

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**G**o to Washington and make a tour of the memorials and you will make a fascinating discovery. Begin at the Lincoln Memorial with its giant statue of the man who braved civil war and presided over the ending of slavery. On one side you will see the Gettysburg Address, that masterpiece of brevity with its invocation of “a new birth of freedom.” On the other is the great Second Inaugural with its message of healing: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as G-d gives us to see the right ...”

Walk down to the Potomac basin and you see the Martin Luther King Memorial with its sixteen quotes from the great fighter for civil rights, among them his 1963 statement, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” And giving its name to the monument as a whole, a sentence from the I have a Dream speech, “Out of the Mountain of Despair, a Stone of Hope.”

Continue along the tree-lined avenue bordering the water and you arrive at the Roosevelt Memorial, constructed as a series of six spaces, one for each decade of his public career, each with a passage from one of the defining speeches of the time, most famously, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

Lastly, bordering the Basin at its southern edge, is a Greek temple dedicated to the author of the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Around the dome, are the words he wrote to Benjamin Rush: “I have sworn upon the altar of G-d eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Defining the circular space are four panels, each with lengthy quotations from Jefferson’s writings, one from the Declaration itself, another beginning, “Almighty G-d hath created the mind free,” and a third “G-d who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have

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l'iluy nishmat my mother  
Rezvan bat Yehuda  
and my aunt  
Ghodsieh bat Yehuda  
by Faramarz Farzan and Family

removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of G-d?”

Each of these four monuments is built around texts and each tells a story.

Now compare the monuments in London, most conspicuously those in Parliament Square. The memorial to David Lloyd George contains three words: David Lloyd George. The one to Nelson Mandela has two: Nelson Mandela, and the Churchill memorial just one: Churchill. Winston Churchill was a man of words, in his early life a journalist, later a historian, author of almost fifty books. He won the Nobel Prize not for Peace but for Literature. He delivered as many speeches and coined as many unforgettable sentences as Jefferson or Lincoln, Roosevelt or Martin Luther King, but none of his utterances is engraved on the plinth beneath his statue. He is memorialised only by his name.

The difference between the American and British monuments is unmistakable, and the reason is that Britain and the United States have a quite different political and moral culture. England is, or was until recently, a tradition-based society. In such societies, things are as they are because that is how they were “since time immemorial.” It is unnecessary to ask why. Those who belong, know. Those who need to ask, show thereby that they don’t belong.

American society is different because from the Pilgrim Fathers onward it was based on the concept of covenant as set out in Tanakh, especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The early settlers were Puritans, in the Calvinist tradition, the closest Christianity came to basing its politics on the Hebrew Bible. Covenantal societies are not based on tradition. The Puritans, like the Israelites three thousand years earlier, were revolutionaries, attempting to create a new type of society, one unlike Egypt or, in the case of America, England. Michael Walzer called his book on the politics of the seventeenth century Puritans, “the revolution of the saints.” They were trying to overthrow the tradition that gave absolute power to kings and maintained established hierarchies of class.

Covenantal societies always represent a conscious new beginning by a group of people dedicated to an ideal. The story of the founders, the journey they made, the obstacles they had to overcome and the vision that drove them are essential elements of a covenantal culture. Retelling the story, handing it

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on to one's children, and dedicating oneself to continuing the work that earlier generations began, are fundamental to the ethos of such a society. A covenanted nation is not simply there because it is there. It is there to fulfil a moral vision. That is what led G. K. Chesterton to call the United States a nation "with the soul of a church," the only one in the world "founded on a creed" (Chesterton's antisemitism prevented him from crediting the true source of America's political philosophy, the Hebrew Bible).

The history of storytelling as an essential part of moral education begins in this week's parsha. It is quite extraordinary how, on the brink of the exodus, Moses three times turns to the future and to the duty of parents to educate their children about the story that was shortly to unfold: "When your children ask you, 'What is this service to you?' you shall answer, 'It is the Passover service to G-d. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians, sparing our homes'" (12: 25-27). "On that day, you shall tell your child, 'It is because of this that G-d acted for me when I left Egypt'" (13: 8). "Your child may later ask you, 'What is this?' You shall answer him, 'With a show of power, G-d brought us out of Egypt, the place of slavery'" (13: 14).

This is truly extraordinary. The Israelites have not yet emerged into the dazzling light of freedom. They are still slaves. Yet already Moses is directing their minds to the far horizon of the future and giving them the responsibility of passing on their story to succeeding generations. It is as if Moses were saying: Forget where you came from and why, and you will eventually lose your identity, your continuity and *raison d'être*. You will come to think of yourself as the mere member of a nation among nations, one ethnicity among many. Forget the story of freedom and you will eventually lose freedom itself.

Rarely indeed have philosophers written on the importance of story-telling for the moral life. Yet that is how we become the people we are. The great exception among modern philosophers has been Alasdair MacIntyre, who wrote, in his classic *After Virtue*, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Deprive children of

stories, says MacIntyre, and you leave them "anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."<sup>1</sup>

No one understood this more clearly than Moses because he knew that without a specific identity it is almost impossible not to lapse into whatever is the current idolatry of the age – rationalism, idealism, nationalism, fascism, communism, postmodernism, relativism, individualism, hedonism or consumerism, to name only the most recent. The alternative, a society based on tradition alone, crumbles as soon as respect for tradition dies, which it always does at some stage or another.

Identity, which is always particular, is based on story, the narrative that links me to the past, guides me in the present, and places on me responsibility for the future. And no story, at least in the West, was more influential than that of the exodus, the memory that the supreme power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless, together with the covenant that followed whereby the Israelites bound themselves to G-d in a promise to create a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, where individuals were respected as the image of G-d, where one day in seven all hierarchies of power were suspended, and where dignity and justice were accessible to all. We never quite reached that ideal state but we never ceased to travel toward it and believed it was there at journey's end.

"The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us," said the BBC's political correspondent, Andrew Marr. G-d created man, Elie Wiesel once wrote, because G-d loves stories. What other cultures have done through systems, Jews have done through stories. And in Judaism, the stories are not engraved in stone on memorials, magnificent though that is. They are told at home, around the table, from parents to children as the gift of the past to the future. That is how story-telling in Judaism was devolved, domesticated and democratized.

Only the most basic elements of morality are universal: "thin" abstractions like justice or liberty that tend to mean different things to different people in different places and different times. But if we want our children and our society to be moral, we need a collective story that tells us where we came from and what our task is in the world. The story of the exodus, especially as told on Pesach at the seder table, is always the same yet ever-changing, an almost infinite set of variations on a single set of themes that we all internalise in ways that are unique to us, yet we all share as members of the same historically extended community.

There are stories that ennoble, and others that stultify, leaving us prisoners of ancient grievances or impossible ambitions. The Jewish story is in its way the

<sup>1</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

oldest of all, yet ever young, and we are each a part of it. It tells us who we are and who our ancestors hoped we would be. Story-telling is the great vehicle of moral education. It was the Torah's insight that a people who told their children the story of freedom and its responsibilities would stay free for as long as humankind lives and breathes and hopes. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**O**nly a people committed to universal freedom has the right to benefit from a revolution and create its own nation-state. Most revolutions in history have failed, with the leaders of the new regime acting far more cruelly and highhandedly than the despots they replaced.

When former slaves begin to rule, they generally do so with a vengeance, zealously and vengefully expressing their new-found invincibility. Witness the French Revolution and the Communist Revolution; sadly the same seems to be true of the Arab Spring as well.

The nation of Israel was born out of a revolution against the despotic regime of the Egyptian Pharaohs. But this revolution did not fail; much the opposite, its message of the inalienable right of universal freedom and its abhorrence of all forms of enslavement reverberate to the present day.

The Israelites emerged from slavery to freedom as a result of 10 plagues which brought havoc to the most advanced civilization of that time. We celebrate their exodus every year at the Seder, reading together the Ten Plagues. These plagues, declares Rabbi Yehuda, are remembered and symbolically categorized by a mnemonic device which divides the plagues into three groups: DATZAKH (dam, tzfardea, kinim), ADASH (arov, dever, shehin), BAHAB (barad, arbeh, hoshekh, b'khorot): blood, frogs and vermin; then wild animals, animal illnesses and boils; finally hail, locusts, darkness and the slaying of the firstborn.

Each group highlights the mastery of G-d over another aspect of Egyptian life: The first three, in which the Nile turned to blood, the waters spewed forth frogs and the dust turned into vermin, demonstrate control over the waterways and the land; the second three, wild animals, animal illnesses and boils, demonstrate control over those who populate the land; and the last three, hail, locusts and darkness, demonstrate control over what comes out of the heavens. The slaying of the firstborn expresses G-d's power over life and death.

The Maharal of Prague and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch provide an even deeper insight into these three categories of plagues. They hark back to G-d's initial covenant with Abraham, when the patriarch is informed, "Your seed will be strangers in a land which is not theirs, they shall be enslaved and they

shall be afflicted" (Gen. 15:13).

Since the Egyptian experience serves as a paradigm for all subsequent Jewish and human exiles and persecutions, this prophesy delineates the three characteristics ascribed by every totalitarian persecutor to any minority group: alienation (gerut), enslavement (avdut) and affliction (inui). This is what Pharaoh did to the Hebrews, what Hitler did to non-Aryans, and what Stalin did to any group that threatened his authority.

The Hebrews in Egypt were first delegitimized as aliens or strangers, then they were enslaved and finally they were persecuted (afflicted) with the mass murder of the Hebrew male babies. The Maharal and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch ingeniously suggest that G-d punished the Egyptians measure-for-measure by means of the plagues - and Rabbi Yehuda brings this allusion to the forefront in his tripartite division of the plagues.

The first plague in each of the three groups - blood, wild animals and hail - would make the Egyptians feel like aliens in Egypt as the Nile turned to blood, wild animals ran rampant and hail poured down on a defenseless Egyptian populace.

The second plague in each grouping - frogs, animal illnesses and locusts - would make the Egyptians feel enslaved, devoid of property ownership. The frogs took over their homes, the animal illnesses destroyed their livestock, and the locusts consumed their agricultural crop.

And the last plague of each of the three categories - vermin, boils and darkness - afflicted every Egyptian with severe personal discomfort, making it impossible to continue living, working and socializing. The Egyptians became subject to the very alienation, enslavement and affliction to which they had subjected the Hebrews! The most important point is not that the victims turned the table on their masters, as is the case with most revolutions; it is rather that the G-d of both the Hebrews and the Egyptians teaches the world the necessity of universal freedom under the G-d of all humanity.

The Bible does not depict the Hebrews as invincible conquerors after the Exodus; they are only grateful freedmen, beholden to the Lord G-d of the universe for their redemption.

This is the message of our revolution against Egypt as well as of the four (for us, now five) expressions of redemption which is the major source for our four (five) cups of redemption-wine highlighting the Passover Seder: "I have taken you out from under the sufferings of Egypt, I have saved you from their enslavement, I have redeemed you with great miracles, and I have taken you for Me or a nation so that I may be your G-d," "I have brought you to your land." (Exod. 6:6).

We dare not exit from our revolution in order to lord it over any other minority; G-d freed us from

Pharaoh's enslavement only in order that we may be free to serve G-d. He teaches us and the world that we must "love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10: 19), and gave us a Sabbath day in order that our gentile servants "may rest like you" - for everyone must be free under G-d (Deut. 5: 14).

Only a people committed to universal freedom has the right to benefit from a revolution and create its own nation-state; the formation of yet another totalitarian regime will only increase human misery and prevent the advent of a world of peace. Herein lies the challenge to the Arab Spring. ©2015 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he story of the Jewish people's suffering under Egyptian bondage reaches its climax in this week's Torah reading and in the beginning part of next week's Torah reading as well. The Torah does not really dwell on the history and political significance of this momentous event. It tells us of the plagues visited upon the Egyptians, of the stubbornness of Pharaoh and of the eventual capitulation of the Egyptians to the demands of Moshe.

However, it does not in any way inform us of the geopolitical consequences of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. Rather, the balance of the Torah readings of the year will concern itself almost exclusively with G-d's relationship and instructions to the Jewish people.

Even when other nations and personages are mentioned and described later in the Torah, this is done only regarding their direct relationship to the Jewish people. So, one can certainly wonder at this seemingly xenophobic exclusive type of narrative. The Jewish people have always been a very small percentage, not only of the world's population, but also of the population of the Middle East itself.

The Land of Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people, is a very small country covering only a minute portion of the landmass of the vast Middle East. Why does the Torah, so to speak, ignore the rest of human society and geopolitical reality and concentrate only on the story of a small people who will inherit a very small slice of world territory? This question of Jewish exclusivity lies at the heart of a great deal of the internal and external debates regarding Israel and the Jewish people in today's world as well.

The story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt is the basis for the root concept of Judaism, that the Jewish people are mysteriously special and unique amongst all other peoples that inhabit the globe. As the Torah proclaims: "Has there been any other historic occurrence where one nation has been extracted from the midst of another nation?"

Many peoples have experienced revolutions against oppressors and the achievement of national freedom. But the story of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt remains a singular and unique one. This is because the purpose for that exodus was not limited to achieving national freedom and personal comfort. Rather, as expressed so often by Moshe and written in the Torah itself, it was that this people should be a light unto the nations, a chosen people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation dedicated to the service of G-d.

It is because of this higher layer of freedom that the exodus from Egypt represents that the Jewish people have survived and prospered in spite of all odds and through all generations. Throughout the ages, many in the non-Jewish world have dealt with the issue of Jewish survival and its ultimate mystery. Judaism, Jewish values and ideals have penetrated and influenced all sections of humanity. One can say that it is the very exclusivity of the Torah narrative and of Jewish thought and lifestyle that carries with it the universality that the Jewish people have achieved. Among the many great paradoxes of the human story, this paradox of the exclusivity and universality of the Jewish people is primary. ©2015 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)*

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### **Taking a Closer Look**

**O**ne of the issues discussed regarding the exodus from Egypt contrasts the original request made of Pharaoh -- to let the Jewish people go on a three-day journey to bring offerings to G-d (Sh'mos 5:3), with what they actually did -- leaving and never returning. As Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky z"l asks (3:18), since G-d's signature is truth, how could He misrepresent His intentions? To summarize Rav Yaakov's approach, the request was really for a temporary break from the hard labor in order to reconnect with G-d, which would have allowed them to survive (spiritually) for the remainder of what would have been a 400-year exile in Egypt (see B'reishis 15:13). Because Pharaoh refused, G-d had to end the exile early (after only 210 years in Egypt, which was 400 years after Avraham's son Yitzchok was born) so that the nation wouldn't undergo any further spiritual deterioration.

Rabbeinu Bachye brings a similar, although a profoundly different approach, suggesting that the reason for an initial three day retreat would have been to provide the nation with their first exposure to G-d's commandments, as giving them the whole Torah right away would have been too much for them to handle. In fact, G-d did give them several commandments (at

Marah), weeks prior to the public revelation at Sinai (see Rashi on Sh'mos 15:25). The implication is that shortly after returning from this initial spiritual retreat they would have left Egypt completely (whereas Rav Yaakov is suggesting that they would have stayed for another 190 years, and a different generation would have come out). Either way, since had Pharaoh agreed to let the nation go on a three-day spiritual retreat they would have returned to Egypt, the request itself was completely above board.

Rabbeinu Bachye's approach has the advantage of not having to explain how Moshe could have been told that G-d would take the nation out of Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land (and other similar statements that clearly indicate that G-d had planned to take them out of Egypt completely, see 3:8, 3:10, 3:17, 6:1, 6:6, 6:26 and 7:2), as Moshe was told what his entire mission would encompass, not just the first part. Nevertheless, it is evident that G-d was telling Moshe things that were going to happen, including that Pharaoh would initially refuse (3:19), that G-d would harden Pharaoh's heart so that he wouldn't listen (7:3-4), and even that Pharaoh would ask for a "sign" (7:9). As far as the original request, though, Moshe being told that G-d would (eventually) take them out of Egypt completely does not negate the possibility that the original request for a three-day journey was an up-front one that Pharaoh could have accepted (but didn't). According to Rav Yaakov's approach, on the other hand, had Pharaoh agreed to the original request, it would have been almost two centuries before the nation left Egypt for good. Even so, since the purpose of the three-day retreat was to allow the nation to be worthy of redemption 190 years later, talking about that eventual exodus now does not contradict the notion that the original request for a short-term leave was legitimate.

Assuming that the nation would have returned to Egypt after their spiritual retreat had Pharaoh agreed to it, why (and when) did it change to a demand that Pharaoh let them go completely? When he finally gives in, why must it be forever, and not for the originally requested three-day journey that would have been followed by a return to Egypt? Rav Yaakov himself explains Pharaoh's change of heart and trying to bring the nation back (14:5) as regretting that he let them go completely rather than just granting them a temporary leave. Why couldn't the nation reconnect with G-d (or get their first mitzvos) at that point and then return to Egypt until the time was right to leave?

Up to the very end, the discussion between Pharaoh and Moshe was about the details of the requested three-day journey. G-d's continually commanded Pharaoh to "send out My people so that they can serve Me" (7:16, 7:27, 8:16, 9:1 and 9:13), not "let My people go free." In his request to remove the frogs (8:4), Pharaoh says he will "send the nation out

[so that] they can bring offerings to G-d," but doesn't offer to free them. When he offers to let them bring offerings to G-d in Egypt itself (8:21), Moshe says that they must travel three days out of Egypt before doing so (8:23), not that their leaving Egypt so there's no reason to do so in Egypt before they leave. After being warned about the forthcoming plague of locusts, Pharaoh offers to let the adults go, but not the children (10:11), while Moshe insists that the children must also take part in the celebration. After the plague of darkness, Pharaoh says that everyone can go, except the livestock, which they must leave behind (10:24). Moshe's response was that they must bring all the livestock too, because they have no way of knowing how many offerings will need to be brought (or from which kinds of animals). If the three-day offer was off the table, Moshe's shouldn't have given reasons why everyone and everything must take part in the spiritual retreat. Instead, he should just tell Pharaoh something like, "hey, don't you get it? We're not coming back! G-d's gonna hit you harder and harder, so just give up!" There must have still been a possibility that they would only leave temporarily, even at this late stage. Why did it change after that? And if going on a spiritual retreat was still appropriate, why didn't it happen?

Another, related, issue is that the nation was told that they would be freed (completely) before any of the plagues started (6:6-8). It's one thing for Moshe to be informed that Pharaoh would be stubborn and they will therefore eventually be set free, but how could the whole nation be told that they will be free if it was still theoretically possible for Pharaoh to still accept the three-day offer?

Sh'mos Rabbah (3:8 and 11:3) tells us that the reason G-d had Moshe ask Pharaoh to allow the nation to go on a three-day journey rather demanding that they be freed forever was to mislead the Egyptians. Since they thought they were only allowing the nation to leave temporarily, when they would realize that the nation was not returning they would chase after them and eventually drown in the sea (as a punishment for drowning the nation's babies). If, on the other hand, when they finally gave in they knew it meant letting the nation go forever, there would be no reason to chase after them when they didn't return.

While this would seem to contradict Rav Yaakov's (and Rabbeinu Bachye's) premise that G-d did initially intend on it being a temporary retreat, I would suggest that it does not. When Moshe first went to Pharaoh, at the end of Nissan 2447 (see Rabbeinu Bachye on 10:5) or in Iyar 2447 (see Rav Saadya Gaon on 7:15 and Midrash Seichel Tov 7:25), had Pharaoh said yes, it really would have only been temporarily. However, once he refused, that offer was no longer on the table. It would now take the power of the plagues to change Pharaoh's mind, and those plagues were reserved for the exodus (see B'chor Shor on 6:6). They

would be an everlasting testament to G-d's involvement in our mundane world (see Ramban at the end of our Parasha), and would be part of our yearly retelling of the exodus story, and were not going to be employed just to get Pharaoh to agree to a temporary leave. Nevertheless, in order to mislead the Egyptians, when Moshe went back to Pharaoh again three months later, he never informed him that the request had changed. The wording he used was ambiguous enough to leave the impression that it was the same, while still being fully accurate. After all, they would travel for three days to serve G-d at Mt. Sinai (see Ralbag and Chizkuni on 3:18)! And Moshe never said they wouldn't stay longer, or that they would return (see Matanos K'huna on Sh'mos Rabbah 3:8).

Moshe was able to respond to Pharaoh's questions in a way that was truthful without being completely forthcoming. Even though the nation would have returned to Egypt had Pharaoh accepted the initial offer the first time, he and his people were purposely misled into thinking that this offer was still available until the very end, in order to complete the punishment of the Egyptians by drowning them in the Sea of Reeds.

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**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**A**s the Jews are leaving Egypt, G-d commands them to sacrifice the Paschal lamb. Following that commandment, a strange rule is spelled out. The Torah describes how a slave may partake of the offering. In the words of the Torah, "And every man's servant that is bought for money, thou may circumcise him and then he may eat thereof." (Exodus 12:44) After experiencing the horrors of slavery and entering a state of freedom, it would seem most logical for the Torah to outlaw the institution of slavery altogether.

In order to understand why the Torah permits slavery, it must be recognized that slavery was universally accepted in Biblical times. Rather than ignore that reality, the Torah deals with slavery in an extraordinarily ethical way.

First, as R. Samson Raphael Hirsch notes, "no Jew could make any other human being into a slave. He could only acquire by purchase, people who, by the then universally accepted international law, were already slaves." Hence, coming into a Jewish household - with its greater sensitivity towards the welfare of a slave - is considered a step up.

Secondly, a slave (eved Canaani) is mandated to keep all the commandments, except for those affirmative commandments that are time-based, and this for obvious reasons - slaves by definition have little control over their own time. From this perspective, it follows that the halakhic system views an eved Canaani as closer to being Jewish than even a ger toshav (resident alien) who is only expected to fulfill the seven laws of

Noah. As such, the eved Canaani is a respected member of our community.

Thirdly, the Torah tells us that, if the slave wishes, he may be circumcised. The Talmud quotes the opinion that once circumcised and immersed (thereby becoming fully Jewish), the former slave can participate in eating the Paschal sacrifice. This is precisely the point of our aforementioned Biblical verse. (Yevamot 48b)

Fourth and most important is the alternative view found in the Talmud, which insists that if any Jew has a slave who is not circumcised, not even the owner himself may partake of the Paschal lamb. In other words, when the Torah states "then he may eat thereof," the "he" refers to the owner. Indeed, this Talmudic opinion is making the stunning statement that it is incongruous for a Jew to celebrate Passover by eating the Paschal lamb - the symbol of freedom - while having a slave in his home (see the commentary of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch).

The Torah has been criticized for supporting the institution of slavery. In point of fact, it attempts to make ethical an already well-entrenched institution. The ethical sensitivity displayed by the Torah reveals that the concept of "eved" has nothing to do with slavery as understood in contemporary times. ©2013 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ**

## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

**I**n this week's portion the Almighty gives the first commandment to the Jewish people as a whole -- to decree the beginning of the Jewish month. This is important for setting the date of each Jewish holiday. It is so important that when the Greeks were persecuting us at the time of the Hanukah story, they forbade the Jewish court to decree the beginning of the new month. The Torah states:

"This month shall be for you the first of the months (referring to the month of Nissan when Pesach occurs. The new year of the reign of king starts with the month of Nissan. The new year for the creation of mankind starts with the month of Tishrei)" (Exodus 12:2).

What lesson for life can we learn from this verse?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein commented that the month of Tishrei is the month of the creation of the world. The month of Nissan is the month of the exodus from Egypt. Both months are lessons in our awareness of the Almighty's power.

The first lesson is that the Almighty is the Creator of the universe. The second lesson is that of hashgacha pratit, Divine Providence. The Almighty

controls the events of the world and therefore He is the One Who enslaved the Children of Israel and He is the One Who freed them. The Torah is telling us in this verse that the lesson of the Almighty's guiding historical events is even more important than the lesson of the creation of the world.

One can believe that the Almighty created the world and this might not make any difference in a person's behavior and attitudes. However, once a person is aware of the supervision of the Almighty in daily events, he will improve his behavior. Moreover, his trust in the Almighty will free him from worry. The month of Nissan is the first month of the year and by remembering this we remember all that is symbolized by the Exodus. This will have a major effect on what we do and think. *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2015 Rabbi M. Twersky & The TorahWeb Foundation*

### RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

## Break No Bones About It

**O**ne of the initial mitzvos of the Torah, the Korban Pesach, was given to the Jewish nation as a preface to redemption. It is filled with myriad details, surely a distinct departure from other introductory exercises that leave the participants with simple initiatory protocol.

What is truly amazing is the place where the Torah put the specific mitzvah that prohibits the breaking of the meat bones of the sacrifice, to get to the food.

At first, in the early part of the parsha, the Torah details the way the lamb is roasted and how it is eaten. "But if the household is too small for a lamb or kid, then he and his neighbor who is near his house shall take according to the number of people; everyone according to what he eats shall be counted for the lamb or kid.: They shall eat the flesh on that night -- roasted over the fire -- and matzos; with bitter herbs shall they eat it.: "You shall not eat it partially roasted or cooked in water; only roasted over fire -- its head, its legs, with its innards: You shall not leave any of it until morning; any of it that is left until morning you shall burn in the fire: "So shall you eat it -- your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; you shall eat it in haste -- it is a Pesach-offering to Hashem" (Exodus 12:4-7).

It makes no mention of the command to eat it without breaking a bone. Only, some thirty verses later, later when the Torah discusses the fundamentals of the offering, does it add that law, as a seemingly misplaced detail among serious edicts: such as who is permitted to eat it; and that the korban is a mitzvah which is incumbent on every Jew.

"Hashem said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the chok (decree) of the Pesach-offering -- no alienated person may eat from it. Every slave of a man, who was

bought for money, you shall circumcise him; then he may eat of it. A sojourner and a hired laborer may not eat it.

Then it adds, "In one house shall it be eaten; you shall not remove any of the meat from the house to the outside, and you shall not break a bone in it. The entire assembly of Israel shall perform it: "When a proselyte sojourns among you he shall make the Pesach-offering for Hashem; each of his males shall be circumcised, and then he may draw near to perform it and he shall be like the native of the land; no uncircumcised male may eat of it. One law shall there be for the native and the proselyte who lives among you.": (ibid 43-49).

The question is: why insert the issue of broken bones, a seemingly minor detail, together with the fundamentals of this most important ritual?

When the Satmar Rav came to this country after World War II he had a handful of Hungarian immigrants, most of them Holocaust survivors, as his Chasidim. As the custom is with Chasidic rebbes, they would come for a blessing and leave a few dollars for the rebbe to give to charity on their behalf. The poor immigrants, would come in for blessings, some leaving a dollar, others some coins and on occasion a wealthier chasid would leave a five, a ten, or even a twenty-dollar bill. The rebbe would not look at the offerings; rather he would open the old drawers of his desk and stuff them in, ready, and available for them to be put to charitable use.

Of course, givers were not the only one who visited the rebbe. Those who were in need came as well. Each of them bearing their tale of sorrow, asking for a donation.

Once a man came desperately in need of a few hundred dollars, which the rebbe gladly agreed to give.

The rebbe opened his drawer, and began pulling out bills. Out came singles and fives, a few tens and even a twenty. Then the rebbe called in his Gabbai (sexton), "Here," he said, please help me with this."

The Rebbe began straightening out the bills one by one. Together, they took each bill, flattened it and pressed it until it looked as good as new. The rebbe took 100 one dollar bills and piled it into a neat stack. Then he took out a handful of five-dollar bills and put them into another pile. Then he took about five wrinkled ten dollar bills, pressed them flat, and piled them as well. Finally, he slowly banded each pile with a rubber band, and then bound them all together. He handed it to the gabbai and asked him to present it to the supplicant. "Rebbe," asked the sexton, "why all the fuss? A wrinkled dollar works just as well as a crisp one!"

The rebbe explained. "One thing you must understand. When you do a mitzvah. It must be done with grace, and class. The way you give tzedaka, is almost as important as the tzedaka itself. Mitzvos must

be done regally. We will not hand out rumbled bills to those who are in need."

The prohibition against breaking bones is not just a culinary exercise. The Sefer HaChinuch explains it is a fundamental ordinance that defines the very attitude toward that Jews should have toward mitzvos. Though we eat in haste, we must eat with class. We don't break bones, and we don't chomp at the meat; especially mitzvah meat. That fact is as fundamental as the others it is placed with. A person's actions while performing a Mitzvah is inherently reflective of his attitude toward the Mitzvah itself. The Torah, in placing this seemingly insignificant, command about the way things are eaten together with the laws of who is to eat it tells us that both the mitzvah and the attitude are equally important with no bones about it. ©2015 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

### **RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

## **Be'eros**

"**C**ome to Paroh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants so that I can place these signs of mine in his midst. And so that you will relate in the ears of your son and grandson how I mocked Egypt..."

Be'er Yosef: Chazal (Shemos Rabba 13) record an exchange between R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish about a fairness issue raised by these pesukim. R Yochanan observed that heretics could conclude that Paroh was set up for failure. It was impossible for him to repent, since Hashem artificially hardened his heart. Reish Lakish responded that heretics had no cause for concern, even if Hashem did harden Paroh's heart. G-d will warn a person again and again, but after a number of warnings, He will block the sinner's heart from the ways of teshuvah. Presumably, teshuvah is a privilege that can be revoked for a person who has committed excessive evil.

This midrash provides the basis for the famous words of the Rambam: "It is possible that a person might sin a great sin or many sins, so that the judgment reached by the great Judge demands that the payment exacted from the sinner (who sinned of his own knowledge and will) be that they prevent him from repenting. They do not permit him to repent of his evil, so that he will die, lost to the sin that he committed...For this reason the Torah writes, 'I will harden Paroh's heart,' because Paroh first sinned of his own accord...Why did Hashem continue to warn him through Moshe, 'Send [them out] and repent' after He had already told Paroh 'You will not send them out?' -- in order to teach humans that when G-d withholds the possibility of teshuvah from the sinner, it is impossible for him to repent, and he will die in his evil." (Hilchos Teshuvah 6:3)

This understanding allows a different approach to our pesukim. We usually read the part about

hardening Paroh's heart as Hashem's clueing in Moshe about what reaction he could expect from Paroh, and why. We now see, however, that this is not necessarily the best way to approach these verses. Rather, Hashem tells Moshe to go to Paroh and deliver a message. The message includes the information to be given to Paroh that Hashem would harden his heart! Moshe tells Paroh that his choices are no longer his own; he would be unable to extricate himself from his stubbornness. As a result, Hashem would have even more opportunities to visit His plagues upon the Egyptians.

Additionally, we've arrived at another way of looking at the word bekirbo/ in his midst. We ordinarily understand this to mean in the midst of the Egyptian people, but it might instead mean in the midst of Paroh's own mind and heart, as we will explain.

Rashi (9:24) calls barad/ hail a miracle within a miracle. The hailstones themselves wreaked havoc all around, as they struck objects and people with the force of large stones. Inside them, fire raged. This fire failed to melt the ice; neither was the fire extinguished by the water. The two immiscible elements coexisted harmoniously, making peace with one another to do Hashem's bidding.

In our approach we find another dimension to the plague of hail. The dynamic between fire and water played out not only within each hailstone, but bekirbo, in the midst of Paroh himself. By now, thoughts of the makos burned furiously within the minds of all the Egyptians. They were angry, fed up, and ready for a return to normalcy at any price. If it would take freeing the Jews to make this happen, then so be it!

This fire burned inside Paroh as well. Yet, it did not succeed in melting his heart. His icy resistance continued as before. It was maintained by Hashem Himself, who ensured that Paroh would not give in as we would expect. Hashem hardened his heart, maintaining his strong rejection of Hashem, contrary to the interests of his subjects, and to sanity itself. (Based on Be'er Yosef, Shemos 10:1-2) ©2015 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org

