

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 B'doro K'Shmuel b'doro". 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



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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 next generation of children. ©2007 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss has been involved in Jewish education for the past forty-six years, serving as principal of various Hebrew day schools. He has received awards for his innovative programs and was chosen to receive the coveted Outstanding Principal award from the National Association of Private Schools. He now resides in Israel and is available for speaking engagements. Contact him at rvmordechai@aol.com

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The American writer Bruce Feiler recently published a best-selling book entitled *The Secrets of Happy Families*. It's an engaging work that uses research largely drawn from fields like team building, problem solving and conflict resolution, showing how management techniques can be used at home also to help make families cohesive units that make space for personal growth.

At the end, however, he makes a very striking and unexpected point: "The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative." He quotes a study from Emory University that the more children know about their family's story, "the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, the more successfully they believe their family functions." (Pg. 274. Feiler does not cite the source, but see: Bohanek, Jennifer G., Kelly A. Marin, Robyn Fivush, and Marshall P. Duke. "Family Narrative Interaction and Children's Sense of Self." *Family Process* 45.1 (2006): 39-54.)

A family narrative connects children to something larger than themselves. It helps them make

sense of how they fit into the world that existed before they were born. It gives them the starting-point of an identity. That in turn becomes the basis of confidence. It enables children to say: This is who I am. This is the story of which I am a part. These are the people who came before me and whose descendant I am. These are the roots of which I am the stem reaching upward toward the sun.

Nowhere was this point made more dramatically than by Moses in this week's parsha. The tenth plague is about to strike. Moses knows that this will be the last. Pharaoh will not merely let the people go. He will urge them to leave. So, on G-d's command, he prepares the people for freedom. But he does so in a way that is unique. He does not talk about liberty. He does not speak about breaking the chains of bondage. He does not even mention the arduous journey that lies ahead. Nor does he enlist their enthusiasm by giving them a glimpse of the destination, the Promised Land that G-d swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the land of milk and honey.

He talks about children. Three times in the course of the parsha he turns to the theme: And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say... (Exodus 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' (Exodus 13:8)

And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him... (Exodus 13:14)

This is wonderfully counterintuitive. He doesn't speak about tomorrow but about the distant future. He does not celebrate the moment of liberation. Instead he wants to ensure that it will form part of the people's memory until the end of time. He wants each generation to pass on the story to the next. He wants Jewish parents to become educators, and Jewish children to be guardians of the past for the sake of the future. Inspired by G-d, Moses taught the Israelites the lesson arrived at via a different route by the Chinese: If you plan for a year, plant rice. If you plan for a decade, plant a tree. If you plan for a century, educate a child.

Jews became famous throughout the ages for putting education first. Where others built castles and palaces, Jews built schools and houses of study. From this flowed all the familiar achievements in which we take collective pride: the fact that Jews knew their texts even in ages of mass illiteracy; the record of Jewish scholarship and intellect; the astonishing over-representation of Jews among the shapers of the modern mind; the Jewish reputation, sometimes admired, sometimes feared, sometimes caricatured, for mental agility, argument, debate, and the ability to see all sides of a disagreement.

But Moses' point wasn't simply this. G-d never commanded us: Thou shall win a Nobel Prize. What he

wanted us to teach our children was a story. He wanted us to help our children understand who they are, where they came from, what happened to their ancestors to make them the distinctive people they became and what moments in their history shaped their lives and dreams. He wanted us to give our children an identity by turning history into memory, and memory itself into a sense of responsibility. Jews were not summoned to be a nation of intellectuals. They were called on to be actors in a drama of redemption, a people invited by G-d to bring blessings into the world by the way they lived and sanctified life.

For some time now, along with many others in the West, we have sometimes neglected this deeply spiritual element of education. That is what makes Lisa Miller's recent book *The Spiritual Child*, an important reminder of a forgotten truth. Professor Miller teaches psychology and education at Columbia University and co-edits the journal *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*. Her book is not about Judaism or even religion as such, but specifically about the importance of parents encouraging the spirituality of the child.

Children are naturally spiritual. They are fascinated by the vastness of the universe and our place in it. They have the same sense of wonder that we find in some of the greatest of the psalms. They love stories, songs and rituals. They like the shape and structure they give to time, and relationships, and the moral life. To be sure, sceptics and atheists have often derided religion as a child's view of reality, but that only serves to strengthen the corollary, that a child's view of reality is instinctively, intuitively religious. Deprive a child of that by ridiculing faith, abandoning ritual, and focusing instead on academic achievement and other forms of success, and you starve him or her of some of the most important elements of emotional and psychological well-being.

As Professor Miller shows, the research evidence is compelling. Children who grow up in homes where spirituality is part of the atmosphere at home are less likely to succumb to depression, substance abuse, aggression and high-risk behaviours including physical risk-taking and "a sexuality devoid of emotional intimacy". Spirituality plays a part in a child's resilience, physical and mental health and healing. It is a key dimension of adolescence and its intense search for identity and purpose. The teenage years often take the form of a spiritual quest. And when there is a cross-generational bond through which children and parents come to share a sense of connection to something larger, an enormous inner strength is born. Indeed the parent-child relationship, especially in Judaism, mirrors the relationship between G-d and us.

That is why Moses so often emphasises the role of the question in the process of education: "When your child asks you, saying..." -- a feature ritualised at the Seder table in the form of the Mah nishtanah.

Judaism is a questioning and argumentative faith, in which even the greatest ask questions of G-d, and in which the rabbis of the Mishnah and Midrash constantly disagree. Rigid doctrinal faith that discourages questions, calling instead for blind obedience and submission, is psychologically damaging and fails to prepare a child for the complexity of real life. What is more, the Torah is careful, in the first paragraph of the Shema, to say, "You shall love the Lord your G-d..." before saying, "You shall teach these things diligently to your children." Parenthood works when your children see that you love what you want them to learn.

The long walk to freedom, suggests this week's parsha, is not just a matter of history and politics, let alone miracles. It has to do with the relationship between parents and children. It is about telling the story and passing it on across the generations. It is about a sense of G-d's presence in our lives. It is about making space for transcendence, wonder, gratitude, humility, empathy, love, forgiveness and compassion, ornamented by ritual, song and prayer. These help to give a child confidence, trust and hope, along with a sense of identity, belonging and at-home-ness in the universe.

You cannot build a healthy society out of emotionally unhealthy families and angry and conflicted children. Faith begins in families. Hope is born in the home. © 2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

I have always been most fascinated-and confounded-by the ninth plague, the plague of darkness. How can darkness be "tangible," touchable? Yes, darkness can be oppressive, foreboding and forbidding. But darkness is not substantive; much the opposite, it is usually defined as the absence of light, a phenomenon more akin to nothingness than to something that can be touched or felt.

But then one phrase in the text, especially in view of how the Hebrews got to Egypt in the first place (because the jealous brothers of Joseph never "saw" the hapless favorite son of Jacob as their brother), cried out at me: "No man could see his brother"-because of darkness (Ex. 10:23).

Herein is depicted a spiritual, social darkness, a veritable blindness on the part of the Egyptians, who refused to see their Hebrew neighbors as their siblings under G-d; therefore, since they were the more powerful, they enslaved the able-bodied Hebrews and murdered their defenseless male babies. It was this spiritual blindness that certainly could be "felt" in the daily acts of inhumanity perpetrated against the Hebrews; it was this blindness that was miraculously expressed in this ninth, palpable plague of darkness.

This may very well serve as the key to

understanding all of the plagues. The Egyptians turned their life-giving river into a bloodbath of innocent Hebrew babies; G-d turned the Nile into blood against the Egyptians.

Then, instead of much-needed water for crops, frogs poured out of the Nile, with their death-heralding "croaks" signaling disasters to come. The Egyptians forced cruel and unsanitary living conditions upon the Hebrews; G-d sent lice to the Egyptians. The Egyptians came after the Hebrews like wild beasts; G-d sent a plague of wild beasts to afflict the Egyptians. The Egyptians denuded their slaves of livestock; epidemic destroyed the Egyptian livestock. The taskmasters' whippings caused the Hebrew slaves to suffer boils on their bodies; G-d sent the Egyptians a plague of boils and blisters.

The whiplashes stung the bodies of the suffering Hebrews, and a heavy rain of stinging, slaying hail fell down on the Egyptians. The Hebrew slaves saw the last of their crops confiscated by their masters, and G-d sent swarms of locusts to remove the last residue of Egyptian produce; locusts which covered their land and filled their houses. And finally, just as the Egyptians plunged the world into spiritual darkness by enslaving and murdering G-d's "firstborn" Israel, G-d engulfed the Egyptian world in darkness and then slew the firstborn of the Egyptians-providing new hope for humanity when Pharaoh submitted to G-d's will and allowed the Hebrews to leave Egypt as free men and women.

The peaceful Islam of the Sufi and moderate Sunni variety (11th to 13th centuries), the Islam which gave the world translations of the Greek mathematicians and philosophers, has given way to extremist Wahhabi Islam of world domination, of Jihad and conquest by the sword.

Meanwhile, the free world is sleeping at the wheel. Iran is being allowed to continue to develop nuclear weaponry; European countries are siding with Mahmoud Abbas in his request for UN recognition even after he makes a pact with terrorist Hamas; Islamic State is on the march, beheading innocent people and taking over more and more territory in Iraq, and America is putting up too little opposition too late.

Shari'a domination is every bit as dangerous as Hitler's Nazism, and is even more fanatically determined to make the world non-Islam free. The world once again is being engulfed in darkness. We are returning to the dark, black Middle Ages, and our response must be strong and immediate. We must prevent extremist Islam from victory.

The Jewish people must understand that in these quickly changing times, we must be cognizant of the fact that G-d provides the cure before the knockout strike. One of the great miracles of this fateful and extraordinary period in Jewish history is the rapprochement between Christianity and Judaism after 2,000 years of Christian anti-Jewish persecution. A

great majority of all Christian leadership today renounces anti-Semitism, accepts our unique Covenant with G-d, and deeply respects the Jewish roots of their faith.

In light of the fact that our world war against extremist Islam is a religious war and although we are fewer than 13 million Jews worldwide while there are 1.2 billion Muslims, thankfully there are also two billion Christians. Hence we, Jews and Christians who believe in a G-d of love, morality and peace must join hands and hearts together and fulfill our mission as G-d's witnesses and a light unto the nations. Together we must reach out to our Muslim brothers and sisters, first to those who understand and deplore the fact that ethical monotheistic Islam is being hijacked by fanatic mono-Satanistic Islam.

We must strengthen their voices to recapture the true faith of Islam. Then all of us together, must reach out to our errant Muslim siblings and remind them that we are all children of Abraham, the father of those who believe in a G-d of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. With strength and spirit, faith and fortitude, the free world will not only survive, but will prevail. ©2016 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

As the drama of the Exodus from Egypt draws nearer its climax in this week's Torah reading, one cannot help but be struck by the stubbornness of Pharaoh in the face of all of the plagues visited upon him and his nation. His advisers had long before told him that all was lost and that he should cut his losses quickly by freeing the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. This seemingly wise and rational counsel was rejected by Pharaoh out of hand.

Pharaoh sees himself as a godlike figure, omniscient, supremely brilliant and all knowing. He is trapped in a propaganda web of his own making – he can never admit to being wrong or to having made an error of judgment or policy. In the course of human history this has often been the fatal error made by dictators who were always supremely confident in their arrogance and who never acknowledged their mistakes.

Just recall the mass murderers and dictators of our past century – Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Arafat, etc. None of them ever admitted to error and all of them led their people to disaster and untold suffering. This was the arrogance of power overwhelming rational thought and nullifying good strategic planning. There is also an arrogance of intellect. The intellectuals amongst us, who always know what is best for everyone else, are never reticent about rendering opinions on all issues and policies. Again, the fact that they have been wrong – dead wrong – so many times in the past

causes them no inhibition in advancing their current viewpoints.

The Torah seems to attribute Pharaoh's continuing folly of unreasonable stubbornness, to G-d, so to speak, 'hardening his heart.' This implies that somehow Pharaoh's freedom of choice was diminished and he could not have capitulated to the demands of Moshe even if he had wished to do so. This philosophic and theological difficulty has been dealt with by the great commentators of Israel over the ages, with varying theories offered and advanced.

It seems from many of their opinions that at a certain point in human decision-making, a tipping point is achieved when the leader can no longer admit to error and remain the leader. 'Hardening' the leader's heart means there is an unwillingness to give up one's position of power. Very few leaders in the history of humanity have willingly surrendered power.

Simply rising to a position of leadership, let alone absolute and dictatorial power, almost automatically 'hardens one's heart' and limits one's choices and policy options. The Torah blesses a generation that is privileged to have a leader that is capable of admitting sin and error and can offer a public sacrifice in the Temple in atonement.

The greatness of King David lies not only in his heroic spiritual and physical accomplishments as king of Israel but in his ability to admit to personal failings and errors of judgment. Pharaoh is incapable of such self-scrutiny and realistic humility. His lust for power has 'hardened his heart' beyond the power of recall. He has doomed himself as have so many of his ilk over the centuries. ©2016 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. ©2016 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 SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Bo continues with the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians, and the exodus that followed. We find one interesting event that happened when Paroh called in Moshe and Aaron to bargain with them, right after being warned of the upcoming locust plague (10:8-11). After offering to allow only the men to go, and being rejected, Paroh kicked Moshe and Aaron out of the palace. The "Riva" wonders why they waited until they were kicked out of the palace, when they could have left before it got to that point. The Riva answers that had Moshe and Aaron left before being told to leave, they would have shown a lack of respect for Paroh, thereby embarrassing him. Since it was Paroh that had originally invited them, and since he was the ruler of the land they were in, they showed him respect

by not leaving until he told them to, despite their embarrassment.

This amazing lesson in humility is even backed up by the events surrounding it. Locust, the plague directly following the story, was started by Moshe stretching his hands on the ground, symbolizing humility. We each have a common, ongoing struggle throughout our lives -- our ego. If we simply stopped, thought, and realized about every time we felt cheated or angry, we'd realize that it's our own ego that's letting us get angry or feel cheated, and if we learned to set that ego aside, we could accomplish so much more, comparable to the accomplishments of Moshe and Aaron. Our ego will control our action and reactions, unless we learn to control it. © 2016 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"Why did [G-d] bring darkness (the 9th plague) upon [the Egyptians]? Because there were wicked Israelites in that generation who didn't want to leave [Egypt], and they died during the three days of darkness so that the Egyptians shouldn't see their downfall and say that they (the Israelites) are being smitten just as we are" (Rashi on Sh'mos 10:22). Later (13:18), Rashi tells us that 80% of the Israelites died during the plague of darkness, an astounding number. By comparison, the six million Jews who were killed in the holocaust, while well over a third of the estimated Jewish population at the time, and certainly significant (the life of each and every Jew is significant), was less than 40%, less than half the amount as those who perished shortly before the exodus from Egypt. [Rashi quotes only one opinion in the M'chilta; another opinion says rather than only one in five surviving, it was one in fifty, while a third opinion says it was one in five hundred. You can do the math to figure out the percentages; only one in five surviving, which means that four out of five did not, is enough to make the point.] Yet, we (correctly) consider the holocaust to be a national tragedy, remembering the victims either on Yom HaShoah or on Tisha B'Av, but celebrate the exodus from Egypt as the epitome of our being saved ("redeemed"), with barely a mention of the tremendous loss of life that occurred. (Even when we "remember the victims" at the Seder by spilling some wine, it is when we mention the ten plagues, with the victims being the Egyptians.) Why is the loss of such a high percentage of our population not considered a national tragedy?

Rabbi Yitzchok Sorotzkin, sh'lita (Rinas Yitzchok II) asks a totally unrelated question, quoting the first Rashi on the first verse in the Torah: "There was no need to begin the Torah any earlier than 'this month is for you' (Sh'mos 12:2), which was the first mitzvah that Israel was commanded." Rav Sorotzkin

asks why this was considered the first mitzvah if Avraham was commanded that he and his descendents must be circumcised (B'reishis 17:1-14), Yaakov was commanded not to eat the sinew of the hip (B'reishis 32:33; although his wording, based on Rambam, isn't precise, the point is valid unless it wasn't really a "commandment"), and Amram (Moshe's father) was commanded to keep additional mitzvos (see Rambam's Hilchos M'lachim 9:1; it would seem that Rav Sorotzkin didn't mention the mitzvos commanded to Adam and Noach because they weren't directed only at us, although since Yishmael was included in the mitzvah of circumcision, which Eisav should have kept as well, this line of thinking could apply to circumcision too). What made the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah, from where the Torah could have started, when other mitzvos were mentioned before it?

To answer this question, Rav Sorotzkin references Siach Yitzchok's commentary (in Siddur Ishay Yisroel) on Yom Tov davening, where we say that G-d "chose us from among all the nations, loved us, and wanted (or forgave) us." Siach Yitzchok suggests that the first stage, G-d having chosen us from among all the nations, refers to G-d taking us out of Egypt despite (at the time of the "choosing") it being difficult to differentiate between us and the Egyptians, since "these were idol worshippers and these are idol worshippers." Until that point, i.e. before we were "chosen," it was not appropriate to give us the Torah (see Maharal's Tiferes Yisroel 17), so none of the mitzvos commanded until then could be considered "the first mitzvah of the Torah." Now, though, as G-d was about to take us out of Egypt, "choosing" us from all the other nations, we became eligible to receive the Torah, and the first mitzvah commanded after this "eligibility" took effect qualified as being "the first mitzvah in the Torah."

This first mitzvah was commanded between the 9th and 10th plagues, i.e. after the plague of darkness, when those "Israelites" who were "wicked" died. In an early piece, Rav Sorotzkin discusses why "not wanting to leave Egypt" was enough of a reason for them to have to die, focusing on the wording of the Midrash that Rashi is based on (Sh'mos Rabbah 14:3), which says "there were sinners among Israel who were given a position of authority from the Egyptians and they had wealth and honor and they didn't want to leave." He then references the Bais HaLevi on Parashas Sh'mos, who says that although making the Israelites into slaves benefited the Egyptians economically, their main purpose in giving them torturous tasks was to get them to abandon their religion, telling them that if they did, they would make their lives easier by lessening their workload. As Yalkut Shimoni (268) says, "the Egyptians said to them, 'why are you circumcising your sons? Let them be like the sons of the Egyptians (i.e. uncircumcised) and we will lighten the hard labor from

you." Rav Sorotzkin then suggests that those who were given a "position of authority, and had honor and wealth" were those who abandoned their religion in order to avoid any hard labor. Because they abandoned their faith, they deserved to die during the plague of darkness.

[As a side note, this would explain why, if the wicked died during the plague of darkness, Dasan and Aviram, who were wicked in Egypt when they caused Moshe to have to flee to Midyan in the first place (see Rashi on Sh'mos 2:13 and 2:15), and remained wicked until the day they died rebelling against Moshe in the desert (Bamidbar 16:23-32, 26:9-10), did not die during that plague, as despite their wickedness, they never abandoned their religion. They may have believed (or made themselves believe) that Moshe was not authorized to take the nation out of Egypt, as the 400 years had not yet passed (see pg. 3 of <http://tinyurl.com/go4uh82>), but their "position of authority" was based on their being independently wealthy (see Rashi on 4:19; becoming poor would have no impact on what they wanted to do to Moshe unless it was their wealth that had given them access to Pharaoh in the first place, access they no longer had). It was not based on them having capitulated to the Egyptians by abandoning their faith, as they never did, and they therefore were not included with the "wicked" who died during the 9th plague.]

It makes sense that those who had abandoned the faith of their fathers would have to be eliminated before G-d officially "chose" the descendents of Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov to be His "chosen nation." Therefore, during the 9th plague all those who were "wicked" died, after which G-d officially designated the nation to be His "chosen people," making them eligible to receive the Torah, and the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh "the first mitzvah of the Torah." And since we didn't, and couldn't, become G-d's "chosen nation" until after the plague of darkness, it was at this point that we attained our status of nationhood. Anything that occurred before this might have been tragic, but couldn't be considered a "national tragedy" worthy of commemorating yearly, or even incorporating into the Seder. (True, when we "remember the victims" we also include the assimilated Israelites who died in the plagues, specifically the 9th plague, but they do not get a separate commemoration.)

There have been many large-scale human tragedies discussed in our traditions, including the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion. But as tragic as they were, there were not national tragedies, and are not commemorated. Similarly, as tragic as the death of 80% of a population is, since we didn't really become a "nation" until after their deaths, this tragedy isn't commemorated either.

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RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

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"V'shamarta es hachuka hazos -- You should observe this law." There is a dispute whether this pasuk is referring to the law of the korban Pesach or the law of Tefillin, since the previous pesukim speak of both of these mitzvos and therefore it is unclear which this pasuk is addressing. There are strong links between the Mitzvos of korban Pesach and Tefillin. They are both remembrances of yetzias Mitzrayim. The primary theme of the first two parshios of Tefillin is yetzias Mitzrayim, with a description of korban Pesach playing a prominent role. Tefillin are not only a way to remember yetzias Mitzrayim, but also reinforce a primary theme of korban Pesach.

One's home is a theme that permeates the observance of korban Pesach, particularly the first one that was brought in Mitzrayim. The halachos of korban Pesach revolve around the home. The blood is placed on the doorpost, the meat is eaten inside the house, and nobody may leave the house until morning. The offering of the korban Pesach is consumed by family units and neighbors. Even in subsequent generations the preparation for Pesach focuses on removing chometz from one's home.

The significance of the Jewish home connects the beginning and the end of Sefer Shemos. The Jewish People are described as the "beis Yaakov -- the house of Yaakov" in the opening pasuk of Sefer Shemos. The sefer concludes with "beis Yisroel -- the house of Israel" seeing Hashem's Glory resting on the Mishkan. The goal of Sefer Shemos is to transform the Jewish home into a place worthy of the Divine Presence. Hashem's presence is not relegated to the Mishkan, rather the Mishkan serves as a model for sanctity in every home. The celebration of Pesach involves not only visiting the Beis HaMikdash but also the preparation of our homes as smaller Mishkans. Just as the flour offerings in the Beis HaMikdash are free of chometz the entire year, during the week of Pesach our homes are elevated to the status of a mikdash and all of the chometz must be removed. Similarly, the first korban Pesach didn't require an actual mizbeach since the doorpost to every home served that purpose.

In addition to our actual homes serving as places for the Shechina to dwell, we carry with us two smaller "houses" that embody the same ideals as the Beis HaMikdash. The Tefillin are referred to as "batim -- houses." These "houses" must be square similar to the mizbeach of the Beis HaMikdash. Just as the Mishkan, and later the Beis HaMikdash, housed the words of Torah found in the Luchos, so too the batim of the Tefillin house the parshiyos that speak of our commitment to the words of the Torah. Chazal teach us that all parts of Tefillin must be made from kosher animal products just as the Mishkan had to meet this

requirement. The batim of the Tefillin and our homes on Pesach remind us that Hashem can rest his presence anywhere. The Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash inspire us to find Hashem in our own homes and family life. As we look at our miniature Mishkan tied to our arms and placed on our heads we remember the message of the korban Pesach. We must find Hashem everywhere and at all times. We can transform the "house of Yaakov" into a "house of Israel" in which we can always see the Divine Presence resting. ©2016 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & TorahWeb.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Oy Vey!

"Don't get mad," said the philosophers of the eighties, "get even."

I am not sure if the objective of the ten plagues was for the Almighty to get even with the nation that had enslaved His people. Certainly there are Midrashic sources that correlate the ten plagues as direct punishment for Egyptian crimes against the Jewish people. (Tana D'bei Eliyahu Chapter 7) So perhaps we might say that the Jewish people got even.

There is, however, no scriptural reference to the fact that they got mad. In fact, each time Moshe went to Pharaoh a serene and calculated negotiation occurred. "Let My people serve Me," Moshe commanded. When Pharaoh refused his obstinence was met with a clear and calculated threat. "If you refuse to allow the people to leave, I will send the following plague in you land." And so it went. Sometimes a plague immediately followed a warning, other times plagues came with no warning at all. When Pharaoh found Moshe and arranged for a cessation of the scourge, Pharaoh reneged on his commitment soon after. Moshe became frustrated, perhaps he even became impatient, but there was no anger until the final plague. Then, he not only got even, he got mad.

Moshe warned Pharaoh with the words of Hashem, "At about midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die." (Exodus 11:4) Though Moshe detailed the ramifications of the plague he was greeted with an apathetic response.

Finally the Torah tells us, that "Moshe left Pharaoh in burning anger" (Exodus 11:8) Why, only then did Moshe storm out in a rage? Was he not accustomed to the callous recklessness of the Egyptian leader? What irked him during the last encounter more than any of the previous ones?

The great physicist Albert Einstein escaped the Nazi inferno to find a haven in the United States. During World War II his letter to President Roosevelt initiated the effort that spurred the creation of the atomic bomb. His theory of relativity was a prime factor in its development, and Einstein knew the destructive power that his ideas could potentially release. When Einstein

heard in an August 6, 1945, radio broadcast that an atomic device was dropped on the city of Hiroshima, he reacted with stunned silence. After a moment of somber reflection he only found two words to say. "Oy vey!"

Rabbi Shimon Schwab (d.1994) explains that Moshe had patience with Pharaoh up to a point. Throughout the ordeal, the reckless king's obstinate decisions caused a great amount of discomfort to his people. Even when his advisors pleaded, "How long will this man [Moshe] be an obstacle, let them [the Jews] serve their G-d," Pharaoh refused. His recalcitrance brought plagues of pestilence, boils, locust, and darkness—in addition to blood, frogs, and lice. All of these afflictions were vastly uncomfortable—but not fatal. Even the fiery hail did not harm the G-d-fearing Egyptians that sought shelter.

The last, the Plague of the First Born, had the most devastating ramifications. It meant the deaths of thousands of Egyptians "from the firstborn son of Pharaoh to those of the maidservant who was behind the millstone." It was devastation so powerful that the Torah says that "such has never been and will never be again." (Exodus 11:6) Pharaoh was able to stop the imminent destruction with one simple word—"Go." Yet he chose to remain steadfast in his denial, bringing the downfall of his people and the death of innocents. And that callous and reckless behavior infuriated Moshe, whose compassion for the simplest of beings earned him the right to be the leader of the Jewish nation. The stark contrast displayed by his nemesis appalled him to the point of rage. The Torah commands us, "do not to hate the Egyptian, for you were a sojourner in his land." (Deuteronomy 23:8) The Torah's attitude toward a nation that held us captive is even more compassionate than that of its own leaders. Barbaric leaders egging on many simple people throughout the world, to act in a self-destructive manner are reminiscent of the Pharaoh who destroyed his own family to save his ego. It's enough to make anybody—even the most humble man who ever lived—very angry. ©2003 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

