with the Divine means risking your lives in uncharted depths on behalf of freedom and redemption. © 2009 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

“**W**here is G-d?” asked Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, one of the great Hasidic masters. “Everywhere,” replied his students. “No, my children,” he responded, “G-d is not everywhere, but only where you let Him enter.”

The Kotzker's answer reinforces a distinction that Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik makes between two terms of redemption - both relate to being saved - hatzalah and yeshuah. Hatzalah requires no action on the part of the person being saved. Yeshuah, on the other hand, is the process whereby the recipient of salvation participates in helping him or herself.

In the portions read during the last few weeks, the Torah describes how the Jewish people, emerging from Egypt, experienced the process of hatzalah. Note G-d's words-ve-hitzalti etchem. (Exodus 6:6) G-d and G-d alone, says the Hagadah, took us out of Egypt.

Just as a newborn is protected by her or his parents, so were the newly born Jewish people protected by G-d.

Much like a child who grows up, the Jewish people, having left Egypt, were expected to assume responsibilities. While Moshe thought that the process of hatzalah would be extended into the future, G-d does not concur - the sea will split, but you will be saved only if you do your share and try to cross on your own. (Rashi on Exodus 14:15) As the Jews stand by the sea, the Torah suddenly shifts from the language of hatzalah to that of yeshuah as it states va-yosha Hashem. (Exodus 14:30)

I remember my son Dov, as a small child at the Seder table, asking: "Why do we have to open the door for Eliyahu (Elijah) the prophet? He has so much power! He gets around so quickly and drinks a lot. Couldn't he squeeze through the cracks?"

At the Seder table, in addition to re-enacting the redemption from Egypt we also stress the hope for future redemption. This part of the Seder experience begins with the welcoming of Eliyahu, who the prophet says, will be the harbinger of the Messianic period. But for the Messiah to come, says Rav Kook, we must do our share and so we open the door and welcome him in. Sitting on our hands and waiting is not enough.

I often asked my parents where their generation was sixty years ago when our people were being murdered and destroyed. Although many stood up, not enough people made their voices heard. Let us bless each other today that when our children and our grandchildren ask us similar questions such as, "Where were you when Jews were mercilessly murdered in Israel" we will be able to answer that we did stand up and did our best to make a difference.

Let us pray that we will have done our share and opened the door to let G-d in. We must recognize that we can't only ask for hatzalah, where G-d alone intervenes, but we must also do our share to bring about a new era, one of genuine partnership between heaven and earth - a true yeshuah. © 2009 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 JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

'**N**ow when Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for G-d said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt." So G-d led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.'

So begins this week's sedra. On the face of it, it is a minor detail in the larger story of the exodus. Yet it is the key text in one of the most fascinating chapters in

medieval Jewish thought. The man who wrote it was Moses Maimonides, in his great philosophical work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

The context in which it occurs is deeply controversial. In *The Guide*, Maimonides poses a fundamental question. Why, if the sacrificial system is so central to Judaism, were the prophets so critical of it? He does not ask a second question, but we should: if sacrifices are the primary form of worshipping G-d, how did Judaism survive without them for 20 centuries from the destruction of the Second Temple until today?

Maimonides' answer is that sacrifices are secondary; prayer-the uniting of the soul of the individual with the mind of G-d-is primary. Judaism could thus survive the loss of the outer form of worship, because the inner form-prayer-remained intact.

Maimonides recognises that this idea is open to an obvious challenge. If sacrifices are secondary, and prayer primary, why did G-d not dispense with sacrifices altogether and immediately? His answer-it was, and remains, deeply controversial-is that the Israelites of Moses' day could not conceive of the form of worship that did not involve sacrifice. That was the norm in the ancient world. G-d is beyond time, but human beings live within time. We cannot take ourselves out of, say, the 21st century and project ourselves a thousand years from now. Inescapably, we live in now, not eternity.

This leads Maimonides to his fundamental assertion (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, III: 32). There is no such thing as sudden, drastic, revolutionary change in the world we inhabit. Trees take time to grow. The seasons shade imperceptibly into one another. Day fades into night. Processes take time, and there are no shortcuts.

If this is true of nature, it is all the more so of human nature. There can be little doubt that from the outset, the Torah is opposed to slavery. The free G-d desires the free worship of free human beings. That one person should own and control another is an offence against human dignity. Yet the Torah permits slavery, while at the same time restricting and humanizing it. Looking back with the full perspective of history, we know that slavery was not abolished in Britain and America until the 19th century-and in the case of America, not without a civil war. Change takes time. This leads to a deeper question. Why did G-d not circumvent human nature? Why did He not simply intervene in the human mind and make the Israelites of Moses' day see that various practices of the ancient world were wrong? Here, Maimonides states a truth he saw as fundamental to Judaism. G-d sometimes intervenes to change nature. We call these interventions miracles. But G-d never intervenes to change human nature. To do so would be to compromise human free will. That is something G-d, on principle, never does (One might object: what about

G-d 'hardening Pharaoh's heart'? To that, Maimonides had an answer-in Hilkhot Teshuvah 6:3 -- but it does not concern us here).

To put it simply: it would have been easy for G-d to create a billion computers programmed to sing His praises continually. But that would not be worship. Freedom of the will is not accidental to human existence as Judaism conceives it. It is of its very essence. Worship is not worship if it is coerced. Virtue is not virtue if we are compelled by inner or outer forces over which we have no control. In creating humanity G-d, as it were, placed himself under a statute of self limitation. He had to be patient. He could not force the pace of the moral development of mankind without destroying the very thing He had created. This self limitation-what the kabbalists called tzimtzum-was G-d's greatest act of love. He gave humanity the freedom to grow. But that inevitably meant that change in the affairs of mankind would be slow.

Maimonides proof-text is the verse with which our sedra begins: 'Now when Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines'. G-d feared that, seeing war, the Israelites would panic and want to go back. Why did G-d not put courage into their hearts? Because G-d does not intervene in human nature. Maimonides, however, goes further. It is no accident that the generation that left Egypt was not the generation to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. That privilege belonged to their children:

"It was the result of G-d's wisdom that the Israelites were led about in the wilderness until they acquired courage. For it is a well-known fact that travelling in the wilderness, deprived of bodily enjoyments like bathing, produces courage... Besides, another generation arose during the wanderings, that had not been accustomed to degradation and slavery." (Guide, III: 32)

In other words: it takes a generation born in freedom to build a society of freedom:

It is hard to overemphasise the importance of this insight. The modern world was formed through four revolutions: the British, the American, the French and the Russian. Two-the British and the American-led to a slow but genuine transformation towards democracy, universal franchise, and respect for human dignity. The French and Russian revolutions, however, led to regimes that were even worse than those they replaced: the 'Terror' in France, and Stalinist communism in Russia.

The difference was that the British and American revolutions, led by the Puritans, were inspired by the Hebrew Bible. The French and Russian revolutions were inspired by philosophy: Rousseau's in the first, Karl Marx's in the second. Tenakh understands the role of time in human affairs. Change is slow and evolutionary. Philosophy lacks that

understanding of time, and tends to promote revolution. What makes revolutions fail is the belief that by changing structures of power, you can change human behaviour. There is some truth in this, but also a significant falsehood. Political change can be rapid. Changing human nature is very slow indeed. It takes generations, even centuries and millennia.

The shape of the modern world would have been very different if France and Russia had understood the significance of the opening verse of Beshallah. Change takes time. Even G-d himself does not force the pace. That is why He led the Israelites on a circuitous route, knowing that they could not face the full challenge of liberty immediately. Nelson Mandela called his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*. On that journey, there are no shortcuts. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks & torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

Now that Tu B'Shevat is close, it is reasonable to discuss matters related to "nature," as is fitting for the agricultural new year. The epic poem in this week's Torah portion, which is named not after the people who sang it but is called Shirat Hayam? the poem of the sea? gives us a perfect opportunity to do this.

Every time we have been privileged to be redeemed we have turned to the Almighty and recited His praises in the Hallel. Every redemption contains some aspects of the Exodus from Egypt, the root of all redemptions, and therefore the words of the Hallel bring us back to the exalted time of that redemption, with the chapter beginning, "When Yisrael left Egypt" [Tehillim 114:1]. What is especially interesting is the point of departure of the psalm. We most often tend to look at the redemption in terms of the outstretched arm of G-d, the horse and riders who were drowned in the sea, and so on, but in Hallel we look through the eyes of nature. "The sea saw and fled, the Jordan retreated, the mountains danced like rams, and the hills like sheep" [114:3-4]. And then we turn to the forces of nature directly. "Why should you, the sea, flee, why should the Jordan retreat?" [114:5].

The answer that we give is that they are retreating "from the Master of the Earth, from the G-d of Yaacov, He who transforms the rock into a lake of water, a flint into a spring of water" [114:7-8]. In the midst of the tumult of horses and riders trapped in the depths of the sea, beyond the wondrous feeling of wellbeing and salvation that beat in the hearts of Bnei Yisrael, the great Divine power of G-d can be perceived, towering above all else. Perhaps this is the reason behind the statement, "A maidservant at the Sea saw what the prophet Yechezkel Ben Buzi did not

see" [Devarim Rabba 7:8]. The Almighty stands water up in a wall, freezes the water in the depths, and creates huge waves of water with His spirit.

G-d would have no trouble in bringing salvation without changing the course of nature, but this is the way He chose to save His nation. In this way, the redemption highlights a novel aspect of the world. Yisrael were no longer under control of the Egyptians, and the Almighty Himself abandons the normal constraints of nature and is revealed as the Master of the Universe. He created the world and He is free to do with it as He wants.

The changes in nature were a one-time act, something that was needed at that specific time and never again. From the moment the task was accomplished, it was no longer needed. The powerful forces of nature had already shown their absolute loyalty to the Almighty by acting against their usual nature when commanded to do so. From then on, "Anybody who recites the Hallel every day may as well be reciting a curse" [Shabbat 118b]. The memory of the changes in nature is included in our recitation of Hallel in order to protect us from looking at nature from an external point of view, something that might be far removed from the Creator. In our daily lives, we must maintain the feeling that nature is holy.

When we live on the holy land, we enjoy the sweetness of its fruit with the sanctity of Teruma, Maaser, and Shemitta. As our sages said, "A man will be called to account for everything that he saw and did not eat!"

RABBI EFRAIM MIRVIS

Daf HaShavua

by Rabbi Doniel Golomb, Allerton Hebrew Congregation, Liverpool

The atmosphere must have been electric: hundreds of thousands of people fleeing for their lives on a rollercoaster of emotions.

"We're slaves." "No, wait, we're free!" "But what will we eat?" "Never mind that: just grab your things! Moses said we have to go now!" "Where are we going?" "To the Holy Land."

And so it went on, as the Egyptians pushed the Children of Israel out of Egypt as fast as they could. Yet, paradoxically they showed them kindness, giving them clothes, utensils and riches. What lay ahead, however, would challenge them to the core of their belief.

The Torah tells us (Shemot 14:10) that the Israelites saw the Egyptians coming after them, in Rashi's words, "with one heart, as one man", totally resolved to catching and destroying them.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all turned to G-d in prayer when they needed help. When faced with death, Moses and the Israelites did the same. However, in the greatest showdown between good and bad that

the world had ever seen, in the quest to reach the Holy Land as a nation, the Children of Israel had to do more than their ancestors did. Prayer and belief were not sufficient in and of themselves, because G-d says to Moses (14:15), "Why do you cry to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them move on". It is not prayer alone that will bring salvation; it is when the Israelites display their undying faith in G-d by walking down towards the waterline, utterly focussed on their mission. Only then will their deliverance come.

It is often challenging to learn a practical lesson from the messages of faith contained in the weekly Sidra. For a start, we do not often find ourselves stranded at the banks of the sea with marauding soldiers on our tails intent on genocide. Yet, the message is there and so very applicable to our time.

Some people are content to offer prayers daily, weekly or even less frequently. Yet, deep down, many yearn for so much more. The world faced horror in the 20th century and now terror in the 21st. Now people ask, "Why pray those same words again and again without seeming to achieve anything?" However, just as theatre or the radio is more than just words, prayer must be a precursor to something more. Perhaps G-d is saying to us that He wants more than plain talk: that if we want to show that we are believers, a nation worthy of the ultimate deliverance and world peace, then the time has come to act. To be a Jew means to do Jewish things.

So as we stare at the shoreline of destiny and the waves of an uncertain future, so proud of our heritage, yet so very conscious of our fragility, let us be brave enough to walk forward, even if we only take small steps. It is not the distance that counts; it is the movement itself. © 2003 Rabbi E. Mirvis and United Synagogue Publications Ltd. - BriJNet

RABBI DOVID GREEN

Dvar Torah

And Pharaoh drew near and the Children of Israel lifted up their eyes and behold the Egyptians were coming after them and they were extremely afraid and the Children of Israel cried out to HASHEM. And they said to Moses, "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that that you have taken us to die in the desert?" (Shemos 14:10-11)

Were there not enough graves that you have taken us to die in the desert:: This sharp irony even in moments of deepest anxiety and despair is characteristic of the witty vein which is inherent in the Jewish race from their earliest beginnings. (Rabbi S.R. Hirsch)

The One Who sits in heaven will laugh... (Tehillim 2:4)

The tension could not have been higher. The entire Nation of Israel finds itself sandwiched between the Army of Pharaoh and the Red Sea. All hope seems

lost. They're trapped like rats. There is no real solution and in that darkest of situations the only escape or way of coping seems to be humor. Why? What is there about those pressing moments in life that satire becomes the only sane outlet? What is there in a joke that seems to offer at least some temporary relief in times of major crisis?

This looks like the earliest record in human history of "gallows humor"! What's that? Two Jews find themselves standing before a firing squad and the orders are being given, "Ready! Aim..." At that moment one of those about to be fired-upon begins to make a stir. While bound in chains he shouts, "This is not fair! You'll pay for this!" Then the other one jumps in and attempts to quiet his comrade telling him, "SHHHHH! Don't say any more! You'll only make them mad!"

Not only is a joke useful in response to danger but also prior to learning. The Talmud tells us that Rabbah, a master teacher would begin his Torah lessons with a joke. What are the common ingredients that make laughter a useful tool for emotional survival and intellectual growth? A young lady with her little daughter entered the food mart and promptly set her into one of those grocery carts. As they wove up and down the aisles the child started to reach with desperation for the items on the shelf. At each outbreak the mother would pause and exclaim ever so calmly, "Chani we only came here for a few items and we are going right home!"

As they passed by the cookie and the candy shelf the struggle became even more pronounced and the mother would again quietly declare, "Chani, we'll be home soon!" The final test was the impulse buying section near the checkout counter and here the child was near hysterical and again the mother's calm prevailed with another soothing speech, "Chani, we're going to the car and then home for dinner!"

In the parking lot, now, by the car a man approached and told the mother that he had been observing carefully all that had transpired in the store and how impressed he was with her parenting skills and how she had she had displayed grace under incredible pressure. He said, "Your tone was so soothing and it was just wonderful to see how nicely you spoke to your daughter Chani." At that moment she gave a look of surprise and responded to the kind man, "My daughter is not Chani. I'm Chani!"

There is usually an element of surprise in a joke that challenges a set of prior assumptions and forces us to shatter certain categorical boxes. This is a valuable exercise before entering the creative realm of Talmudic thought. Similarly, when we feel trapped and see no way out, the search for a solution and the need to make whole sense of a situation may lead to some outrageously absurd and even humorous conclusions as we desperately reconfigure the prevailing paradigms. And just when you think you've figured it

out the sea splits and we're made to think again! © 2004 Rabbi D. Green & Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**T**hen the chiefs of Edom became alarmed, the mighty ones of Moav were seized with trembling, all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away” (Shemos 15:15). This description of what happened to these nations is part of the song of praise sung to G-d by the Children of Israel after Egypt drowned. The Canaanites "melted away" because they knew that the destination of the Chosen People was the land they were living on. But what about the other nations? Rashi tells us that the Pelishtim (mentioned in 15:14) were "gripped by fear" because they had killed the sons of Efrayim who had left Egypt 30 years too early, and they were afraid of retribution. Moav and Edom, though, "had nothing to fear, since they (the Children of Israel) were not going to them" to conquer their land. Rather, they were distressed at the success the Nation of Israel was experiencing.

Rashi's source, the Mechilta (Beshalach, Hashira 9), "proves" that these two nations (three if you count Amon) had nothing to fear by quoting explicit commands given to Moshe not to attack Edom (Devarim 2:4-5), Moav (2:9) or Amon (2:19). However, as the commentators point out, these commands were given in the 40th year in the desert, while the song of praise was sung right after leaving Egypt. How could these nations have known that the just-redeemed nation wasn't heading their way if the commandment not to attack them didn't come until 39 years later?

In his recently published "Machat Shel Yad" (Beshalach #7), Rabbi Yitzchok D. Frankel asks a more direct question. Elsewhere (Devarim 1:7) Rashi tells us that originally we would have conquered the land of Edom, Amon and Moav; it was only because of the sin of the "spies" (and perhaps the golden calf) that we only conquered seven of the ten nations (see Sifsay Chachamim). Had we been worthy, we would have conquered all ten right away, but instead we will only acquire the last three in the future (see Rashi on 2:5 and 19:8). Indeed, at Mt. Sinai, when Moshe is told what the boundaries of Israel would be (Shemos 23:31) it includes an area that was never part of Israel, as it is the boundaries that would have been had we not sinned, not the actual land that was conquered (see Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam). Being that at the time the Children of Israel crossed the Sea of Reeds, when they sang this song of praise, they still would have conquered the lands of Edom, Amon and Moav, how could Rashi (or the Mechilta) say that these nations could not have shared the same fear as Canaan? Shouldn't they have also been concerned that their lands would be taken over?

It is fascinating to me that although there is much discussion in the classical commentaries pertaining to the first issue, I have not seen any about the one that Rabbi Frankel raises. Nevertheless, by examining how the former is dealt with, perhaps we can apply at least some of it to the latter as well.

The Mizrahi references Rabbainu Tam, quoted by Tosfos on Bava Kama 38a (d"h Nasa Moshe), who places the verse regarding not attacking Moav earlier than indicated by its placement in the Torah. [The Talmud says that Moshe would have thought that Moav was included in the commandment to attack Midyan, so G-d had to explicitly exclude them; Tosfos asks why they had to be excluded now if Balak, the king of Moav, already knew that there was a prohibition against waging war with Moav and was only afraid of being plundered, to which Rabbeinu Tam answers that the commandment not to wage war with Moav did come earlier, so that Moshe would later know not to.] By stretching the amount of time earlier that this commandment was given (from earlier in the 40th year to right after the exodus from Egypt), the Mizrahi is able to explain how Moav (and Edom) already knew that their land was safe. Aside from this being contradicted by the sources that indicate that at this point these lands would have in fact been conquered, several commentators (e.g. the Taz) have a hard time accepting that the commandment not to attack Edom and Moav would come so many years before they were relevant. The Netziv (in his commentary on the Mechilta) suggests that these nations had a tradition from their ancestors (going back to Avraham) that their lands were safe, and that the verses being used as a proof-text aren't the basis for their feeling safe, only to show that they were justified in feeling secure. Although this addresses the Taz' concern, it does not account for the fact had they really should have been concerned, since the nation hadn't sinned yet and might still be conquering their land.

The Maharal asks a question that runs counter to the Midrash referenced by Tosfos, wondering how Rashi (or the Mechilta) could say that Moav already knew that they wouldn't be attacked if Balak hired Bilaam precisely because he was afraid they would be. He explains the Mechilta to mean only that they were less afraid than Canaan, as in order to facilitate the conquering of their land, G-d had placed an extreme amount of fear in the people to be conquered (as evidenced by what Rachav told the spies that Yehoshua had sent). Since (because of the sins of the golden calf and the spies) Edom and Moav were not going to be conquered, there was no reason for G-d to make them give them this extra amount of fear. If this was the fear that the Mechilta is referring to, we can understand why the verses were quoted (to prove that there was no need to instill it in them). Why would the nations of Edom and Moav being singled out, if their

level of fear was actually less? Because of this other factor, being distressed at Israel's success.

While this approach can theoretically be applied to answer our questions as well, the wording of Rashi and the Mechilta do not really fit with it that well.

The Mirkeves Hamishneh (a commentary on the Mechilta) suggests two possible answers to explain applying verses from the 40th year so many years earlier, as does the Nachalas Yaakov. The former's first approach and the latter's second approach both mirror the approach of the Be'er Basadeh (as does the Netziv's on Chumash), whose explanation (given below) is a bit more complete. The Nachalas Yaakov's first approach is similar to that of the Mizrahi, while the Mirkeves Hamishneh's second approach explains "the chiefs of Edom and the mighty of Moav" to refer to their administering angels in heaven, who knew what was written in the Torah and therefore knew that the commandments not to attack their people would eventually be given, so were only bothered by Israel's success. However, the simple understanding of the verses is that it refers to the human inhabitants of Edom and Moav, and it would be difficult to explain the plural ("chiefs" and "mighty ones") that way if each nation has but one administering angel (although it is theoretically possible that each human "chief" had a corresponding angel, and that Amon and Moav each had their own despite Amon being included in the verse's use of "Moav").

Based on the dual wording in verse 13, the Be'er Basadeh says that there is a dual track being sung about in this part of the "Shira." "With Your kindness You led, this nation did You redeem" refers to the events that had just happened, while "with Your might You guided [them] to Your holy dwelling place" refers to leading the nation into Israel (and, according to Targum Yonasan, to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem). The reaction of the nations (the Be'er Basadeh continues) is similarly split into two groups, with "the nations heard [about the exodus and the splitting of the sea] and shuddered, fear gripped those who live in Palestine (i.e. the Pelishtim, not to be confused with Canaan, where the Canaanim lived, which is modern-day Israel) happening at the time the song was sung, and "then (i.e. in the future), the chiefs of Edom will have become alarmed, the mighty ones of Moav will be seized with trembling, all the inhabitants of Canaan will have melted away" occurring when the actual conquest is about to take place. (The Ohr Hachayim also says there is a dual track, with the "future" referring to the time of Moshiach, may it be soon.) If the reaction of Edom and Moav occurred "then," after the sin of the golden calf and the spies, there is no contradiction between what could have been and what actually was.

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