

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd [the midwives] didn’t do as the king of Egypt had told them, and they caused the boys to live.” Despite being commanded explicitly by Pharaoh to kill any infant boy as he is being born (Shemos 1:16), the midwives defied this royal order (1:17). Chazal (quoted by Rashi) address the seemingly superfluous double-wording of “not listening” and “causing the infant boys to live” by telling us that not only didn’t they kill any babies, but they fed them as well. When Pharaoh questioned their insubordination, they said they didn’t have a chance to kill the infants, as “the Hebrew women give birth before the midwives arrive” (1:19). However, if their insubordination included feeding these infants after they were born, how did not being there to prevent the infants from being born explain their behavior after the birth? Pharaoh had challenged them on both accounts, asking them “why did you do this thing,” then adding, “and you sustained the boys” (1:18). Even if “this thing” refers to not killing the male infants (in which case we need to explain why he called it “doing something” rather than “not doing” it), the second expression uses the identical wording that, Chazal tell us, refers to feeding them. If “sustaining the boys” (“causing them to live”) in verse 17 refers to feeding them, then that same term in verse 18 must also refer to providing them with sustenance. And since Pharaoh was also upset at the midwives for feeding the infants (and/or their mothers), how did they explain this aspect of their insubordination if their excuse for not killing the babies won’t explain their feeding them?

Additionally, if the midwives were only needed after the child was born, why didn’t they tell this to Pharaoh right away? “Sorry, Pharaoh, we can’t kill any infants as they are being born because the Hebrew women give birth before we get there.” How did he accept their reason for not killing any infants if, when he gave them these instructions, they would have had to already know that they are never there in time to help deliver any children?

Bechor Shor is among the meforshim (commentators) that say that although originally the midwives were called to help deliver the babies, since the Hebrew women were knowledgeable about how to deliver babies, they sensed that things were no longer being done properly, and stopped calling them. (Toldos

Yitzchok says that merely being summoned to the king raised enough suspicion that they were no longer called.) Although this answers our second question, it not only doesn’t answer our first question, it undermines it; if the midwives weren’t called anymore, they wouldn’t be around to feed the newborn children (or their mothers) either. It is possible that the midwives were called after the babies were born, but it is difficult to understand why they would call them at all if they suspected foul play. Bechor Shor himself, on the next verse, implies that the midwives were called to help afterwards. Nevertheless, even if the first question isn’t being undermined, it certainly isn’t being addressed.

Abarbanel doesn’t address the second issue, but does explain how not being there for the delivery answered Pharaoh’s question of why they helped afterwards. He suggests that they denied helping them, as Hebrew women know how to take care of themselves and don’t need midwives for that either. (The midwives only purpose, it would seem, was in cases of emergency.) The Malbim says that since they could have, and would have, done these things to help themselves, the only difference not helping them would make would be to raise suspicion of foul play. Maharil Diskin says that since they weren’t needed to help deliver the children, if they didn’t help even after the child was born, there would be no reason to call them at all. Tosefes Beracha explains that Pharaoh never forbade them from helping afterwards, only from helping them give birth (see Maharsha on Sanhedrin 57b). Once they gave birth on their own, nothing the midwives did went against Pharaoh’s instructions. (A similar approach is suggested by Rabbi Peretz Steinberg, shlita.) However, if the only instructions were about what to do before/during birth, why did Pharaoh even complain about what they did after the child was born?

Taz and B’er BaSadeh suggest that the expression “and they/you caused the boys to live” does not mean the same thing in the two verses. However, since it is doubtful that Pharaoh spoke Hebrew, it is highly unlikely that the Torah would translate his Egyptian words into the same Hebrew words used to tell us that they also fed the children (and/or their mothers) if that’s not what he was accusing them of doing.

Or Hachayim suggests that the midwives answered that they were bringing provisions to the mothers before they gave birth, hoping that by treating them well they would earn their trust and be asked to deliver their babies. However, because the mothers had

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already given birth by the time they got there, and they couldn't just take back the provisions they brought, they had to leave them there even after the babies were born. I don't quite understand how this could satisfy Pharaoh (even if they only started bringing provisions after they were told to kill the male newborn), as the midwives should have been able to adjust, and bring the provisions earlier. (It's one thing to say they aren't called in early enough to help deliver the children, but quite another to claim they were trying to get there earlier, even before being called, but were never early enough.)

Pharaoh gave them two sets of instructions. First he told them to kill the male babies as they were being born, then he told them to let the female babies survive. There is some discussion as to what Pharaoh meant by this second instruction, as by only telling them to kill the baby if it is a boy, he obviously does not want them to kill it if it is a girl. Shemos Rabbah (1:14) explains Pharaoh's instructions this way: "If it is a male, kill it, and if it is a female, don't kill it; instead if it lives, it lives, and if it dies it dies." In other words, even though they didn't have to (or weren't allowed to) kill the females, they weren't allowed to help it survive either; even if they could have saved it, they had to let it die instead. The males they had to actively kill, while the females that couldn't actively save.

There were therefore three aspects to the midwives' insubordination; they didn't kill the males, they saved the females that wouldn't have otherwise survived, and they fed the male (and female) babies (either directly, or by feeding their mothers). The latter two are both included in the expression "and they sustained the children" (or "and they caused the children to live"). Although only the first two acts of insubordination went against Pharaoh's explicit words, he challenged them on all three, including the latter two in the same expression. The midwives response, however, did not address why they disobeyed (or how they could). Rather, they either pretended they had misunderstood his instructions, or (if there was a language barrier) had misunderstand his instructions. They thought (or pretended to think) that Pharaoh's instructions weren't to kill the males (how could he even suggest such a thing!), but to not actively save them, letting them die instead (which were his instructions for females). And since Pharaoh was contrasting

(passively) letting the boys die with treating the girls better, then he must have meant that they should actively save those girls that needed help.

There was no reason to tell Pharaoh right away that the Hebrew women don't need them to deliver healthy babies, as they didn't think (or pretended they didn't think) this was relevant to Pharaoh's instructions. When Pharaoh called them back to ask them what they had done (as opposed to what they didn't do), he was referring to their saving those females that would have otherwise died, and to feeding the children/mothers afterwards. Upon realizing (or pretending they first realized) what Pharaoh really wanted them to do, they responded that it was impossible to kill any children during birth, as the Hebrew mothers deliver before the midwives arrive. Since they had misunderstood Pharaoh's instructions, he realized that they were not guilty of insubordination, as they thought he wanted them to take care of the children that would have survived anyway, and that since the midwives weren't at the delivery, there was no point in reissuing his original (and now clarified) instructions. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

After being raised in the Egyptian palace, Moshe (Moses) goes into the field and sees an Egyptian smiting a Jew. In the words of the Torah, "He looked this way and that way, and when he saw there was no man (ish) he smote the Egyptian." (Exodus 2:12)

Taken literally, it seems that Moshe looked to see if anyone was watching. With the coast clear, Moshe defends the Jew. But this interpretation is difficult because in the midst of a busy working field, it's doubtful that no one was there.

The Netziv (Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 18th Century in his Ha'amek Davar) reads it differently. In his view, Moshe, seeing a Jew beaten, looked to see if any Egyptian would stand up for him. Moshe looks this way and that way, but sees no one who seems to care. In the absence of Egyptian or worldly justice, Moshe acted. Things are not so different today. All too frequently, the world is silent as Jews are attacked.

Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabalah (Rav Ya'akov Zvi Mecklenberg, 19th century) has another take. Moshe knew that no Egyptian would come forward. He looked, however, to see whether any Jew would care enough to save his own brother. When no Jew did, Moshe killed the Egyptian. Once again, this dynamic plays out today. Tragically, too often, Jews don't respond to the suffering of their fellow Jews.

There is another way to look at it. Moshe was raised in an Egyptian home, but nursed by his biological Jewish mother. As a consequence, Moshe was always unsure who he really was. When seeing an Egyptian smiting a Jew, he looked within himself to ascertain

whether he should help the Egyptian or defend the Jew? The meaning of, "he looked this way and that way," is that he looked within himself to see who he really was, Egyptian or Jewish.

When he fully grasps that he had not firmly established his identity, he makes a decision—he smites the Egyptian, symbolically eliminating a part of himself declaring unequivocally that he was a Jew.

The Talmud tells of an aging man who in a polygamous society decides to marry a second younger wife. Both wives vie for his affection. "You're graying," said his wife of many years. "Why not age maturely?" As she speaks, she plucks his black hair and says, "Look in the mirror and you'll see you're all gray." The younger wife, not to be denied, declares, "You're old in age but young in vigor." As she speaks she plucks out his gray hair, and tells him, "Look into the mirror and you'll see your hair is all black." In the end, looking into the mirror, the man finds himself absolutely bald.

At a certain point it's crucial for each of us to stop wavering and to stand up and identify ourselves boldly and clearly. When we find ourselves in a place where there is no person (ish) as so many of us often do it's crucial that each of us step in as Moshe did to make the difference. To paraphrase our rabbis, in a place where there is no ish, struggle to be one. (Ethics 2:6) ©2010 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.

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

I used to say, only half in jest, that the proof that Moses was greatest of the prophets was that when G-d asked him to lead the Jewish people, he refused four times. Who am I to lead? They will not believe in me. I am not a man of words. Please send someone else.

It is as if Moses knew with uncanny precision what he would be letting himself in for. Somehow he sensed in advance that it may be hard to be a Jew, but to be a leader of Jews is almost impossible.

How did Moses know this? The answer lies many years back in his youth. It was then when, having grown up, he went out to see his people for the first time. He saw them enslaved, being forced into heavy labour.

He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He intervened and saved his life. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting, and again he intervened. This time the man he stopped said to him, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?"

Note that Moses had not yet even thought of being a leader and already his leadership was being challenged. And these are the first recorded words spoken to Moses by a fellow Jew. That was his reward for saving the life of an Israelite the day before.

And though G-d persuaded Moses, or ordered him, to lead, it never ceased to be difficult, and often demoralising. In Devarim, he recalls the time when he said: "How can I myself bear your problems, your burdens and your disputes all by myself" (Deut. 1:12). And in Behaalotecha, he suffers what can only be called a breakdown: He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? . . . I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin." (Num. 11: 11-15)

And this was said, don't forget, by the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Why are Jews almost impossible to lead?

The answer was given by the greatest rebel against Moses' leadership, Korach. Listen carefully to what he and his associates say: They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord assembly?" (Num. 16: 3)

Korach's motives were wrong. He spoke like a democrat but what he wanted was to be an autocrat. He wanted to be a leader himself. But there is a hint in his words of what is at stake.

Jews are a nation of strong individuals. "The whole community is holy, every one of them." They always were. They still are. That is their strength and their weakness. There were times when they found it difficult to serve G-d. But they certainly would not serve anyone less. They were the "stiff-necked" people, and people with stiff necks find it hard to bow down.

The prophets would not bow down to kings. Mordechai would not bow down to Haman. The Maccabees would not bow down to the Greeks. Their successors would not bow down to the Romans. Jews are fiercely individualistic. At times this makes them unconquerable. It also makes them almost ungovernable, almost impossible to lead.

That is what Moses discovered in his youth when, trying to help his people, their first response was to say, "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?" That is why he was so hesitant to take on the challenge of leadership, and why he refused four times.

There has been much debate in British and American Jewry recently about whether there should be an agreed collective stance of unconditional support for the state and government of Israel or whether our public position should reflect the deep differences that exist among Jews today, within Israel or outside.

My view is that Israel needs our support at this critical time. But the debate that has taken place is superfluous. Jews are a nation of strong individuals who, with rare historic exceptions, never agreed about anything. That makes them unleadable; it also makes them unconquerable. The good news and the bad go hand in hand. And if, as we believe, G-d loved and still loves this people despite all its faults, may we do less?

Thank G-d for all the things that cost nothing and are worth everything. Credo - the Times - December 2009

I thank Him for the love that has filled our home for so many years. Life is never easy. We've had our share of pain. But through it all we discovered the love that brings new life into the world, allowing us to share in the miracle of birth and the joy of seeing our children grow.

I thank Him for the blessing of grandchildren. I don't know why it is I was so surprised by joy, but in their company my constant thought is that I didn't know that life could be that good.

I thank Him for the friends who stood by us in tough times, for the mentors who believed in me more than I believed in myself, and for the teachers who encouraged me to think and question, teaching me the difference between truth and mere intellectual fashion.

I thank him for those rare souls who lift us when we are laid low by the sheer envy and malice by which some people poison their lives and the lives of others. I thank Him for the people I meet every day who light up the world with simple gestures of humanity and decency. I thank Him for the fragments of light he has scattered in so many lives, in the kindness of strangers and the unexpected touch of souls across the boundaries that once divided people and made them fearful of one another.

I thank Him for the gift of being born a Jew, despite all the persecutions visited on our people, often in the name of the same G-d my ancestors worshipped and to whom they dedicated their lives. I thank Him for the transformation of the relationship between Jews and Christians that has happened in my lifetime, and for the gift of coming to know people from so many different faiths, each of which has given something utterly unique to humanity.

I thank Him for Beethoven's late quartets and Shakespeare's prose and Rembrandt's portraits. Rabbi Abraham Kook, chief rabbi of what was then Palestine, once said that G-d took some of the light of the first day of creation and gave it to Rembrandt who put it into his paintings. I thank Him for the first cup of coffee in the morning and the I-pod I've almost learned how to use (another year or two should do it), for Morgan Freeman's voice and Woody Allen's humour, for 2B pencils and wide-lined notepads, for bookshops and a forgiving wife.

I thank Him for the atheists and agnostics who keep believers from believing the unbelievable, forcing

us to prove our faith by the beauty and grace we bring into the world. I thank him for all the defeats and failures that make leadership so difficult, because the hard things are the only ones worth doing, and because all genuine achievement involves taking risks, making mistakes, and never giving up.

I thank Him for the gift of faith, which taught me to see the dazzling goodness and grace that surround us if only we open our eyes and minds. I thank Him for helping me understand that faith is not certainty but the courage to live with uncertainty; not a destination but the journey itself. I thank Him for allowing me to thank Him, for without gratitude there is no happiness, only the fleeting distraction of passing pleasures that grow ever less consequential with the passing years.

Oscar Wilde was right when he defined a cynic as one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. The richer Britain became, the more cynical it grew. It put its faith in a financial house of cards. It looked at house prices and thought itself rich. It created the religion of shopping, whose original sin was not having this year's model or must-have, and whose salvation lay in spending money you don't have, to buy things you don't need, for the sake of a happiness that doesn't last.

Rarely was a faith more seductive or addictive. The wake-up call, which is what the recession is, came just in time. So next year, let's enjoy joy itself, which unlike its gift-wrapped, instantly obsolete substitutes, is given freely to all those who bid it welcome. ©2010 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah leaves us basically unprepared for its description of the events that are recorded for us in this week's parsha. When we last left the family of Israel at the conclusion of last week's parsha of Vayechi, the Jews found themselves comfortable, affluent, protected and settled well in the land of Goshen.

The Torah does not describe to us the process by which this situation so radically changed into becoming a slave state for the Jews. It only tells us of a new king who didn't know Yosef and, for reasons not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, became a hater and persecutor of the Jews.

The Torah seems to indicate that this is almost a natural state of affairs -- to be expected. The Egyptian exile begins on a high note, deteriorates into abject sorrow and attempted genocide and ends with miraculous redemption. The Torah does not dwell upon any motives for the occurrence of this pattern of events. What did the Jews do wrong? Why was the Pharaoh such a hater? What were the economic or social factors of the time that allowed for such a dramatic worsening of the Jewish position in Egypt?

The Torah addresses none of these issues. It is almost as if the Torah wishes us to understand that these things happen blindly in human history. And, particularly in Jewish history, that the attempts of historians and sociologists to explain these irrational events and behavior patterns are really useless.

As has been often pointed out, all subsequent Jewish exiles -- Babylonia, Spain, France, Germany, Eastern Europe, the Moslem Middle East -- all seem to eerily conform to this original Egyptian template. As usual the Torah leaves us with more questions than it provides answers for. In effect, that is why the Torah is called the book of human life.

We are also unprepared to recognize the savior of Israel in the person of Moses. We are told how he was miraculously saved from the crocodiles of the Nile by the daughter of the Pharaoh and raised in the royal court. He sympathizes with the brutalized Jewish slaves, defends them, and is forced to flee from Egypt.

We hear nothing regarding Moses for the next sixty years until he reemerges as a shepherd in Midian, married to the daughter of Yitro, the local religious chief who, at this time, is still a pagan. Hardly the resume that one would expect for the leader of Israel, the greatest of all prophets and the teacher of all human kind.

Where did his holiness and greatness stem from, how was it developed, who were his mentors and what were his experiences over those long decades of separation from his people? The Torah gives us no clue or answer to these questions. It effectively points out that greatness oftentimes comes from unexpected sources and from people and leaders who operate outside of the usual establishment circles.

All of life is a mystery and certainly the Jewish story remains in its base an inexplicable one. This therefore sets the stage for everything else that will now follow in the Torah. It is why the Jewish people, when accepting the Torah pledge to G-d that "we will do and then perhaps try to understand,"

if we wish to understand first we will never come to do. The Divine hand guides us but it is never subject to our rational thoughts and explanations. ©2010 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

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**M**oses wished to dwell with the man [Jethro]”(Exodus 2:21) Moses is the greatest leader the Israelites have ever experienced – or will ever experience. He gave his people two most precious gifts: He freed them from Egyptian servitude, and he infused them with a Divine mission and legal code, challenging them to become a holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers. Whose

influence contributed to the development of this outstanding liberator-legalist? Undoubtedly, Yochebed and Amram, his biological parents from the tribe of Levi, taught Moses the traditions of the covenantal family of Abraham, the fundamental teachings of ethical monotheism, with its emphasis on compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Whatever he received from them, however, was limited to his early years, since as soon as he was weaned, he was taken to Pharaoh's palace by his adoptive mother, Princess Bitya.

This daughter of Pharaoh must have made a tremendous impression on him. She risked her life to save him, drawing him out of the River Nile in defiance of her father's orders that every male Hebrew child be drowned there. She then nurtured him during his formative years. Surely, it was she who served as his model when he reached out to his Hebrew brethren and killed the Egyptian task-master who was striking a Hebrew slave, thereby forsaking the plush, playboy life which could have been his in Pharaoh's palace.

But we dare not forget yet another role model for Moses, Jethro, the priest-sheikh of Midian, his father-in-law and mentor for 60 years. The Biblical narrative provides only the barest outline of how Moses got to Midian, but Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, in his superb commentary, "Moses: Envoy of G-d, Envoy of His People" draws on the Midrash to flesh out the details. The Bible records that "on the second day" - the day after this Prince of Egypt killed the Egyptian - Moses went out to his people, and found two Hebrews fighting between themselves. Why did Moses go out on the second day? Rabbi Lichtenstein suggests that he hoped to inspire the slaves with his fervor for freedom, inciting a rebellion against the Egyptian taskmasters. Instead, he found dissension within the Hebrew ranks and resentment and derision towards him for leading this initiative (Exodus 2:13, 14).

Disappointed by the Hebrews, the Egyptians and perhaps by humanity in general, frustrated, and frightened lest he be killed by the Egyptian authorities, Moses fled to Midian. Why Midian, a city in the midst of a great desert? Perhaps the attraction was not so much the place, or even the shepherdess he rescued there, but rather Zipporah's father, priest-sheikh Jethro. This man was a seeker after G-d, a spiritual personality who deliberately chose to live in an isolated area ideal for meditation, working as a shepherd and living in tune with nature. Indeed, when Jethro met Moses many years later, after the splitting of the Reed Sea, he declared, "Now I know that JHVH is greater than all the G-ds" (Shemot 18:11). Apparently, he had investigated all the G-ds himself.

Now, Moses yearns to spend significant time in search for and in the company of G-d. He spends 60 years in the desert, developing his spiritual energies, his "active intellect." As the Bible tells us, "Moses wished to [or swore to, according to Rashi] dwell with the person

[Jethro], and he [Jethro] gave Zipporah his daughter [as wife] to Moses" (Ex. 2:21). "And Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, Priest of Midian, and he led the sheep far away into the desert; and he came to the Mountain of the Lord, to Horeb." Moses is searching, Moses is praying, Moses is meditating. Moses is near Horeb, at Sinai. Then Moses has a Divine revelation, an angel of the Lord in a blazing spark at the heart of fire in the midst of a sneh (thorn bush) at Sinai. The thorn bush is glowing red with fire, but it is not being consumed. This prickly bush symbolizes the ungrateful nation of Israel, lowly slaves in Egypt's social pecking order, but still passionately burning with the fiery message of G-d. Israel is suffering, but it is also basking in its eternal covenant with G-d. And G-d expects Moses to suffer the thorn pricks and lead the bush to Sinai and beyond.

The Almighty describes Himself as "I will be who I will be," as the G-d of history. He is the G-d who demands people in general, Israel in particular, and most especially of Moses, to be His partners in redeeming the world. The lowly sneh must rise to the exalted heights of Sinai, the word and fire of G-d must transform an unfriendly and difficult desert into a peaceful and secure universe.

G-d is telling Moses to assume his rightful place in world history, to act rather than to meditate. "Know and be informed about Me that I am the Lord who does loving-kindness, justice and compassionate righteousness on earth; it is these things that I want, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:24, and Maimonides, at the end of his Guide for the Perplexed). ©2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

The scene has always fascinated thinkers, artists and people from every walk of life. Moses stands in the distance looking up in awe at the mountaintop where a bush is burning vigorously -- without being consumed! Suddenly, the voice of Hashem speaks to him from amidst this wondrous spectacle, commanding him to remove his shoes and come nearer. This is the setting in which Moses is appointed as the divine messenger to go down to Egypt and lead the Jewish people to freedom.

But why did Hashem choose to communicate through such a spectacular manifestation as an indestructible burning bush? Why didn't He address Moses directly as He would any other prophet? And why did He command Moses to remove his shoes before coming near?

The commentators explain that, although he had fled Egypt many years before, Moses never forgot the plight of his unfortunate Jewish brothers and sisters in Egyptian bondage. Even as he lived in the relative serenity of Midian, he could find no peace. His mind

was filled with images of Jews struggling under heavy burdens of bricks and cement, suffering the tongue-lashes and whiplashes of their Egyptian taskmasters. What would happen to the Jewish people? How long would they have to suffer such terrible agonies? These questions gave Moses no rest. He himself may have been in Midian, but his heart was enslaved with his people amidst the bricks and mortar of Egypt.

Hashem provided the answers to his questions in the most vivid form through the metaphor of the burning bush. The bush sitting alone atop a mountain in the wilderness symbolized the Jewish people trapped in the desperate desolation of exile and enslavement, stripped of their physical freedom and their spiritual greatness. The fire symbolized the terrible suffering of the Jewish people. But fire is an ambivalent thing. It is a destroyer, but it can also give warmth and light. A fire is raging inside this bush, Hashem was telling Moses, but there is another aspect to this fire which you cannot see. The Divine Presence resides within this very fire. The terrible ordeal which this fire represents will not destroy the Jewish people. On the contrary, it is a crucible which will forge them into a great people, and cement an everlasting bond between Myself and them, My chosen people. It will make them strong spiritually, and it will lead on the golden path of their destiny to the Giving of the Torah.

But why was it so difficult for Moses to view the suffering and afflictions of exile as an indispensable stage in Hashem's master plan?

The answer to this question, the commentators explain, was implicit in Hashem's command that Moses remove his shoes. Shoes empower and inhibit us at the same time. They help us walk on all types of terrain, but in order to accomplish this, they prevent the toes from exercising their sense of touch. The physical aspect of a person has a similar effect on him. It allows his soul to function in the physical world, but in doing so, it obscures his spiritual perception. The exile might seem inexplicable to Moses because he was "wearing his shoes," so to speak, because he was viewing it through the eyes of a mortal.

"Remove your shoes!" Hashem commanded him. Transcend your physical existence! Look with the spiritual eyes of the pure soul! Behold, the burning bush is not consumed! The promise symbolized by the burning bush -- that the loving hands of Hashem are always there under the raging currents of our history -- has been our consolation for thousands of years. Even in the best of times, we are in need of that consolation. Even as we enjoy prosperity and status in the Diaspora, our holy Temple, the glorious crown jewel of our nation, still lies in ruins, and our people are dispersed to the far corners of the earth. Even as we enjoy an uneasy respite in this seemingly endless exile, we still suffer physical persecution and spiritual deprivation. But if we look past our "shoes," we, too, will sense the Divine

Presence among us. We, too, will discern the light that shines even in the densest darkness. ©2010 Rabbi N. Reich and torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah displays the true potential of the Jewish people and their unlimited ability. The prophet Yeshaya opens with a descriptive expression about the Jewish exile and exodus from Egypt. He states, "Those who are coming will strike roots as Yaakov and will blossom and bud as Yisroel." (27:6) These words refer to the drastic contradistinction between the Jewish people who struck roots in Egypt and those who merited the exodus. Yeshaya says that they entered with the identity of Yaakov and left as Yisroel. This change of name typified the spiritual ascent of the Jewish people which began from the downtrodden status of the galus Jew, Yaakov, and resulted with the supreme status of Yisroel. These names truly reflect the incredible spiritual growth of the Jewish people who developed from a nearly assimilated group rising to the lofty kingdom of priests.

In this week's parsha the S'forno reveals to us a significant dimension regarding the Jewish people's conduct in Egypt. In describing the Jewish population explosion in Egypt the Torah says, "And the children of Israel were fruitful and multiplied in swarms and proliferated and became overpowering in excessive measures." (Sh'mos 1:7) The S'forno takes note of this peculiar expression "multiplying in swarms" which seems to compare the Jewish people to swarms of insects and crawling creatures. He explains that this comparison refers to the prevalent mannerisms of the Jewish people in those days. They fell prey to Egyptian culture and were transformed into of a free thinking, undisciplined race. This comment reflects the words of Chazal which indicate that during the early years in Egypt the Jews roamed the streets of Egypt. They preoccupied themselves with Egyptian practices and freely participated in Egypt's immoral style of amusement and enjoyment.

The S'forno, in his commentary to previous passages, informs us that this severe spiritual descent transpired only after the passing of the initial pious group who entered Egypt. Once the devout were out of sight, the Jewish people began viewing Egypt as their homeland and became acclimated to her alien culture. This, however, was the description of their earliest era. Miraculously, after years of heavy servitude and torturous slavery, this same Jewish people emerged as a nation of sanctity and dignity, each worthy of the highest level of prophecy. At this point they qualified for the revelation of Hashem at Har Sinai and were temporarily elevated to the spiritual level of the angels. The prophet Yeshaya reflects upon this early experience to demonstrate the Jewish people's true

potential. From it we learn that even after digressing for an extended period to the level of swarming creatures the Jewish people's potential remained that of the angels themselves.

The prophet Yeshaya continues and predicts that this pattern will reoccur amongst the Jewish nation. He begins with sharp words of reprimand to the ten tribes of Israel and calls upon them to remove every trace of idolatry from their kingdom. He warns them and says, "Woe unto you, crown of arrogance; drunkards of Efraim. The splendor of your glory will be likened to a withering bud." (28:1) This refers to the imminent experience of destruction and exile soon to befall the ten tribes. Yeshaya then continues and turns to the remaining Jewish segment, the Judean kingdom, and blames them for following a similar path. To them Yeshaya says, "And they too were negligent through wine and strayed through intoxication...for all of their tables were replete with refuse without any remaining space." (27:7,8) These passages refer to the sinful plunge of the Judean empire into idolatry. Although this repulsive practice originated from the ten tribes it eventually took hold amongst the Judean kingdom and they also seriously strayed from the proper path.

But, Yeshaya inserts here some encouraging words and says, "On that day Hashem will be a crown of splendor and a diadem of glory for the remnant of His people." (28:5) The Radak (ad loc.) explains Yeshaya's reason for expressing these comforting words in the midst of his heavy rebuke. Radak sees these words as a reference to the Judean kingdom's future fortune, meriting one of the greatest miracles in Jewish history. In their near future, the mighty King Sanherev would attempt to engage in a heavy war against the Jewish people. In response to this Hashem would perform an awesome miracle and rescue His people without suffering one casualty. This miracle would result from an unprecedented campaign by King Chizkiyahu to proliferate Torah knowledge throughout the Judean kingdom. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 94b) records that during this illustrious era every single person -- man or woman, boy or girl -- was proficient in the most complicated laws of ritual cleanliness. This very same kingdom who, one generation earlier was so heavily involved in idolatry, would soon cleanse itself from all sin and become totally immersed in Torah study and rituals. Through this enormous comeback, the prophet demonstrated the unlimited potential of the Jewish people. Although they may seriously digress in their spiritual ways, they do remain capable of a perfect reversal. Yeshaya stressed the phenomena that over the span of but one generation the Jewish people went from total spiritual bankruptcy to almost unprecedented perfection, meriting one of the greatest miracles ever seen.

In this spirit, Yeshaya brings the haftorah to a close and relays Hashem's heartwarming statement to our patriarch Yaakov. Hashem says, "Now, don't be

embarrassed Yaakov, and don't blush from shame because when your children will see My hand in their midst they will sanctify My name... and exalt the Hashem of Israel." (29: 22, 23) The undertone here is that in the future the Jewish people will severely stray from the proper path. Their actions will be so inexcusable that their beloved patriarch Yaakov will be embarrassed and ashamed of them. But Hashem reminds Yaakov to focus on the unlimited potential of his children, the Jewish people. Although they can and do stray from the path, this is only when Hashem conceals Himself from them. In spiritual darkness, they lose sight of true values and, being amongst the nations of the world, adopt foreign values and customs. But the moment Hashem returns to them with His open hand, they will regain their true status of greatness. They will quickly return to Hashem and follow His perfect ways, sanctifying and exalting Him with their every action. Hashem told our patriarch Yaakov to overlook his children's present spiritual level and to focus on their potential greatness. The time will surely arrive when Yaakov, after all the long, hard years of servitude and exile will merit Hashem's revelation. Undoubtedly the response to this will be an immediate return to the lofty levels of spirituality and Yaakov, now Yisroel, will praise and glorify Hashem's name for eternity. ©2010 Rabbi D. Siegel and Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we begin the Sefer {Book} of Shmos--Names. "V'aileh Shmos Bnei Yisroel {And these were the names of the Children of Israel} that went down to Mitzrayim {Egypt}. [1:1]"

The Ramban explains the focus of the first two Books of the Torah and the flow from Breishis into Shmos. Breishis is the Sefer HaYetzirah--the Book of Creation. It contains the creation of the world and its inhabitants and the life-happenings of the Avos {the Patriarchs}. These occurrences were also a creation of sorts--a 'planting' process out from which sprouted all that would happen to their descendants.

With Shmos, the Torah begins to reveal that which resulted from the actions of the Avos. It is called the Book of Exile and Redemption. It begins with the very start of exile--those who descended to Mitzrayim, and concludes with the redemption--the Shchinah {Hashem's holy presence} filling the Mishkan {Sanctuary} and connecting to Bnei Yisroel.

As such, Sefer Breishis was the planting and Sefer Shmos, the sprouting. The Avos planted their abilities and strengths in their descendants and in Shmos this blossomed into redemption. The Shchinah connected to the descendants as it had to the Avos.

The word "ohr--light" was written five times by the Torah's depiction of the creation. The Medrash teaches that these five references correspond to the

five Books of the Torah. Hashem's proclamation of "Let there be light" corresponds to Sefer Breishis. The resulting "And there was light" corresponds to Sefer Shmos.

The Ohr Gedalyahu explains that the first was the Yetzirah {creation} of light--the creation of the light with which the Avos filled the world and planted within their descendants. The second was the blossoming of that light in their descendants after them.

We understand why the first Sefer is called Breishis--In the Beginning. It aptly describes the focus of the Sefer. Although our parsha is filled with Shmos {names}--the names of the Tribes, Moshe being named and the name of Hashem--the title Shmos doesn't seem to capture the essence of the Sefer. What is the connection between Shmos {Names} and Exile/Redemption? The Ohr Gedalyahu explains in the following way. The Medrash teaches that when Hashem created Adom Harishon {Adam, the first man} all of the animals were brought before him and he gave them names. In Lashon Hakodesh {the holy language, Hebrew} a name is not simply an agreed upon label that facilitates communication. Rather, it describes the essence and purpose of what something is. Adom, by naming the animals, exhibited an intuition and perception of the role that every animal was meant to play in the revelation of Hashem's glory in this world. A person's name describes his latent potential. His purpose in life is to bring those abilities to a state of realization. That his actions should be in sync with who he is.

The travails and hardships of the exile forced Bnei Yisroel to dig down deeply into themselves and find strengths that they didn't even know existed. Exile is compared to planting. The point when the seed seems to have completely decomposed is the point when the real growth can begin. That is the deeper understanding of the tremendous merit that Bnei Yisroel didn't change their names in Mitzrayim. They didn't lose that connection to who they really were and to that which the Avos had planted in them.

The Sefer is called Shmos--Names. "V'aileh Shmos Bnei Yisroel {And these were the names of the Children of Israel} that went down to Mitzrayim {Egypt}. [1:1]" A name is actually synonymous to exile and redemption. It represents the latent abilities one brings into the exile and it's the fruition of those abilities that will define redemption. The Ohr Gedalyahu goes on to explain that there is also a state of personal exile. When we are not using our abilities, our talents and that spark of G-dliness that is inside us, we are in exile. At the end of the Amidah prayer, each individual alludes to his own name and then recites the verse "Hashem tzuree v'go'a'lee--Hashem is my 'rock' and my redeemer." A plea for heavenly assistance in utilizing our abilities to bring honor to Hashem's name and to reach a state of personal redemption. ©2010 Rabbi Y. Ciner & Project Genesis, Inc.