

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

It is no accident that parshat Bo, the section that deals with the culminating plagues and the exodus, should turn three times to the subject of children and the duty of parents to educate them. As Jews we believe that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education. Freedom is lost when it is taken for granted. Unless parents hand on their memories and ideals to the next generation – the story of how they won their freedom and the battles they had to fight along the way – the long journey falters and we lose our way.

What is fascinating, though, is the way the Torah emphasises the fact that children must ask questions. Two of the three passages in our parsha speak of this:

And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.’ (Ex. 12:26-27)

In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’ (Ex. 13:14)

There is another passage later in the Torah that also speaks of question asked by a child: In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our G-d has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (Deut. 6:20-21)

The other passage in today’s parsha, the only one that does not mention a question, is: On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ (Ex. 13:8)

These four passages have become famous because of their appearance in the Haggadah on Pesach. They are the four children: one wise, one wicked or rebellious, one simple and “one who does not know how to ask.” Reading them together the sages came to the conclusion that [1] children should ask questions, [2] the Pesach narrative must be constructed in response to, and begin with, questions asked by a child, [3] it is the duty of a parent to encourage his or her children to ask questions, and the child who does

not yet know how to ask should be taught to ask.

There is nothing natural about this at all. To the contrary, it goes dramatically against the grain of history. Most traditional cultures see it as the task of a parent or teacher to instruct, guide or command. The task of the child is to obey. “Children should be seen, not heard,” goes the old English proverb. “Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord,” says a famous Christian text. Socrates, who spent his life teaching people to ask questions, was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young. In Judaism the opposite is the case. It is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions. That is how they grow.

Judaism is the rarest of phenomena: a faith based on asking questions, sometimes deep and difficult ones that seem to shake the very foundations of faith itself. “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” asked Abraham. “Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people?” asked Moses. “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” asked Jeremiah. The book of Job is largely constructed out of questions, and G-d’s answer consists of four chapters of yet deeper questions: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? ... Can you catch Leviathan with a hook? ... Will it make an agreement with you and let you take it as your slave for life?”

In yeshiva the highest accolade is to ask a good question: Du fregst a gutte kashe. Rabbi Abraham Twersky, a deeply religious psychiatrist, tells of how when he was young, his teacher would relish challenges to his arguments. In his broken English, he would say, “You right! You 100 procent right! Now I show you where you wrong.”

Isadore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied, “My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, ‘What did you learn today?’ But my mother used to ask: ‘Izzy, did you ask a good



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question today?" That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist."

Judaism is not a religion of blind obedience. Indeed, astonishingly in a religion of 613 commandments, there is no Hebrew word that means "to obey". When Hebrew was revived as a living language in the nineteenth century, and there was need for a verb meaning "to obey," it had to be borrowed from the Aramaic: le-tsayet. Instead of a word meaning "to obey," the Torah uses the verb shema, untranslatable into English because it means [1] to listen, [2] to hear, [3] to understand, [4] to internalise, and [5] to respond. Written into the very structure of Hebraic consciousness is the idea that our highest duty is to seek to understand the will of G-d, not just to obey blindly. Tennyson's verse, "Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do or die," is as far from a Jewish mindset as it is possible to be.

Why? Because we believe that intelligence is G-d's greatest gift to humanity. Rashi understands the phrase that G-d made man "in His image, after His likeness," to mean that G-d gave us the ability "to understand and discern." The very first of our requests in the weekday Amidah is for "knowledge, understanding and discernment." One of the most breathtakingly bold of the rabbis' institutions was to coin a blessing to be said on seeing a great non-Jewish scholar. Not only did they see wisdom in cultures other than their own, they thanked G-d for it. How far this is from the narrow-mindedness that has so often demeaned and diminished religions, past and present.

The historian Paul Johnson once wrote that rabbinic Judaism was "an ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals." Much of that had, and still has, to do with the absolute priority Jews have always placed on education, schools, the beit midrash, religious study as an act even higher than prayer, learning as a life-long engagement, and teaching as the highest vocation of the religious life.

But much too has to do with how one studies and how we teach our children. The Torah indicates this at the most powerful and poignant juncture in Jewish history – just as the Israelites are about to leave Egypt and begin their life as a free people under the sovereignty of G-d. Hand on the memory of this

moment to your children, says Moses. But do not do so in an authoritarian way. Encourage your children to ask, question, probe, investigate, analyse, explore. Liberty means freedom of the mind, not just of the body. Those who are confident of their faith need fear no question. It is only those who lack confidence, who have secret and suppressed doubts, who are afraid.

The one essential, though, is to know and to teach this to our children, that not every question has an answer we can immediately understand. There are ideas we will only fully comprehend through age and experience, others that take great intellectual preparation, yet others that may be beyond our collective comprehension at this stage of the human quest. Darwin never knew what a gene was. Even the great Newton, founder of modern science, understood how little he understood, and put it beautifully: "I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

In teaching its children to ask and keep asking, Judaism honoured what Maimonides called the "active intellect" and saw it as the gift of G-d. No faith has honoured human intelligence more. ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd it came to pass that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne, to the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the cattle." [Ex. 12:29]

Why is the killing of the firstborn the final, and most significant, plague? True, it brought death into every household, rattling Egypt at its foundations, but certainly the plagues of hail, or fire in blocks of ice falling from the sky, or total, crippling darkness for three days and nights, were not inconsequential demonstrations of G-d's power. Any of these plagues could have dealt a knockout punch to the most cold-hearted dictators. What, then, is it about the killing of the firstborn that proved most effective?

I suggest that it is because it destroyed a certain institution of ancient culture that G-d found objectionable: primogeniture, the primacy and veneration of the firstborn. Turning to the earliest pages of Genesis, we find the theme of the firstborn early in the Torah, when sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel is translated into the rejection and acceptance of their respective sacrifices to G-d: the hypocritical gift of the firstborn Cain is rejected, while the more sincere offering of the younger Abel is accepted.

Part of Cain's vexation is due to the fact that he

sees his firstborn status as having been overlooked – and indeed it was, since sincerity of devotion is ultimately more important than order of birth.

Thus, Abraham's eldest son, Ishmael, must step aside for the younger Isaac because the former is a metzahek [Gen. 21:9] – a scorner and an adulterer – which renders him unfit for the birthright. Of Isaac's two sons, Esau must give way to Jacob, since the former scorned the birthright, first by selling it for a mess of pottage, and then by taking Hittite wives.

Jacob also has a firstborn, Reuben, but having "moved" his father's bed – either an attempt to determine with whom his father would sleep after the death of Rachel, or a euphemism for illicit relations with his father's concubine – he is deemed unfit. In his place, leadership passes to Judah and Joseph.

With the birth of the Jewish People in the book of Exodus, a revolutionary concept emerges on the world stage: the prevailing rule of the firstborn rapidly comes to an end. Indeed, the essence of the Egyptian-Hebrew confrontation boils down to the idea that if you're born an Egyptian, you have the right to enslave, and if you're born a Hebrew, you become a slave.

Slavery was not exclusive to Egypt. The Greeks and the Romans believed that anyone born into a race other than theirs was barbaric, and that they had the moral right to enslave all barbarians.

Indeed, less than 150 years ago, a bloody war was fought in the United States because nearly half the country chose secession rather than adhering to the law that condemned slavery as illegal. And 75 years ago, the free world was threatened by a nation that believed in the Aryan right to dominate and exterminate.

From the moment it began its ascent in the world, Judaism has message has been that an individual's merits are more important than an individual's genealogy. Therefore, the killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians not only strikes terror in the heart of every household member, it also tolls the death knell for the revered institution of the firstborn.

Many generations later, following the destruction of the Second Commonwealth, and in the absence of a priesthood and monarchy, the Rabbinic Sages emerged as the leaders of the Jewish People. These scholars taught – and demonstrated – the principle of meritocracy: one becomes a leader through study and devotion, not as a result of "yichus" (ancestry). A prime example of this can be found in the teaching: "A mamzer [person born of adultery or incest] who is a Torah scholar takes precedence over an ignorant High Priest." [Mishna, Horayot 3:8]

The Talmud expands this concept: "You shall therefore observe My statutes, and My ordinances, which if a human [adam] does, he shall live by them..." (Lev. 18:5). Rabbi Meir says that the Torah's choice of the word "human" [adam] means that a non-Jew who

observes the Torah and mitzvot is as great as the High Priest. [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 59a]

This revolutionary – and fundamentally democratic – message is one of Judaism's great lessons for humanity. This concept, so central to the idea of the Exodus, can and should empower all people, Jews and non-Jews alike, to throw off their shackles of genealogy and birth order, and attempt to attain true freedom. Ultimately, only those who dream the impossible will ever achieve the incredible. ©2017 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

As the story of the sojourn and enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt comes to its final climax in this week's Torah reading, there are many questions that are left unanswered. What was the actual length of time that this Egyptian story encompassed? There seems to be contradictory dates that appear in the Torah. And why does it appear from Talmud and Midrash that the vast majority of the Jews who were in Egypt never left with Moshe to travel into the desert of Sinai and from there to the promised land of Israel?

What could have been the reason for that? And why does Pharaoh now finally succumb, after having in his mind and actions successfully withstood the previous nine plagues which were so devastating to him and Egyptian society. These questions are not addressed directly in the Torah itself though they are discussed in the commentaries that, over the ages, have been written to explain and elucidate the written word of the Torah.

After reviewing all of the ideas advanced to deal with the above questions – and other problematic biblical questions – all that can be said is that the ways of Heaven are truly mysterious and are meant to be so. Moshe is justifiably wary of gazing at the presence of G-d and when he finally demands to understand the policies of Heaven, he will be rebuffed and told that this understanding is beyond human comprehension and rational thinking.

The entire story of the Jewish people descending into Egyptian slavery and then being extricated is essentially supernatural in detail. Nevertheless, it is the basic and most vital narrative in Jewish history throughout the millennia of Jewish existence. It is the paradigm for the irrational and mysterious story of Jewish survival itself.

Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves in the United States of America by presidential proclamation, responding to the political pressures and national interests that beset him. Even though the hand of G-d, so to speak, guides all events in the world, the decision to free the slaves of the South was a completely understandable, rational and even predictable one. The

main question raised by historians regarding Lincoln's action, is why was it not done sooner?

The question regarding the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, and their redemption from slavery was how these things had occurred in the first place and how were they so miraculously corrected later. The great lesson here is that the fate and future of the Jewish people cannot be known on a purely rational basis.

Man proposes and G-d disposes. Yaakov and his family willingly, even enthusiastically, went to reside in Egypt. Just when it seems that the Jewish people has despaired of redemption and is attempting to integrate itself completely into Egyptian society, the redemption begins, led by an unlikely redeemer.

Questions will always abound about the Jewish redemption from Egypt. The answers to those questions will be creative and flights of genius. But the basic issue will remain as being the inscrutability of G-d's behavior, so to speak, in redeeming the Jews and making them a unique and special people. ©2017 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

As 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. ©2017 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Wearing Tefillin

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

What is the obligation of wearing Tifillin? Must it be worn all the time? What if one forgets to don his Tifillin?

It would seem from the Talmud that people in those days wore their Tifillin the entire day even if their work was very menial. By wearing them they would be fulfilling the Torah law "it shall be a sign on your hand and a remembrance between your eyes". However there is a view that states that from the strict Torah law it is sufficient to wear the Tifillin for even a short period of time. The Rabbis extended this time to include the entire day with the minimum time to wear Tefillin being at least during prayers and the recitation of Shema.

On the other hand our sages objected strenuously to the person who did not don his Tifillin at all and declared him in essence a sinner (Poshea yisrael begufo). It is unclear whether this strong language by our sages applies to all people. Maimonides for example, states that it only applies to a person who never wears Tifillin. However if one did don Tifillin even once he would not be considered a sinner

(poshei Yisrael). The Rosh on the other hand extends the sages harsh language for even someone who wears his Tifillin only periodically. The Pri Magadim even says that one is called a Poshea (sinner) even if he misses only one day.

Our sages further question the motive of the person who doesn't wear Tefillin. Rabeinu Tam states that he is called a "Poshea" only if he neglects this Mitzva because he is lazy or he is ashamed or looks brazenly at the Mitzva but one who is unable to don his Tifillin because he does not have the proper sanctity (perhaps because of health reasons), such a person is not called a "Poshea".

The Yeraim on the other hand states that even someone who does not wear his Tifillin because of laziness is still not considered to be a "Poshea". The Beit Yosef counters that any excuse is not accepted and anyone who brazenly refuses to don his Tifillin is called a "Poshea".

The exact language that our sages use to describe the man who does not don Tifillin is "Poshea Yisrael Begufo" (he transgresses against Israel with his body). Perhaps the reason this language is used, is because the Mitzvah of Tefillin is to don them on one's body so that it becomes a part of him and by not wearing them he is actually missing a portion of his body. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

The night just prior to Bnei Yisrael's exodus from Mitzrayim is referred to as Leil Shimurim (Shemos 12:42). Rashi translates this appellation as "A night of anticipation." Hashem was waiting and looking forward to the time that He would be able to fulfill His promise to redeem Bnei Yisrael from bondage.

If Hashem anticipated the redemption to such a great degree, why didn't He redeem Bnei Yisrael sooner? What was the Ribbono Shel Olam waiting for? Rav Wolbe explains that Hashem was ready for the redemption for many years; He was waiting for Bnei Yisrael to be ready.

When asked how things are going, it is common for people to respond, "I need siyata d'shmaya -- Heavenly assistance." This response implies that the person feels that he has already invested tremendous effort and done everything in his ability to achieve the desired results and the only thing lacking is Hashem's helping hand. The truth is, Hashem waits and looks forward to offer His assistance, but before fulfilling His desire He needs us to properly be prepared to receive His gracious aid. After Bnei Yisrael poured out their hearts in prayer they were properly prepared for the redemption, the salvation was immediate in coming.

Hashem is waiting to help all of us. It's up to us whether that desire will come to fruition. Why push off till tomorrow a salvation that could come today?

Rashi mentions (Shemos 13:14) that the Torah discusses how to transmit what transpired during Yetzias Mitzrayim to four different types of sons: The simple son, the wicked son, the son who doesn't know how to ask and the wise son. Rav Wolbe notes that although one of the sons is dubbed a rasha, the Torah does not write him off. Even the questions of a wicked Jew deserve an answer, and one must make an effort to hand tailor an answer that can influence him to mend his wayward ways.

Rav Wolbe gleans another important lesson from the rasha. Regarding the korban pesach the rasha asks, "What is this service for you?" He asks a simple question and we immediately pin on him the title of a rasha -- what was wrong with his question? The problem wasn't the question itself, rather how he asked the question. He didn't ask, "What is this service for us?" He asked, "What is this service for you?" thereby disconnecting himself from the rest of Bnei Yisrael. One who ignores miraculous, life-altering occurrences and doesn't relate them to himself, is termed a rasha.

Likewise, we find that the Meraglim are referred to as reshaim because they witnessed what happened to Miriam when she spoke derogatorily about Moshe and they failed to internalize what they perceived. When Hashem speaks -- He is speaking to you. The pasuk in this week's parsha instructs us to tell our children, "Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt" (ibid. 23:8). Every person must feel as if he was redeemed from Mitzrayim. In a similar vein, the Ramban (ibid. 20:2) points out that the Aseres HaDibros were said in the singular so that every person should feel as if Hashem was speaking specifically to them. Additionally, the Mishna in Sanhedrin states that each person should say, "It was for my sake that the world was created." It's all about me.

The Mesillas Yesharim tells us that the very first step on a person's journey to self perfection is for him "to clarify and verify his obligation in his world." Every person has to feel that the world was hand tailored to his specific situation.

The realization that the world was created for you, the redemption from Egypt was orchestrated with you in mind and the Torah was given specifically to you, should help you refrain from looking over your shoulder and rather focus on accomplishing your obligation in your world. © 2017 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and The AishDas Society

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states regarding the Pesach offering: "Neither shall you break a bone of it" (Exodus 12:46). What is the Torah coming to teach us about life from this commandment?

On Passover night as we sit at the Seder we are to envision ourselves as going out of Egypt and

becoming free people. At the Seder, we are kings and queens; we dress royally, we act royally, we eat royally. Royal people do not break bones to suck out the marrow. Poor, downtrodden people must suck the bones to draw out all of the nourishment possible.

The outward action brings the inner appreciation. If you want to be free, act free. If you want to be royal, act royally. Likewise, if you want to be kind or to be charitable, then act that way. Eventually, your personality will be shaped by your actions. Life and growth are a process of deciding and then consistently acting in line with your decision. Decide and you can be! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Break No Bones About It

One 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 tzedoka, is almost as important as the tzedoka itself. Mitzvos must be done regally. We will not hand out crumpled 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 PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"G-d said to Moshe: Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants..." (Shemos 10:1) Pharaoh had it coming to him. Ever since he said, "Who is G-d, that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know G-d, nor will I let Israel go" (Shemos 5:2), he was on a collision course with the Almighty, and as they say, "Abuse it, lose it."

So he lost it, his free will that is. After that, he couldn't stop the roller coaster ride to destruction even if he wanted to, to the cheers of all those who saw it coming, or at least wished for it to happen. It was classic: Bad guy bullies innocent underdog, so hero comes along and puts bully in his place, allowing good to triumph over evil.

However, in this process of reaching this climactic turning point in the Jewish struggle for freedom, a major issue arises that has been the topic of discussion for many a commentator for many a millennium: What about Pharaoh's free will? If G-d took away his free will by hardening his heart, then why was he punished for refusing to let the Jewish people go?

The answer is embedded in last week's parshah, subtly but also profoundly. It was a message, not just for Pharaoh and his servants, but for the Jewish people then and now.

The Torah tells us that after Moshe Rabbeinu performed the first two plagues, Pharaoh's magicians were able to do the same. Consequently, Moshe failed to prove the point that he was making, that he had come on behalf of G-d and wasn't just another court magician with a cheap bag of tricks.

Hence, understandably: "And the magicians of Egypt did similarly with their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as G-d had said." (Shemos 7:22)

Based upon this, Pharaoh should not have been held accountable for the first two plagues. That is, until we learn the following: "Aharon stretched out his hand with his rod and smote the dust of the earth, and there was lice upon man, and upon beast; all the dust

of the earth became lice throughout all the land of Egypt. The magicians did likewise with their secret arts to bring lice but they could not... Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of G-d,' and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he didn't listen to them, as G-d had said." (Shemos 8:13-14)

Does that make sense? If Pharaoh's whole sense of encouragement was the fact that his magicians could use magic to match Moshe's miracles, then he should have become discouraged once they failed to do so. When even his own people were forced to admit that it was G-d Who was powering Moshe's supernatural acts, he should have become soft-hearted, not hard-hearted.

What do we learn from this? That it didn't make a difference what Pharaoh's magicians could or couldn't do to mimic Moshe Rabbeinu's signs and wonders. He was determined from the outset to break the Jewish people and their savior, and only used his magicians to justify his behavior.

Once they could no longer lend him their support after reaching the limits of their black magic, he was still left with his attitude towards the idea of letting the Jewish people go. On the contrary, the fact that Moshe bested his magicians forced Pharaoh to act even stronger, lest their weakness appear to be his too.

This is why he acted illogically in Parashas Shemos as well. After Moshe Rabbeinu came and demanded the release of the Jewish people, Pharaoh decided that it was the fact that they weren't working hard enough that they even listened to Moshe in the first place and began to entertain thoughts of freedom, even if only temporary.

Now, if you were a leader bent on building up Egypt with slave labor, and you felt that those slaves could be worked harder, would you give them additional supplies that would allow them to do so, or make them go out looking for their own supplies? The fact that Pharaoh did the latter shows us that what concerned him the most was controlling the Jewish people, not working them.

You could say that Pharaoh was a control freak, at least when it came to the Jewish people. More than likely he was a control freak across the board; ancient rulers usually were, having gained power as a result of entitlement and not personal merit. Even modern-day elected leaders can be this way when they tend to be narcissistic.

When people choose to control the quality of their lives by controlling others around them, forcing them to act in ways that satisfy their need for pleasure or security they tend to become obsessive. They may become so obsessive that they cannot see how absurd their behavior has become, and how damaging it can be. Worst of all, they can delude themselves into believing that they have control where they do not, and security where it does not exist. In their quest to

become invulnerable they become the most vulnerable of all.

G-d didn't have to take away Pharaoh's free will. He did it to himself, as have so many other people throughout history the moment they became addicted to false sources of pleasure and confidence. We are hardwired to be open to such errors, but the world is hardwired to expose such people and their weaknesses, and if necessary, bring them down.

Thus, all G-d was doing was exposing Pharaoh for what he really was, using the plagues and his crazy obstinacy to reveal his true attitude toward life and higher values. And, he was making an example of Pharaoh, to show the rest of mankind what happens to a person who tries to change the world instead of himself.

But, that is only one half of the story. The second half has to do with the Jewish people themselves, and how they deal with people who seem in control, but really are not.

To say that the Jewish people feared Pharaoh is, obviously, an understatement. He was a tyrant whose word could build or destroy countless lives in moments, like so many others before and after him. His decrees could free people or enslave them, and it did not take much for Pharaoh to decide the latter. So, who wouldn't fear such a human being?

Yet, as the Talmud points out, and Kabbalah makes perfectly clear, Pharaoh, and all the rest of history's tyrants, are but puppets of G-d, as are all leaders. Unwittingly, they are but ministers of G-d, exercising HIS will, and rarely their own, no matter how much they will argue to the contrary. But, what made them make their decisions or decrees in the first place?

Circumstances that they did not create and which they could not control, and hence, to which they could only react. Who advised them to make such decisions? Usually advisors they put into office, whom Heaven made sure were available for the right job at the right time.

This is what the Talmud means when it says: "All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven." (Brochos 34b)

To make this operating principle of the Jewish people eminently clear, then and for the rest of history, G-d allowed Pharaoh to become as powerful as any ruler might become, and then systematically stripped him of all of his might until he had none. In this way we could learn that when history does not go the path we prayed it would, the addresses to turn to are not the instruments of oppression, but to G-d Himself.

This is true whether we have to deal with an international leader, a member of our community, or a member of our household. The world is full of control freaks, people who would rather change us than change themselves when things go wrong, or when the going gets difficult, even when they are responsible for

the results.

This does not mean that they should get off the hook for all the hurt and damage they cause to the world around them. They shouldn't, and won't. You can sue them, or divorce them, and simply turn your back on them. But ultimately, those whom they have affected have to ask themselves, and then G-d, "Why did I have to go through this? Why were they able to do what they did to me?"

The tyrants of history and everyday life are, ultimately, messengers. Getting rid of them might be top priority, but not before receiving the message that they are here to deliver. If we simply make them the focus of our complaints and ignore the message the crisis they create teaches us, then G-d will just find other messengers to succeed where these had failed. And, we've seen how far He has been willing to go to do that. © 2014 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Bo contains the very first commandment the Jews received as a nation; the Mitzvah to have a Rosh Chodesh (new month), and to mark the beginning of every month thereafter (Exodus 12:2). What makes this commandment so important for it to be the very first commandment for the Jews as a people? Also, when describing the first month that the Jews need to acknowledge, the Torah fails to name that month. If the Torah values the months, wouldn't it be important for the Torah to name those months, just like the Torah names important places the Jews had traveled through?

The Ramban explains that the Torah referred to the months as "first", "second" and so on, because the numbers refer to how many months the Jews were removed from the moment when we were established as a people. This helps focus our attention to the most important moment we had as a nation. It also focuses us on something else; The months we now controlled (both in name and in timing) dictate when holidays occur, when customs are performed, and even when G-d judges us. The very first commandment is the one that empowers us the most. The first commandment as a nation makes us partners with G-d, because although we didn't determine the holidays to celebrate, we do determine when they are celebrated. So every time we celebrate Rosh Chodesh (like today), we should celebrate our partnership with G-d, and our being empowered to individually "name" the month as we, as a people, see fit. ©2015 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

