

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Genesis ends on an almost serene note. Jacob has found his long lost son. The family has been reunited. Joseph has forgiven his brothers. Under his protection and influence the family has settled in Goshen, one of the most prosperous regions of Egypt. They now have homes, property, food, the protection of Joseph and the favour of Pharaoh. It must have seemed one of the golden moments of Abraham's family's history.

Then, as has happened so often since, "There arose a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph." There was a political climate change. The family fell out of favour. Pharaoh told his advisers: "Look, the Israelite people are becoming too numerous and strong for us" (Ex. 1:9) -- the first time the word "people" is used in the Torah with reference to the children of Israel. "Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase." And so the whole mechanism of oppression moves into operation: forced labour that turns into slavery that becomes attempted genocide.

This is the first intimation in history of what in modern times took the form of the Russian forgery, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. In the Diaspora, Jews -- powerless -- were often seen as all-powerful. What this usually means, when translated, is: How is it that Jews manage to evade the pariah status we have assigned to them?)

The story is engraved in our memory. We tell it every year, and in summary-form in our prayers, every day. It is part of what it is to be a Jew. Yet there is one phrase that shines out from the narrative: "But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread." That, no less than oppression itself, is part of what it means to be a Jew. The worse things get, the stronger we become. Jews are the people who not only survive but thrive in adversity.

Jewish history is not merely a story of Jews enduring catastrophes that might have spelled the end to less tenacious groups. It is that after every disaster, Jews renewed themselves. They discovered some hitherto hidden reservoir of spirit that fuelled new forms

Please keep in mind
Yaacov Yechezkel Chai ben Soomboul
for a refuah shelaima

of collective self-expression as the carriers of G-d's message to the world.

Every tragedy begat new creativity. After the division of the kingdom following the death of Solomon came the great literary prophets, Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Out of the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile came the renewal of Torah in the life of the nation, beginning with Ezekiel and culminating in the vast educational programme brought back to Israel by Ezra and Nehemiah. From the destruction of the Second Temple came the immense literature of rabbinic Judaism, until then preserved mostly in the form of an oral tradition: Mishnah, Midrash and Gemara.

From the Crusades came the Hassidei Ashkenaz, the North European school of piety and spirituality. Following the Spanish expulsion came the mystic circle of Tzefat: Lurianic Kabbalah and all it inspired by way of poetry and prayer. From East European persecution and poverty came the Hassidic movement and its revival of grass-roots Judaism through a seemingly endless flow of story and song. And from the worst tragedy of all in human terms, the Holocaust, came the rebirth of the state of Israel, the greatest collective Jewish affirmation of life in more than two thousand years.

It is well known that the Chinese ideogram for "crisis" also means "opportunity". Any civilisation that can see the blessing within the curse, the fragment of light within the heart of darkness, has within it the capacity to endure. Hebrew goes one better. The word for crisis, mashber, also means "a child-birth chair." Written into the semantics of Jewish consciousness is the idea that the pain of hard times is a collective form of the contractions of a woman giving birth. Something new is being born. That is the mindset of a people of whom it can be said that "the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread."

Where did it come from, this Jewish ability to turn weakness into strength, adversity into advantage,



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darkness into light? It goes back to the moment in which our people received its name, Israel. It was then, as Jacob wrestled alone at night with an angel, that as dawn broke his adversary begged him to let him go. "I will not let you go until you bless me", said Jacob. That is the source of our peculiar, distinctive obstinacy. We may have fought all night. We may be tired and on the brink of exhaustion. We may find ourselves limping, as did Jacob. Yet we will not let our adversary go until we have extracted a blessing from the encounter. This turned out to be not a minor and temporary concession. It became the basis of his new name and our identity. Israel, the people who "wrestled with G-d and man and prevailed", is the nation that grows stronger with each conflict and catastrophe.

I was reminded of this unusual national characteristic by an article that appeared in the British press in October 2015. Israel at the time was suffering from a wave of terrorist attacks that saw Palestinians murdering innocent civilians in streets and bus stations throughout the country. It began with these words: "Israel is an astonishing country, buzzing with energy and confidence, a magnet for talent and investment -- a cauldron of innovation." It spoke of its world-class excellence in aerospace, clean-tech, irrigation systems, software, cyber-security, pharmaceuticals and defence systems. (Luke Johnson, 'Animal Spirits: Israel and its tribe of risk-taking entrepreneurs,' Sunday Times, 4 October 2015.)

"All this", the writer went on to say, "derives from brainpower, for Israel has no natural resources and is surrounded by hostile neighbours." The country is living proof of "the power of technical education, immigration and the benefits of the right sort of military service." Yet this cannot be all, since Jews have consistently overachieved, wherever they were and whenever they were given the chance. He goes through the various suggested explanations: the strength of Jewish families, their passion for education, a desire for self-employment, risk-taking as a way of life, and even ancient history. The Levant was home to the world's first agricultural societies and earliest traders. Perhaps, then, the disposition to enterprise was written, thousands of years ago, into Jewish DNA. Ultimately, though, he concludes that it has to do with

"culture and communities".

A key element of that culture has to do with the Jewish response to crisis. To every adverse circumstance, those who have inherited Jacob's sensibilities insist: "I will not let you go until you bless me." That is how Jews, encountering the Negev, found ways of making the desert bloom. Seeing a barren, neglected landscape elsewhere, they planted trees and forests. Faced with hostile armies on all their borders, they developed military technologies they then turned to peaceful use. War and terror forced them to develop medical expertise and world-leading skills in dealing with the aftermath of trauma. They found ways of turning every curse into a blessing. The historian Paul Johnson, as always, put it eloquently:

"Over 4,000 years the Jews proved themselves not only great survivors but extraordinarily skilful in adapting to the societies among which fate had thrust them, and in gathering whatever human comforts they had to offer. No people has been more fertile in enriching poverty or humanising wealth, or in turning misfortune to creative account." (Paul Johnson, *The History of the Jews*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, 58.)

There is something profoundly spiritual as well as robustly practical about this ability to transform the bad moments of life into a spur to creativity. It is as if, deep within us were a voice saying, "You are in this situation, bad though it is, because there is a task to perform, a skill to acquire, a strength to develop, a lesson to learn, an evil to redeem, a shard of light to be rescued, a blessing to be uncovered, for I have chosen you to give testimony to humankind that out of suffering can come great blessings if you wrestle with it for long enough and with unshakeable faith."

In an age in which people of violence are committing acts of brutality in the name of the G-d of compassion, the people of Israel are proving daily that this is not the way of the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of life and the sanctity of life. And whenever we who are a part of that people lose heart, and wonder when it will ever end, we should recall the words: "The more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread." A people of whom that can be said can be injured, but can never be defeated. G-d's way is the way of life. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Book of Exodus begins the story of the people of Israel, the nation which developed from the household, or the family of Jacob. Many are the differences between the Book of Genesis and the Book of Exodus, but perhaps the greatest change lies in the "personality" (as it were) of G-d Himself.

Genesis, the book of creation, refers to G-d at first as Elohim, the sum total of all the powers of the

Universe, who created the heavens, the earth and all of their accouterments. And this G-d of the creation, actually the G-d who was there before creation and who brought creation into being, works very much alone: G-d creates, G-d speaks, G-d calls forth.

Very different is the G-d of the Exodus; at the opening of this book, G-d defines Himself as Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, "I will be what I will be," the essence of being into the future, the G-d of history. In effect, G-d is saying that He will be, He will effectuate, He will bring about freedom and redemption, but in an indefinite time which cannot be revealed to Moses.

Why not? Because G-d now has partners. Firstly His Israelite covenantal partners from the Covenant Between the Pieces of Abraham (Genesis 15); secondly, the nations roundabout and especially the very powerful Egypt; and of course the leaders of Israel, especially Moses, and Moses's brother Aaron and sister Miriam.

You see, if Genesis is the book of creation, Exodus is the book of history and history is an ongoing process between G-d and His Chosen Nation, between G-d and the nations of the world; G-d will effectuate, but only together with the cooperation of His partners.

For the remainder of the Five Books of the Bible (Pentateuch), Moses will be the strong towering figure, from servitude to freedom to revelation, to wandering in the desert, to our entry into Israel. And strangely enough, he is introduced in our biblical portion with no personalized mention of pedigree: "A certain man of the House of Levi went and married a Levite woman; the woman conceived and bore a son... and she hid him for three months."

Why are Moses's parents anonymous? Perhaps because it really doesn't matter who your parents are: It matters who you are. And perhaps because we shall learn that he had a second mother who nurtured him, who saved his life from the baby-slaying Egyptians, who named him her son (Moses, in ancient Egyptian, means son) and brought him up in Pharaoh's palace - perhaps to teach us that only someone who came from the "outside" could free himself of the slave mentality and emancipate the Hebrew slaves, or perhaps to teach us that although the Egyptians enslaved us, it was also an Egyptian woman who endangered her life to save a Hebrew child.

It is only in Chapter 6 of Exodus that we learn the names of Moses's biological parents, and trace his pedigree from his parents Amram and Jochebed all the way back to the Children of Jacob; and this study of his roots comes just at the time that he is about to confront Pharaoh for the first time and begin his mission to free the Hebrew slaves. Nevertheless, the Bible tells us nothing at all about Moses's parents, their characters or their activities; we are only informed as to their names.

To be sure, we will learn much from the Bible

about the almost superhuman achievements of Moses, who was not only a great political liberator but who also "spoke to G-d face to face" (as it were) and revealed G-d's Torah laws for all posterity. We will also come to know his remarkable siblings, Aaron and Miriam.

But we cannot help but be curious about the two individuals who bore and to a great extent raised the three greatest leaders in Jewish history.

I may not know much about the parents of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, but I do know volumes about the grandparents of these three extraordinary people. Just imagine the circumcision ceremony which was made for Moses' father and the simhat bat for Moses' mother, rituals which must have occurred in fearful secrecy during a period of slavery and persecution.

The history of the children of Israel seems to be ending almost before it began, in the hellholes of Pithom and Raamses, in the turpitude of debasement and oppression.

Nevertheless one set of parents choose to name their son Amram, "exalted nation," and the other set of parents choose to name their daughter Jochebed, "glory to G-d." These grandparents had apparently been nourished on the Covenant Between the Pieces, upon the familial prophecy of "offspring who will be strangers in a land not theirs, who will be enslaved and oppressed, but...in the end will go free with great wealth" (Genesis 15:13-14), and will return to the land of their fathers.

And these grandparents apparently inspired their grandchildren with faith in the exalted status of their nation, a nation which will eventually bring the blessing of freedom and morality to all the families of the earth and with the ability to give glory to G-d in the darkest of times because they knew that eventually His great light would shine upon all of humanity. Yes, I may not know much about Moses' parents, but by the names they bestowed upon their children I know volumes about Moses' grandparents! ©2015 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Almighty tells Moshe at the incident of the Burning Bush: "The place upon which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). What deeper meaning and lesson can we derive from these words?

When a person finds himself in a situation with many distractions and difficulties, he is likely to say, "When the Almighty improves my situation, then I will be able to study Torah and fulfill more mitzvot, but not right now. Now I can only think of my problems."

The Chofetz Chaim, the greatest rabbi of the last generation, applies this verse to those situations. "The place upon which you are standing" -- that is, the exact situation in which you find yourself -- that is sacred. If your life situation is difficult, it is exactly in

that difficult situation that the Almighty wants you to serve Him. The Almighty only gives people tests which they can pass and the tests are for their own personal growth and spiritual elevation. The Sages teach us "According to the difficulty is the reward," We must strive to make the most of our every situation to serve the Almighty to the best of our ability. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2015 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It should be obvious to all that Moshe is a very unlikely choice to head the Jewish people, to redeem them from Egyptian bondage, and to bring the Torah down from Heaven to the Jewish people and eventually to all of humankind. It is also clear that Moshe would not be the likely one to guide them through the vicissitudes of war, thirst and forty years sojourn in the desert of Sinai.

Rambam writes that Moshe was of short temper. The Torah records for us that he was raised in the palace of the Egyptian Pharaoh. He kills an Egyptian and covers up his deed. He is a shepherd for a pagan priest of Midyan and marries one of his daughters. He is separated from his people for sixty years before returning to them and proclaiming himself as their leader.

Not really too impressive a resume for the greatest of all humans and of the Jewish people! But there it is for all to see and study. So, what is the message that the Torah is sending to us with this narrative?

Who needs to know of his previous life before becoming the Moshe we revere? After all, the Torah does not explicitly tell us about the youth experiences of Noach, Avraham and other great men of Israel and the world. So, why all the detail – much of it not too pleasant – about the early life of Moshe? The question almost begs itself of any student of Torah. The Torah is always concise and chary of words, so this concentration of facts and stories about Moshe's early life is somewhat puzzling.

What is clear from biblical narrative and Jewish and world history generally is that Heaven does not play by our rules nor does it conduct itself by our preconceived norms and notions. We never would have chosen David as our king, Amos as our prophet or Esther as our savior from destruction. Jewish history in a great measure has been formed by unlikely heroes, unexpected champions and surprising personalities.

It is almost as if Heaven wishes to mock our pretensions and upset our conventional wisdom. Oftentimes it is our stubborn nature, our haughtiness to think that we are always privy to G-d's plans and methods that has led us to stray far from truth and reality. The greatness of the generation that left Egypt

was that it not only believed in the G-d of Israel but believed in His servant Moshe as well.

Throughout his career as leader of Israel, according to Midrash, the rebels would always hold Moshe's past against him. They could not come to terms with Moshe as being their leader for he did not fit the paradigm that they had constructed for themselves. Eventually this disbelief in Moshe translated itself into a disbelief in G-d as well and doomed that generation to perish in the desert of Sinai.

G-d's plans, actions and choices, so to speak, are inscrutable. The prophet taught us that G-d stated: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts and My ways are not your ways." Moshe's life story is a striking example of this truism. ©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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Who were the midwives that were asked by Pharaoh to kill the newborn Jewish males? (Exodus 1:15, 16) Their identity is critical because they deserve a tremendous amount of credit. In the end, at great personal risk, they "did not do as the King of Egypt commanded them, but saved the boys." (Exodus 1:17)

Rashi insists that the midwives were Jewish women. They were Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moshe respectively. For Rashi, the term meyaldot ha-ivriyot (Exodus 1:15) is to be understood literally, as the Hebrew midwives.

Sforno disagrees. He insists that the midwives were actually non-Jews. For Sforno, meyaldot ha-ivriyot is to be understood as the midwives of the Hebrews.

What stands out as almost shocking in Rashi's interpretation is the actual request. Pharaoh asks Jews to murder other Jews, believing they would commit heinous crimes against their own people. Tragically, this phenomenon has occurred at certain times in history—tyrants successfully convinced Jews to turn against their own people.

On the other hand, what stands out in Sforno's interpretation is the response. In the end, the non-Jewish midwives, at great personal risk, were prepared to save Jews. This has also occurred in history—the preparedness of non-Jews to stand up to authority and intervene on behalf of Jews.

Sforno mirrors the time in which he lived. As part of renaissance Italy in the 15th century, he was a universalist par excellence. He believed that non-Jews would stand up and risk their lives to help Jews.

Rashi, hundreds of years before, lived in a

different world. Living before the Crusades, he could never imagine that non-Jews would stand up against the Pharaoh and save Jews.

Without this watershed moment in our history of standing up in the face of evil, there may have been no nation of Israel. Yet, there is no consensus as to the identity of these heroines. Only G-d knows for sure.

In this world where heroism sadly is defined by who sinks the winning shot or has the most money or sings the greatest music, we must remember this important lesson. Most of the time, we don't know who the true heroes are. Many who are given honor are undeserving. Others, who deserve honor, remain forever unknown.

It is G-d alone, who really knows. ©2015 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 DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

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

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

amusement and enjoyment.

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

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

But, Yeshaya inserts here some encouraging words and says, "On that day Hashem will be a crown of splendor and a diadem of glory for the remnant of His people." (28:5) The Radak (ad loc.) explains Yeshaya's reason for expressing these comforting words in the midst of his heavy rebuke. Radak sees these words as a reference to the Judean kingdom's future fortune, meriting one of the greatest miracles in Jewish history. In their near future, the mighty King Sanherev would attempt to engage in a heavy war against the Jewish people. In response to this Hashem would perform an awesome miracle and rescue His people without suffering one casualty. This miracle would result from an unprecedented campaign by King Chizkiyahu to proliferate Torah knowledge throughout the Judean kingdom. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 94b) records that during this illustrious era every single

person -- man or woman, boy or girl -- was proficient in the most complicated laws of ritual cleanliness. This very same kingdom who, one generation earlier was so heavily involved in idolatry, would soon cleanse itself from all sin and become totally immersed in Torah study and rituals. Through this enormous comeback, the prophet demonstrated the unlimited potential of the Jewish people. Although they may seriously digress in their spiritual ways, they do remain capable of a perfect reversal. Yeshaya stressed the phenomena that over the span of but one generation the Jewish people went from total spiritual bankruptcy to almost unprecedented perfection, meriting one of the greatest miracles ever seen.

In this spirit, Yeshaya brings the haftorah to a close and relays Hashem's heartwarming statement to our patriarch Yaakov. Hashem says, "Now, don't be embarrassed Yaakov, and don't blush from shame because when your children will see My hand in their midst they will sanctify My name... and exalt the Hashem of Israel." (29: 22, 23) The undertone here is that in the future the Jewish people will severely stray from the proper path. Their actions will be so inexcusable that their beloved patriarch Yaakov will be embarrassed and ashamed of them. But Hashem reminds Yaakov to focus on the unlimited potential of his children, the Jewish people. Although they can and do stray from the path, this is only when Hashem conceals Himself from them. In spiritual darkness, they lose sight of true values and, being amongst the nations of the world, adopt foreign values and customs. But the moment Hashem returns to them with His open hand, they will regain their true status of greatness. They will quickly return to Hashem and follow His perfect ways, sanctifying and exalting Him with their every action. Hashem told our patriarch Yaakov to overlook his children's present spiritual level and to focus on their potential greatness. The time will surely arrive when Yaakov, after all the long, hard years of servitude and exile will merit Hashem's revelation. Undoubtedly the response to this will be an immediate return to the lofty levels of spirituality and Yaakov, now Yisroel, will praise and glorify Hashem's name for eternity. © 2015 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

In this week's parsha, Shemos we read about Moshe's first encounter with Hashem while shepherding his sheep in the barren wilderness. Hashem revealed Himself to the future leader in a supernatural manner from within the burning 'sneh' -- the desert bush. Moshe witnesses the bush ablaze in fire without being consumed and is thoroughly baffled by this phenomenon.

Hashem's first words to him as he communicates to him from within the bush are,

"Remove your shoes from your feet for the land upon which you are standing is holy."

The whole scene is cloaked in mystery. What is the significance of the burning bush? Why couldn't Hashem communicate with him directly, without the medium of a bush? Why did he have to remove his shoes?

The commentaries explain that the sign of a true leader is one who intimately senses the pains and travails of his people. Although Moshe was estranged from his Jewish roots while living in Paroh's palace, his heart and mind were churning in the cement and mortar with which his enslaved brothers toiled.

He was overwhelmed with the epic question; why were Hashem's chosen and beloved children so persecuted and forsaken? Where was Hashem when their babies were tossed in the Nile, when they were being ruthlessly tormented? It is the same question we Jews have grappled with throughout our long and blood-soaked exile, until this day. Where was Hashem when we, his chosen people, were driven from country to country, maligned and reviled, led like sheep to the slaughter house?

Hashem communicates to Moshe His reassurance that while He may appear at times to be remote from His suffering people, in reality He is at their side, suffering along with them. The wild thorn bush symbolizes the people of Israel. A product of the desert, lowly and despised, the thorn bush relies on infrequent rainfall for its survival. So, too, the Jewish people in Egypt seemed abandoned by Hashem, as if drifting about at the mercy of natural forces.

Yet, Moshe is shown an amazing, uplifting sight; the bush withstands the raging flame. Although fire is essentially a destructive force, it is also the source of light and warmth. Similarly, in the darkest moments of our exile, when we feel the brunt of His anger, Hashem's loving presence radiates with an even greater intensity. He hears our cries and feels our suffering. It is this faith that has helped us survive millennia of persecution. But how are we to internalize this message in the midst of anguish and hardship?

The answer lies in Hashem's opening words to Moshe: "Remove your shoes from your feet." The commentaries explain that just as shoes cover the lower extremities of the body and allow them to connect to mother earth, our source of material sustenance, so, too, the physical body is but a protective covering to the soul. That covering allows the soul to maintain itself in our dark physical, temporal world.

By telling Moshe to take off his shoes, Hashem was essentially telling him to transcend the finite parameters of the concrete mind and body with which we perceive and interpret the world around us. Only by interpreting world events with a spiritual, transcendent gaze can we experience Hashem's loving light.

Yes, to our naked eye the galus may

sometimes seem to be a vale of never-ending torment and tears. But when we look beyond the physical exterior, we perceive that the lifeless clod of earth beneath our feet is imbued with Hashem's presence. Although we may not understand the purpose of it all, we are secure in the knowledge that all of our travails are stepping stones to an ultimate triumph. ©2015 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And G-d said to Moshe in Midyan, 'go return to Egypt, for all the men who seek to kill you have died' (Sh'mos 4:19). These instructions were given to Moshe "in Midyan," after he returned to Yisro to ask for permission to return to Egypt (4:18), which was after the long conversation at the burning bush when G-d told Moshe to go back to Egypt in order to take the Children of Israel out of Egypt (3:4-4:17). Why did G-d communicate with Moshe a second time to tell him to go back to Egypt? He was already planning to go, as he had asked his father-in-law for permission to do so (which was granted), so this second command seems superfluous. Was Yisro's "permission" facetious, doubting Moshe's story about G-d appearing to him, with his response being a sarcastic "good luck," as if to say "you'll never succeed," thereby necessitating another prophetic vision to assure Moshe that he shouldn't be afraid of returning to the country from which he had fled?

Ibn Ezra, in his "short" commentary, says that this second communication occurred many days after Moshe had returned to Yisro, making it seem as if G-d needed to reissue His instructions because His first set hadn't yet been followed. In his "long" commentary (the one that appears in most Chumashim), Ibn Ezra says that these verses were taught out of order, with 4:19 occurring (chronologically) before 4:18. First G-d spoke to Moshe at Sinai (where the burning bush was), then Moshe returned to Midyan where he experienced a second divine communication, then he asked his father-in-law for permission to return to Egypt. As far as why this second communication was needed, the implication embedded within Ibn Ezra's words are that G-d wanted to assure Moshe that he shouldn't be afraid of those who wanted him dead, but couldn't do so during the first communication because they hadn't died yet. By the time he returned to Midyan, though, they had, so G-d informed him of this. However, if the purpose of the second communication was to put Moshe's mind at ease, which could not have been done yet while Moshe was still at Sinai, there would be no need to alter the chronological order of the verses; just as Moshe's enemies hadn't died until he returned to Midyan, they may not have died until after he had asked (and been granted) permission to return to Egypt. [Some (e.g. Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam and Abarbanel)

suggest that it was Yisro's response that made Moshe uneasy about returning because of what might happen, which is why G-d told him that those who wanted to kill him were dead so there was no need to worry, but this can't be what Ibn Ezra had in mind, as there would still be no need for the verses to be out of chronological order.]

Ramban rejects Ibn Ezra's chronological switch [although I don't understand his (stated) reason for rejecting it, as Ibn Ezra himself acknowledges that the second communication was not in the same location as the first one]. Ramban suggests that after the first communication Moshe's plan was to only make a quiet trip to Egypt, by himself, without attracting any attention, but not to "return" to Egypt permanently. [Rather than reading 4:18 as "I will go and return to my brothers who are in Egypt," he reads it as "I will go to my brothers who are in Egypt and then return to Midyan," even though this reading doesn't fit with the musical notes.] G-d therefore spoke to Moshe a second time, in Midyan, to tell him to "return to Egypt," not just go visit, and that he shouldn't be concerned about attracting attention, as those who want to kill him were dead. After hearing this, Moshe took his wife and children as well (since "returning" meant moving there permanently, at least until the entire nation leaves Egypt), which would show everyone that he was confident the exodus was imminent (as if not, why bring them into slavery when they were fully free in Midyan). [S'fornu has a similar approach.]

There are several issues with Ramban's approach. First of all, how could Moshe have considered going "quietly" if G-d had explicitly told him to go to Pharaoh (3:10) with the nation's elders (3:18) and demand that he let the nation leave the country? Did Moshe think he only needed to keep things quiet initially, until he garnered enough support from the nation, after which he could go public? Although Ramban often disregards Midrashim that Rashi quotes [so quoting Midrashim that are inconsistent with Ramban's approach cannot (from his standpoint) be used against it], there are Midrashim (e.g. Bamidbar Rabbah 11:2) that have Moshe disappearing for months after his initial appearance in Egypt, which means he didn't "return" to Egypt right away. Besides, Yisro brought Moshe's wife and children to Mt. Sinai well after the exodus (18:2), so they must not have been in Egypt. Even if Ramban rejects the Midrash that Rashi quotes there, that Aharon convinced Moshe not to bring his family into Egypt, Ramban himself acknowledges that at some point before the exodus Moshe must have sent his family back to Yisro in Midyan. How could the purpose of G-d's second communication with Moshe have been to tell him to "return" to Egypt with his family, if his family never really "returned" there?

Or Hachayim suggests that although G-d

wanted to assure Moshe that he shouldn't be afraid of those who want to kill him, He didn't want to tell him this until after Moshe had already decided to go. At Sinai, Moshe gave numerous reasons why G-d should send someone else instead of him, but concern for his own personal safety was not one of them. By waiting to tell him until after Moshe received permission from Yisro to go, when Moshe was able, ready and willing to go despite such concerns, we are made aware that Moshe's protestations were not for personal reasons [but because Moshe genuinely thought he was not the right person for the job], and Moshe can be given credit for not including the concern he had about his own safety as a factor. (Although Or Hachayim is only addressing why the Torah tells us that the second communication was in Midyan, not why there needed to be a second communication, I extended his thought to address this as well.)

K'sav Sofer, quoting Ramban saying that had Moshe asked G-d to heal his speech deficiency He would have done so, suggests that if Moshe had been healed no one would have known that it was the same person who had fled all those years earlier. Therefore, it was only after the first communication had ended, and Moshe never asked to be healed, that it became relevant that those who wanted to kill him were dead. However, this information could still have been included at the very end of the first communication, at the point that it would have otherwise ended. Besides, since Dasan and Aviram were included in those who wanted Moshe dead, and they would know who Moshe's family was, no longer having a speech impediment wouldn't have mattered in this regard.

When Moshe asked Yisro for permission to return to Egypt, he didn't tell him that G-d had commanded him to do so, or that the goal of his trip was to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt; he only said that he wanted to "see his if his brothers were still alive." Several reasons are given for this, including not having been given permission to share the real purpose of his trip (Or Hachayim), and not being confident that Yisro would let him go if he told him the real reason he was going (Midrash HaGadol) -- especially since Yisro might not be happy that Egypt would suffer so (Alshich, see Rashi on 18:9; the latter might be the reason for the former).

Midrash HaGadol is among those who mention that Moshe had to get permission from Yisro because he had taken an oath that he wouldn't leave Midyan without getting it (see Rashi on 2:21). Nevertheless, since Moshe didn't tell Yisro that he was planning to leave for good (and not just a visit), the permission Yisro gave didn't really fulfill the conditions of the oath. Therefore, Midrash HaGadol says that during the second communication, G-d negated the oath by finding an "opening" that rendered it a mistake -- had Moshe known that the Children of Israel needed him in

order to be redeemed, he never would have made the oath in the first place. Once the oath was null and void, he was able to return to Egypt even without Yisro's permission. However, negating Moshe's oath could have occurred before Moshe went to ask Yisro for permission, so even if this was what the second communication accomplished, we still need to understand why this couldn't have been done without needing a second, separate, communication. Midrash HaGadol adds that when an oath is negated, it must be done in the presence of the person to whom the oath was made (as otherwise it will seem as if the oath was being violated). [As a matter of fact, the Talmud (N'darim 65a) says that G-d undoing Moshe's oath to Yisro in Midyan is the source that an oath must be negated in the presence of the person to whom the oath was made!] However, this still could have been done before Moshe asked for Yisro's permission, and, if the purpose of undoing the oath in Midyan was so that Yisro knew it was being undone, not telling him the full story wouldn't suffice. We therefore still need to understand why G-d waited until after Moshe asked for permission to visit his brothers before undoing the oath, if Moshe was eventually going to have to tell Yisro the real purpose of his trip anyway.

One possibility is that G-d wanted to break it to Yisro gently, first allowing him to grant Moshe permission to go for a visit before being told that he was leaving permanently. Had Yisro been told right away that Moshe was leaving (or been asked permission for that), he likely would have been much less receptive to the idea. [If not for the Talmud, and the Midrash, saying that G-d negated the oath during that second communication, it could be suggested that after Moshe only asked for permission to visit his brothers in Egypt, G-d had to tell him to go back to Yisro to get permission to return to Egypt, not just to go for a visit.] It is also possible that, as Alshich suggests, Yisro's response of "go in peace" meant that he was only giving him permission to go if it was "in peace," i.e. if there was no concern that he would still be in danger if he went back. Rather than G-d communicating with Moshe a second time just to confirm that he would not be in danger (so he had Yisro's permission to go), if the second communication was meant to negate the oath (because Yisro wouldn't have been confident that Moshe wasn't in danger no matter what Moshe told him), it had to happen after Yisro gave his conditional permission so that he would be more accepting of G-d negating the oath (or, from Yisro's perspective, of Moshe being convinced that G-d had negated the oath). G-d telling Moshe that he was no longer in danger may not have been enough for Yisro to let Moshe go back, but it was enough for Yisro to accept that G-d had negated the oath, since he had already agreed that Moshe could go back if there was no longer any danger in doing so. ©2015 Rabbi D. Kramer