

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

The Message of Mount Sinai

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Secondly, teachers must have the ability and the desire to always look for the "rose" in every child. There is always good in everyone and certainly in all our Jewish children.

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

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

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next generation of children. ©2007 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the former Principal of the Bess and Paul Sigal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Hebrew Academy of Atlantic County where together he served for over forty years. He and his wife D'vora recently made Aliya and are living in Allon Shvut. All comments are welcome at ravmordechai@aol.com

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

To gain insight into the unique leadership lesson of this week's parsha, I often ask an audience to perform a thought-experiment. Imagine you are the leader of a people that has suffered exile for more than two centuries, and has been enslaved and oppressed. Now, after a series of miracles, it is about to go free. You assemble them and rise to address them. They are waiting expectantly for your words. This is a defining moment they will never forget. What will you speak about?

Most people answer: freedom. That was Abraham Lincoln's decision in the Gettysburg Address when he invoked the memory of "a new nation, conceived in liberty," and looked forward to "a new birth of freedom." Some suggest that they would inspire the people by talking about the destination that lay ahead, the "land flowing with milk and honey." Yet others say they would warn the people of the dangers and challenges that they would encounter on what Nelson Mandela called "the long walk to freedom."

Any of these would have been the great speech of a great leader. Guided by G-d, Moses did none of these things. That is what made him a unique leader. If you examine the text in parshat Bo you will see that three times he reverted to the same theme: children, education and the distant future.

"And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses.'" (Ex. 12: 26-27)

"And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.'" (Ex. 13:8)

"And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us

out from Egypt, the house of bondage.'" (Ex. 13: 14)

It is one of the most counter-intuitive acts in the history of leadership. Moses did not speak about today or tomorrow. He spoke about the distant future and the duty of parents to educate their children. He even hinted -- as Jewish tradition understood -- that we should encourage our children to ask questions, so that the handing on of the Jewish heritage would be not a matter of rote learning but of active dialogue between parents and children.

So Jews became the only people in history to predicate their very survival on education. The most sacred duty of parents was to teach their children. Pesach itself became an ongoing seminar in the handing on of memory. Judaism became the religion whose heroes were teachers and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. The Mesopotamians built ziggurats. The Egyptians built pyramids. The Greeks built the Parthenon. The Romans built the Coliseum. Jews built schools. That is why they alone, of all the civilizations of the ancient world are still alive and strong, still continuing their ancestors' vocation, their heritage intact and undiminished.

Moses' insight was profound. He knew that you cannot change the world by externalities alone, by monumental architecture, or armies and empires, or the use of force and power. How many empires have come and gone while the human condition remains untransformed and unredeemed?

There is only one way to change the world, and that is by education. You have to teach children the importance of justice, righteousness, kindness and compassion. You have to teach them that freedom can only be sustained by the laws and habits of self-restraint. You have continually to remind them of the lessons of history, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt," because those who forget the bitterness of slavery eventually lose the commitment and courage to fight for freedom. And you have to empower children to ask, challenge and argue. You have to respect them if they are to respect the values you wish them to embrace.

This is a lesson most cultures still have not learned after more than three thousand years. Revolutions, protests and civil wars still take place, encouraging people to think that removing a tyrant or having a democratic election will end corruption, create freedom, and lead to justice and the rule of law -- and still people are surprised and disappointed when it does not happen. All that happens is a change of faces in the corridors of power.

In one of the great speeches of the twentieth century, a distinguished American justice, Judge Learned Hand, said: "I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law,

no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it." (The Spirit of Liberty" -- speech at "I Am an American Day" ceremony, Central Park, New York City, 21 May 1944.)

What G-d taught Moses was that the real challenge does not lie in gaining freedom; it lies in sustaining it, keeping the spirit of liberty alive in the hearts of successive generations. That can only be done through a sustained process of education. Nor is this something that can be delegated away to teachers and schools. Some of it has to take place within the family, at home, and with the sacred obligation that comes from religious duty. No one ever saw this more clearly than Moses, and only because of his teachings have Jews and Judaism survived.

What makes leaders great is that they think ahead, worrying not about tomorrow but about next year, or the next decade, or the next generation. In one of his finest speeches Robert F. Kennedy spoke of the power of leaders to transform the world when they have a clear vision of a possible future: "Some believe there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills -- against misery, against ignorance, or injustice and violence. Yet many of the world's great movements, of thought and action, have flowed from the work of a single man. A young monk began the Protestant reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth, and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and 32 year old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal. 'Give me a place to stand,' said Archimedes, 'and I will move the world.' These men moved the world, and so can we all." (The Kennedys: America's Front Page Family, 112)

Visionary leadership forms the text and texture of Judaism. It was the book of Proverbs that said, "Without a vision [chazon] the people perish." (Prov. 29: 18). That vision in the minds of the prophets was always of a long term future. G-d told Ezekiel that a prophet is a watchman, one who climbs to a high vantage-point and so can see the danger in the distance, before anyone else is aware of it at ground level (Ezek. 33: 1-6). The sages said, "Who is wise? One who sees the long-term consequences [ha-nolad]." (Tamid 32a) Two of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century, Churchill and Ben Gurion, were also distinguished historians. Knowing the past, they could anticipate the future. They were like chess masters who, because they have studied thousands of games, recognise almost immediately the dangers and possibilities in any configuration of the pieces on the board. They know what will happen if you make this move or that.

If you want to be a great leader in any field, from Prime Minister to parent, it is essential to think long-term. Never choose the easy option because it is simple or fast or yields immediate satisfaction. You will

pay a high price in the end.

Moses was the greatest leader because he thought further ahead than anyone else. He knew that real change in human behaviour is the work of many generations. Therefore we must place as our highest priority educating our children in our ideals so that what we begin they will continue until the world changes because we have changed. He knew that if you plan for a year, plant rice. If you plan for a decade, plant a tree. If you plan for posterity, educate a child. (A statement attributed to Confucius.) Moses' lesson, thirty-three centuries old, is still compelling today. ©2013 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**W**hen your children will say to you, 'What is this service to you?' You shall say, 'It is the Passover service to G-d.'”

Why does the author of the Haggada call the questioner in this sequence "the wicked child"? The reason that the Haggada itself emphasizes lies in the questioner's exclusion of himself from the family ritual when he asks, "What is this service to you?" The Haggada explains: "Saying 'you,' he excludes himself, and by doing so he denies a basic principle of our faith." For a Jew, it is considered "wicked" to exclude oneself from the Jewish ritual-familial experiences.

Also, in this instance, the child doesn't ask his parents anything; instead, he tells them: "...when your children shall say to you" (Ex. 12:26). An honest question reveals a willingness to learn, but the wicked child is not interested in answers - only in making statements.

How might we respond to such a child? The Bible itself gives one response: "It is the Passover service to G-d. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt [when he slew the Egyptian firstborn] and He saved our homes" (Ex. 12:27); the author of the Haggada gives another: "You shall cause his teeth to be on edge, and say to him, 'It is because of that which G-d did for me when I went out of Egypt'" (Ex.13:8).

Why the difference, and what is the specific message of each? The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893) teaches that the wicked child's statement reflects his belief that so many years after the original events there is no reason to retain such an old-fashioned and outmoded service. The biblical answer is that it is a Passover sacrifice to G-d, who saved our homes, and our families.

There are two central pillars in Judaism: family ties and Divine directions. Family has been an important Jewish value from the beginning of our history, when Abraham is told that he is distinguished and loved by G-d "so that he command his children and his family after him that they do righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). And when Pharaoh's servants agree to allow

Moses to leave Egypt - but only with the males - Moses and Aaron respond, "We shall go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters" (Ex. 10:9). It's a family affair.

Hence, the Bible tells this wicked child that the Passover sacrifice is a reminder of a Divine miracle that preserved the Jewish family. The Seder is precisely the kind of family ritual that is crucial for familial continuity.

The author of the Haggada cites a different verse: "When the Lord brings you to the land which He swore to your fathers to give to you... You shall tell your child on that day, saying, 'It is because of this [ritual] that G-d did [miracles] for me when I went out of Egypt'" (Ex. 13:5-8).

The key words here are "did for me." Passover teaches the two most important messages of Judaism: the inalienable right of every individual to be free and the injunction that we love the stranger because we were (unloved) strangers in Egypt. The continuity of the generations and the familial celebrations of crucial historical events demand that each Jew have the ability to transform past history into one's own existential and personal memory. The initial biblical answer emphasizes the importance of familial experiences for familial continuity; the author of the Haggada adds that without incorporating past into present there can be neither meaningful present nor anticipated future.

I am my past. Despite the fact that the wicked child has denied his roots, we dare not tear him out of the family. He may think that he wants to remove himself from historical continuity, but it's the task of his family to remind him that this celebration is an indelible part of his existential identity, that he is celebrating his own personal liberation.

The Haggada instructs us to set the teeth of the wicked child on edge. The phrase in Hebrew is "hakheh et shinav." It doesn't say "hakeh", which means to strike, to slap him in the teeth, but rather "hakheh," from the language of the prophet Ezekiel, "The fathers eat the sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. (Ezek. 18:2). The prophet is expressing the fundamental unfairness in the fact that the parents have sinned but their children are the ones who must suffer the pain of exile. Indeed, children do suffer for the sins of their parents - always. Anyone who comes from a difficult or dysfunctional home will bear the burden.

But just as the child has responsibility to his past, the parent has responsibility to the future. Are we certain that the wicked child's teeth are not set on edge because of the sour grapes that we, the parents, have eaten because we have not properly demonstrated the requisite love and passion for the beauty and the glory of our traditions? Have we been there to hear his questions when he was still ready to ask them and to listen to answers? Have we been the appropriate models for him to desire continuity within our family? The author of the Haggada subtly but forthrightly reminds both parents and children of their obligations to

each other, to past and to future. ©2013 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In this week's parsha the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt reaches one of its most climactic moments.

Pharaoh finally succumbs to the pressures of the plagues and to the demands of Moshe and of the G-d of Israel. The last three plagues that are discussed in detail in this week's parsha are those of the locusts, darkness and the slaying of the firstborn.

These plagues represent not only physical damages inflicted on the Egyptians but also, just as importantly, different psychological pressures that were exerted on Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The plague of locusts destroyed the Egyptian economy, or whatever was left of it after the previous seven plagues. Economic disaster always has far-reaching consequences. Sometimes those results can be very positive, such as the recovery of the United States from the Great Depression. Sometimes they are very negative, as the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s could not have occurred if it were not for the economic crisis that enveloped the Weimar Republic.

Here the economic crisis engendered by the plague of locusts brings Egypt to its knees, so that it is only the unreasoning stubbornness of Pharaoh that keeps the drama going. The next plague of darkness is one that affects the individual. Cooped up in one's home, unable to move about, blinded by darkness unmatched in human experience, the individual Egyptian is forced to come to terms with his or her participation in the enslavement of the Jewish people.

For many people, being alone with one's self is itself a type of plague. It causes one to realize one's mortality and to reassess one's behavior in life. This is not always a pleasant experience. Most of the time it is a very wrenching and painful one.

The final plague of the death of the firstborn Egyptians, aside from the personal pain and tragedy involved, spoke to the future of Egyptian society. Without children no society can endure - and especially children such as the firstborn, who are always meant to replace and carry on the work of their elders and previous generations. We all want to live in eternity and since we cannot do so physically we at least wish it to happen spiritually, emotionally and psychologically.

The plague that destroyed the Egyptian firstborn destroyed the hopes of eternity that were so central to Egyptian society. The tombs of the leaders of Egypt were always equipped with food and material goods to help these dead survive to the future. Even though this was a primitive expression of the hope for eternity it nevertheless powerfully represents to us the Egyptian mindset regarding such eternity.

By destroying the firstborn Egyptians, the Lord sounded the death knell for all of Egyptian society for the foreseeable future. It was this psychological pressure – which is one of the interpretations of the phrase that there was no house in Egypt that did not suffer from this terrible plague – that forced Pharaoh and his people to come to terms with their unjust enslavement of Israel and to finally succumb to the demands of Moshe and the G-d of Israel.

We should remember that all of these psychological pressures, even though they do not appear in our society as physical plagues, are still present and influential. The trauma of life is never ending. ©2013 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The Biblical term for midnight, the time Moshe (Moses) says G-d will slay the first born-is ka-hazot ha-lailah (Exodus 11:4). Different interpretations are given for the prefix ka, which gives us the key as to the true meaning of this term.

On its simplest level, ka, says Rashi, means "when." From this perspective, ka-hazot is a delineation of time, i.e. that actual moment when the night was divided - midnight.

The Talmud sees it differently - ka means "approximately." Although the plague actually occurred ba-hazi ha-lailah (Exodus 12:29) - precisely at midnight, Moshe says ka-hazot. This was because Moshe feared the Egyptians would make a mistake in calculation and believe midnight had arrived when it had not. The Egyptians would then accuse Moshe of being a false prophet. (Berakhot 4a)

Or Ha-hayyim (Hayyim ibn Attar, 18c. Morocco) understands ka as referring to a moment in the past. The term refers to that midnight in the book of Genesis when Avraham (Abraham), the first patriarch, rescued his nephew Lot. (Genesis 14) As Avraham was victorious at midnight, so would the Jews overcome the Egyptians at midnight.

Another approach can be suggested. Perhaps ka does not refer to the past, but to the future.

Consider the following: night in the Torah symbolizes suffering and exile. Hazi takes it a step further. It is not only night, but it is the night of the night-midnight, the time of the deepest suffering and exile, when the voice of G-d seems silent.

Hence, the Torah here states ka-hazot. As we were saved from Egypt, so will we in the future, survive other midnights - other times of pain and despair.

In the will of Yossele Rakover, a fictitious last testament left in the ruins of Eastern Europe, this idea of ka-hazot is expressed powerfully. There it states: "I

believe in the sun, even when it does not shine. I believe in love, even when I am alone. I believe in G-d, even when He is silent."

What is true about the nation of Israel is similarly true about individual lives. Often G-d intervenes precisely when one thinks there is no hope.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, of blessed memory, reinforced this message in his comment on the sentence, "As for me, I trust in Your kindness, my heart will rejoice in Your salvation." (Psalms 13:6) He suggested that the Psalmist is telling us that our faith in G-d should be so great that we rejoice in His salvation even before we are saved - even when it is still dark.

May each of us achieve such faith in our personal and national experiences of ka-hazot. ©2012 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

“How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me; send my people [out] that they may serve Me" (Sh'mos 10:3). This message to Pharaoh was delivered before the eighth plague (locusts); why did G-d wait until now to address Pharaoh's unwillingness to "humble himself" before the Almighty? Besides, since G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart after the first five plagues (see Tanchuma Va'eira 3, Sh'mos Rabbah 13:3 and Rashi on 7:3), thereby not letting him "give in" to let the Children of Israel go, what relevance does Pharaoh's lack of humility have? The bottom line is that G-d will harden his heart, and keep bringing more plagues, until all ten have occurred; would Pharaoh humbling himself before G-d have really made a difference? How could G-d demand that Pharaoh agree to let His people go if Pharaoh would have done just that had G-d not hardened his heart?

One of the fundamental questions asked about G-d hardening Pharaoh's heart is how G-d could continue to punish him if he no longer had any choice in the matter. Another, related, question is why G-d took Pharaoh to task for "continuing to tread on my nation" (Sh'mos 9:17) if the only reason he was still doing so was because "G-d [had] strengthened his heart" (9:12)? How could Pharaoh be blamed for it if it really wasn't his doing? Similarly, how could Moshe say he knew that Pharaoh "still did not fear G-d" (9:30) if it was only because G-d had hardened his heart that he hadn't let the Children of Israel go?

According to S'fornu (Sh'mos 7:3), G-d never took away Pharaoh's free will. Rather, G-d "strengthened his heart" so that he could withstand the beating Egypt was taking, thereby allowing his decision-making process to continue to be based on free will. Instead of being forced to give in when he really didn't want to because of the plagues, Pharaoh was given the

ability to deal with the suffering and let his decisions be based on what he really wanted to do. "There is no doubt that without the hardening of the heart Pharaoh would have sent Israel [out, but] it wouldn't have been based on repentance and humility before G-d, regretting having rebelled -- even though he recognized His greatness and goodness; rather, it would have been because he was unable to withstand the suffering of the plagues anymore." S'fornu also explains what G-d had told Moshe would happen before he ever spoke to Pharaoh (4:21): "And I will strengthen his heart, for because of his inability to tolerate the plagues there is no doubt that he would have sent the nation [out]; not because he will lower himself before G-d to do what He wants. And for this reason He strengthened His heart so that he should have the fortitude to withstand the plagues and not send them [out]." Whereas without his heart being "strengthened" Pharaoh would have had to give in, without really having a choice in the matter, G-d gave him back his free will, thereby allowing him to decide whether to listen to G-d based solely on it being the right thing to do, not because of the pressure of the plagues. As he (S'fornu) put it (7:3), "if Pharaoh would have wanted to humble himself before G-d, and to return to Him with a complete repentance, there was nothing preventing him from doing so."

Since G-d "strengthening his heart" enabled Pharaoh to still choose, through free will, not to let the Children of Israel go, he was held responsible for "still treading on My people," and punished for his wrong choices. (For more on S'fornu's approach to G-d strengthening/hardening Pharaoh's heart, as well as the purpose of the plagues, see his commentary on 3:19, 3:20, 4:23, 7:4, 9:12, 9:16, 9:29, 9:32, 9:35, and 10:1-2.) Although this would also explain why Pharaoh was taken to task for not humbling himself before G-d (10:3), as doing so was key to Pharaoh changing his ways, S'fornu adds another element to the mix: "[Even though] there is no (longer any) hope that you will repent because of the strength of any plagues, perhaps you will do so because of their length, [if they] last for a long time. Therefore it was appropriate to ask at what point will the limit of the continuing refusal be reached because of a continuing plague." In other words, G-d was threatening Pharaoh that the next plague (locusts) would stick around until he gives in; "how long do you think you can last?" However, this doesn't fit into the words as well, nor would it explain why G-d stopped the plague if Pharaoh hadn't really repented yet, or why G-d strengthened his heart again (10:20) if he had. A more straightforward explanation of these words, based on how S'fornu had explained things until now, is that G-d was asking Pharaoh how long it will take until he freely chooses to let the Children of Israel go because G-d told him to rather than because he can't take the suffering anymore.

The issue with this explanation is the one we started with; why did G-d first ask him this now? If the

point of these words ("how long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me") is that he should do what G-d asks because it's the right thing to do (not because it hurts too much to not listen to G-d), why is it asked before the eighth plague rather than shortly after G-d started "strengthening his heart"? As soon as Pharaoh was willing to give in for the wrong reasons, G-d should have told him to start giving in for the right reasons!

Although G-d had hardened Pharaoh's heart after the sixth plague, there was no need to do the same with the hearts of his servants until before the eighth one (10:1; compare 9:34 with 10:7, see Ibn Ezra on 10:1). As S'fornu had pointed out (on some of the earlier referenced verses), one of the purposes of the plagues was for the Egyptians to repent. They held out longer than he did, but only as far as being able to deal with the suffering (perhaps because Pharaoh was more concerned with his people's suffering than they were). Neither Pharaoh nor his servants had repented, but it was only before the eighth plague that his servants would have given in to the pressure had G-d not hardened their hearts. It was therefore at this point that G-d asked how long they would continue to refuse to become humbled before Him, i.e. how long it would take until they sent out His people because He asked them to rather than because they didn't want to endure any more suffering. ©2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reflects the painful reality that people do not learn from the past and history will undoubtedly be repeated. The setting is the Babylonian destruction of the Egyptian Empire. The prophet Yirmiyahu states in the name of Hashem, "I will direct my attention to the multitudes of Alexandria and to Pharaoh and all of Egypt...I will deliver them into the hands of their killer, Nebuchadnezar, the King of Babylonia." (46: 25,26)

The Radak explains that these passages refer to a massive massacre predicted for Egypt and her Pharaoh. Radak reminds us that the Egyptian people have a long history of hostility towards the Jewish nation. After an extended period of calm following her devastation at the Sea of Reeds, Egypt resumed her hostility towards her Jewish neighbors. It resurfaced during the reign of the Egyptian premier, Shishak, who invaded the Land of Israel shortly after the demise of Shlomo Hamelech. During this vulnerable Jewish era, Shishak forced his way into Israel and cleared out the treasury of the king. Our Chazal (quoted in Rashi's commentary to M'lochim I, 14-6) cite that Shishak even had the audacity of stealing the glorious throne of Shlomo Hamelech. Egypt continued her hostility towards Israel, and after receiving heavy sums from Israel in exchange for military protection, betrayed her Jewish "ally" and abandoned her. But Egypt's final crime

came when Pharaoh N'cho executed the pious King Yoshiyahu because he refused to allow Pharaoh's army to enter Israel enroute to Assyria.

Because of this full record, Hashem decided that the time had arrived to repay Egypt for all her cruelty. Although, in truth, she had previously received forty years of exile, apparently this was not sufficient treatment for her. This time, a massive massacre was being planned and an appropriate execution was awaiting her Pharaoh. With this, Hashem would remind Egypt of the very special relationship He maintained with the Jewish people. Hashem's historic lesson to the earlier Pharaoh was characterized in His opening statement that the Jews are "My son, My first-born" (Shmos4: 24). Through these words Hashem warned Egypt at the outset that her hostility toward His chosen nation would be repaid in full. And now, nearly a thousand years later, the time had come for Egypt to review this lesson. Egypt would soon be massacred in response to her cruelty and hostility towards Hashem's first born, the Jewish people.

It is interesting to note the particular analogy Yirmiyahu uses when predicting the Babylonian army's invasion. He says "They cut down her forest, for the enemy could not be counted; they exceeded the locusts, beyond any imaginable limit." (46: 25, 26) Yirmiyahu compares the Babylonians to locusts invading the land in unimaginable proportions. In fact, he describes the totality of this massacre as even greater than the work of the locusts. This analogy seems to bring us back to the historic plague of locusts in this week's parsha. It suggests a corollary between the Egyptian plague in earlier times and the invasion of Egypt by the king Nebuchadnezzar in later times.

The explanation of this may be gleaned from the insightful words of the Kli Yakar in this week's sedra. He notes the Torah's introduction to the plague of locusts and explains it through a shocking Egyptian phenomenon. The Torah introduces the plague and states, "I have hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and his servants in order to place My signs in his midst. And for you to tell your children and grandchildren how I played with Egypt." (Shmos 10: 1, 2) "Why," asks the Kli Yakar, "was this introduction chosen for the plague of locusts and not for any other plague?" He responds by citing the testimony of Rabbeinu Chananel regarding an indisputable fact about the land of Egypt. Rabbeinu Chananel testifies that there has never been a locust invasion in Egypt since the massive plague of locusts sent to her by Hashem. Nowadays, even when all surrounding countries are infested with locusts these devouring insects will not penetrate the Egyptian borders. And if they remotely filter into Egypt they never destroy the existing crop.

He explains that this miraculous phenomenon was meant to serve as an everlasting testimony about the plague of locusts. In response to Moshe Rabbeinu's plea for the removal of locusts the Torah states, "There

did not remain one locust throughout the entire Egyptian border." (Shmos 10:19) Apparently, this passage became an everlasting statement and from that point and on locusts would never remain in the land of Egypt. This indisputable testimony reminds the world of Hashem's harsh response to Egypt for all the cruelty she showed His chosen people. The plague of locusts therefore deserves a special introduction stating the purpose for all the plagues, to tell of their occurrence to our children. Because, in fact, the plague of locusts and its everlasting testimony were to serve as the perfect vehicle through which to remember Hashem's revelations in Egypt.

We now appreciate the perfect analogy of Yirmiyahu regarding the Babylonian invasion. The prophet was hinting to the fact that Egypt's attitude towards the Jewish people could not be condoned. They, more than anyone, should have anticipated the consequences of their cruel actions. The total absence of locusts from Egypt should have been a constant reminder to them of their past experiences for mistreating the Jewish people. Obviously no one could claim that Egypt hadn't been fairly warned. However, typically, people do not learn their lesson and history must undoubtedly be repeated. If the historic plague of locusts was not a sufficient reminder for them, then the present Babylonian "locusts" would do the trick. Hashem therefore ordered a full scale massacre for Egypt to repeat their earlier experience. They would once again realize that the Jewish people are very dear to Hashem and hostility towards them is certainly not a welcomed policy. Eventually Hashem will protect His people and respond to all hostility in a most befitting fashion. ©2013 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrاند

The Ramban's Chumash commentary is a storehouse of fundamental Jewish philosophical beliefs. There is a famous Ramban at the end of Parshas Bo which explains why the Torah contains so many commandments that commemorate the Exodus. To name just a few T'fillin, Mezuzah, Pessach, Succah, and Kiddush are all "zecher l'yetzias Mitzrayim".

The Ramban explains that the Exodus set the record straight and debunked all the myths that were prevalent in the world. Some argued that the Master of the Universe did not exist. Others admitted that there was a Creator, but after Creation, He decided not to have anything to do with the world anymore. Still others believed that G-d Knows what goes on in the world, but does not care about it.

The Exodus contradicted all these theological errors. The miraculous unfolding of the events which led to the departure of the nation of slaves from the hands of the most powerful empire of its day proved that G-d created the world and still takes an active role in its

direction, changing "nature" itself if it suits Him. This is why this historical event is so crucial for setting straight the "theological facts of life".

Since G-d does not want to create open miracles on an ongoing basis, it was necessary to provide commandments that remind us of the "open miracles" that occurred in the past. The Ramban explains that from the belief in G-d's ability to create "open miracles" (in the past), a person will come to accept the concept of "hidden miracles" (that happen on a daily basis), which the Ramban calls the foundation of all of Torah. "For a person has no portion in the Torah of Moshe our teacher until he believes that everything that happens to us in all circumstances of life -- whether private or public -- are all miracles."

We need to believe that life itself is a miracle. The fact that I can stand here and talk and you can listen or the fact that the sun rises every morning in the eastern sky and sets every evening in the western sky is a miracle -- except that these "miracles" are disguised as "nature". We become used to these things because they have happened throughout all our lives and perhaps throughout all of history, but they are miraculous nonetheless.

I recently received the following letter. After hearing the above Ramban regarding "hidden miracles", I believe we can all have a greater appreciation of this letter and the story it tells:

"In the summer of 2004, Andrew and Sharon finally became engaged and asked me, their Rabbi from Bel-Air California, if I would officiate at their wedding. The ceremony was to take place on December 5, 2004.

I told them I would be happy to officiate at their wedding provided they satisfied four basic requirements: (1) They are both Jewish; (2) The bride will go to the mikvah before the marriage; (3) The food at the wedding will be kosher; (4) Neither of them are currently married to another person and if they are currently married they must first obtain a Jewish divorce.

The couple agreed to the conditions, however "to be up front" Sharon told me that she had been married previously "but it was only for 6 hours and it was a mistake and I had the marriage annulled and I don't want to revisit it because it was a terrible mistake on my part."

I told her that in Judaism it does not matter if one is married for 6 hours or 6 years or 60 years -- one remains married until the death of the spouse or one obtains a Jewish divorce.

"But the courts annulled my marriage, Rabbi. Please understand. It was a mistake."

"I am sorry, you need a Get", I told her.

"Rabbi, what if I can't find the 'mistake'? Am I doomed forever?"

I told her "I will be there for you. Let's contact the Jewish courts in Los Angeles, and they will help us get through this dilemma."

It took several weeks. This first husband was finally tracked down. I got in touch with the Beis Din in Los Angeles. They arranged the Get and the Beis Din told Sharon, "Now that you have your Get, you can get married, but not before 92 days from today." [This is based on the law of 'havchana,' which requires a waiting period before remarriage to preclude doubt regarding paternity issues of a child that may be born 7-9 months after the first marriage was terminated.]

The couple was now very distraught because this waiting period would push the wedding date past December 5th. All they could think about was their wedding plans, their honeymoon, their chosen dates. For days, they did not understand why they would have to wait until January 2005 before they could get married. But they finally agreed. After a few days, Andrew and Sharon called me back and told me that they wanted to do the wedding right in G-d's Eyes, so they began re-planning their wedding for January 23, 2005.

Still, in the back of their minds they could not understand why G-d was delaying their wedding. They could not understand that until December 26, 2004. Andrew and Sharon were supposed to be on the last days of their three week honeymoon in a luxury hotel on a romantic island in the Indian Ocean, which was totally swept away by the 12/26/2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which took almost a quarter of a million lives.

As Andrew said, "The best advice the Rabbi ever gave us was to follow the rules of G-d's Torah. He assured us that it would be a blessing for us in the end."

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