

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

It remains one of the most counterintuitive passages in all of religious literature. Moses is addressing the Israelites just days before their release. They have been exiles for 210 years. After an initial period of affluence and ease, they have been oppressed, enslaved, and their male children killed in an act of slow genocide. Now, after signs and wonders and a series of plagues that have brought the greatest empire of the ancient world to its knees, they are about to go free.

Yet Moses does not talk about freedom, or the land flowing with milk and honey, or the journey they will have to undertake through the desert. Instead, three times, he turns to the distant future, when the journey is complete and the people -- free at last -- are in their own land. And what he talks about is not the land itself, or the society they will have to build or even the demands and responsibilities of freedom. (That, of course, is a primary theme of the book of Deuteronomy.)

Instead, he talks about education, specifically about the duty of parents to their children. He speaks about the questions children may ask when the epic events that are about to happen are, at best, a distant memory. He tells the Israelites to do what Jews have done from then to now. Tell your children the story. Do it in the maximally effective way. Re-enact the drama of exile and exodus, slavery and freedom. Get your children to ask questions. Make sure that you tell the story as your own, not as some dry account of history. Say that the way you live and the ceremonies you observe are "because of what God did for me" -- not my ancestors but me. Make it vivid, make it personal, and make it live.

He says this not once but three times: "It shall be that when you come to the land which God will give you as He said, and you observe this ceremony, and your children say to you, 'What does this service mean to you?' you shall say, 'It is a Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and spared our homes.'" (Ex. 12:25-27).

"On that day you shall tell your child, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt'" (Ex. 13:8).

"In the future, when your child asks you, 'What

is this?' you shall tell him, 'With a mighty hand, the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the land of slavery.'" (Ex. 13:14).

Why was this the most important thing he could do in this intense moment of redemption? Because freedom is the work of a nation, nations need identity, identity needs memory, and memory is encoded in the stories we tell. Without narrative, there is no memory, and without memory, we have no identity. The most powerful link between the generations is the tale of those who came before us -- a tale that becomes ours, and that we hand on as a sacred heritage to those who will come after us. We are the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, and identity begins in the story parents tell their children.

That narrative provides the answer to the three fundamental questions every reflective individual must ask at some stage in their lives: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? There are many answers to these questions, but the Jewish ones are: I am a member of the people whom God rescued from slavery to freedom. I am here to build a society that honours the freedom of others, not just my own. And I must live in conscious knowledge that freedom is the gift of God, honoured by keeping His covenant of law and love.

Twice in the history of the West this fact was forgotten, or ignored, or rebelled against. In the 17th and 18th century, there was a determined effort to create a world without identities. This was the project called the Enlightenment. It was a noble dream. To it we owe many developments whose value is beyond question and that we must strive to preserve. However, one aspect of it failed and was bound to fail: the attempt to live without identity.

The argument went like this. Identity throughout the Middle Ages was based on religion. But religion had for centuries led to war between Christians and Muslims. Then, following the Reformation, it led to war between Christian and Christian, Protestant and Catholic. Therefore, to abolish war one had to move beyond identity. Identities are particular. Therefore, let



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us worship only the things that are universal: reason and observation, philosophy and science. Let us have systems, not stories. Then we will become one humanity, like the world before Babel. As Schiller put it and Beethoven set to music in the last movement of the Ninth Symphony: *Alle Menschen werden Brüder*, "All men will be brothers."

It cannot be done, at least as humanity is presently constituted. The reaction, when it came, was fierce and disastrous. The nineteenth century saw the return of the repressed. Identity came back with a vengeance, this time based not on religion but on one of three substitutes for it: the nation state, the (Aryan) race, and the (working) class. In the 20th century, the nation state led to two world wars. Race led to the Holocaust. The class struggle led to Stalin, the Gulag and the KGB. A hundred million people were killed in the name of three false gods.

For the past fifty years the West has been embarked on a second attempt to abolish identity, this time in the opposite direction. What the secular West now worships is not the universal but the individual: the self, the "Me," the "I." Morality -- the thick code of shared values binding society together for the sake of the common good -- has been dissolved into the right of each individual to do or be anything he or she chooses, so long as they do not directly harm others.

Identities have become mere masks we wear temporarily and without commitment. For large sections of society, marriage is an anachronism, parenthood delayed or declined, and community a faceless crowd. We still have stories, from Harry Potter to Lord of the Rings to Star Wars, but they are films, fictions, fantasies -- a mode not of engagement but of escapism. Such a world is supremely tolerant, until it meets views not to its liking, when it quickly becomes brutishly intolerant, and eventually degenerates into the politics of the mob. This is populism, the prelude to tyranny.

Today's hyper-individualism will not last. We are social animals. We cannot live without identities, families, communities and collective responsibility. Which means we cannot live without the stories that connect us to a past, a future and a larger group whose history and destiny we share. The biblical insight still

stands. To create and sustain a free society, you have to teach your children the story of how we achieved freedom and what its absence tastes like: the unleavened bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. Lose the story and eventually you lose your freedom. That is what happens when you forget who you are and why.

The greatest gift we can give our children is not money or possessions but a story -- a real story, not a fantasy, one that connects them to us and to a rich heritage of high ideals. We are not particles of dust blown this way or that by the passing winds of fad and fashion. We are heirs to a story that inspired a hundred generations of our ancestors and eventually transformed the Western world. What you forget, you lose. The West is forgetting its story. We must never forget ours.

With the hindsight of thirty-three centuries we can see how right Moses was. A story told across the generations is the gift of an identity, and when you know who you are and why, you can navigate the wilderness of time with courage and confidence. That is a life-changing idea. *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2018 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd it came to pass at the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all of God's multitudes went forth from the Land of Egypt" [Ex. 12:41]. In a great tragedy of history, the success of far too many revolutions against tyranny have turned into disasters, with the revolutionaries acting as cruelly and high-handedly in power as the despots whom they overthrew. Consider the French "reign of terror" that followed the 1789 revolution, and the policy of systematic oppression by Stalin in the decades following 1917's Bolshevik revolution, to cite but two examples that have unfortunate parallels in more recent times.

With that context, we would have expected to read of vengeful behavior by the freed Israelites toward an Egyptian oppressor that had de-humanized and enslaved them for generations. They certainly had plenty of scores to settle. Yet the rebellion by the Israelite slaves does not take this parochial -- if understandable -- detour.

Rather, the Divinely-orchestrated Israelite revolution actually has an unambiguous, universal message that repudiates the Egyptian worldview: Every human being is a child of God, born with the inalienable right of freedom.

This forward-looking guiding principle for humanity reverberates to the present day. Sadly, since oppression and rebellion persist in this world, we see

that the lesson has not yet taken root everywhere, so it is imperative that we learn from the Exodus, the quintessential moral revolution against human oppression of fellow humans.

The series of events that enabled the Israelites to finally flee from Egypt were, of course, the Ten Plagues. The order and content of the plagues are not coincidental; embedded in its structure is the key lesson about the Exodus for all future generations. Appropriately enough, it is the Passover Haggadah that unlocks this message, where Rabbi Judah breaks down these plagues into three categories, consisting of three, three and four plagues, respectively.

Based on this teaching, Rabbi Judah Loew (16th Century Prague, better known as “Maharal”) and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th Century Germany) offer a deep insight into the plagues, citing the prophecy from the “Covenant Between the Pieces”, in which God informs Abraham that “your descendants will be strangers in a land not theirs; they shall be enslaved; and they shall be afflicted” [Gen. 15:13], after which they will inherit the Promised Land of Israel.

This prophecy delineates the three characteristics perpetrated by every persecutor toward its victim: alienation, enslavement, and affliction. The Israelites in Egypt were first de-legitimized as aliens or strangers in a foreign country to which they did not belong [Ex. 1:9-10]; were enslaved and forced to build the storehouses of Pitom and Ramses [ibid., v. 11-14]; and were mercilessly afflicted through the mass murder of their male babies and back-breaking labor under inhumane working conditions [ibid., v. 15-22].

Maharal and Rabbi Hirsch ingeniously suggest that God punished the Egyptians measure for measure by means of the plagues.

The first plague in each of the three categories – blood (#1 of 10), wild animals (#4) and hail (#7) – would make the Egyptians feel like aliens in an Egypt taken over by some strange force totally foreign to their experience until this point: the familiar life-giving Nile turned to blood, wild animals running rampant and seemingly controlling human movement, and hail uncharacteristically raining – and reigning – down on a defenseless Egyptian populace.

The second plague in each of the categories – frogs (#2), animal illnesses (#5) and locusts (#8) – would make the Egyptians feel enslaved, devoid of ownership of any property, which is the chief characteristic of a slave. Frogs took over their homes, animal illnesses destroyed their livestock, and locusts completely consumed their agricultural crop.

And the third plague of each of the categories – vermin (#3), boils (#6) and darkness (#9) – afflicted every Egyptian with severe personal discomfort, making it impossible to continue living, working and socializing in any humanly endurable fashion. The Egyptians became subjected to the very alienation,

enslavement and affliction to which they had subjected the Israelites!

The most important point of all this, however, is that it is not the Israelites who return the favor to the Egyptians; rather, it is the Almighty Who teaches the world the lesson of the necessity of universal freedom under the God of all humanity.

Thus, the Israelites have no right to feel like invincible conquerors after their successful Exodus; if anything, they can only feel beholden to the God of their redemption, before Whom every human is creature and not creator, servant and not master. The creator-hood and parenthood of God ultimately make possible the creature-hood and sibling-hood of humanity, and in such a world, no human has the right to enslave another human.

God freed us from Pharaoh’s enslavement in order that we be able to serve God, the only and ultimate Redeemer. Therefore, God teaches us and the world that we must “love the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt” [Deut. 10:19], and gave us the Sabbath (“a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt”) a day on which our gentile servants, too, “may rest like you” – for everyone must be free under God. This is the ultimate message and legacy of the great Israelite revolution in Egypt. ©2018 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**A**s the narrative of the Torah regarding the exodus of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery reaches its climax in this week’s reading, I feel that it is important for us to concentrate on the verb that the Lord uses so to speak in telling Moshe to once again appear before the Egyptian Pharaoh.

The word “bo” in Hebrew means not only to come but it’s more nuanced understanding is to enter, to penetrate deeply into a place or person. It is the verb that is used for physical intimacy throughout biblical and rabbinic writings. The Lord here tells Moshe to enter into the state of mind and the state of heart of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Not merely to appear before him in a superficial manner but rather to attempt to understand why he is so stubborn and what the true issue involved here is in the freeing of the Jewish slaves from Egypt.

The Lord is in effect informing Moshe that it is not only the stubborn will of Pharaoh that is involved in refusing to free the Jews, it is also the fact that the Lord has hardened his heart and given him the courage of his convictions. So, no matter how painful the blows being rained on Egypt, he will not give in.

It is a further example to Moshe that the exodus from Egypt is an eternal lesson for the Jewish people and the world as well, and that only by the miracles that the Lord will perform will Pharaoh agree to free the Jewish slaves. It is the irrationality of Pharaoh in

continuing to resist that indicates to Moshe and through him to the Jewish people, that this is a supernatural and illogical event and that it is the prime example of God's right of the Jewish people throughout all of human history.

There is much to be said for understanding the point of the view of one's enemy. Only then can one take the correct defensive measures to protect oneself from irrational onslaught and cruelty. By entering into the mindset of those who oppose and hate us, we gain an understanding as to how to counteract these diseased and cursed thoughts.

As long as we ascribe to our enemies rational and logical reasons, as long as we keep on looking within ourselves for faults that may have been the reason for their enmity, then eventually we are defenseless against their aggression. If we realize that the Lord has hardened their hearts and removes rationality from their thinking, we would be much better prepared to counter their pressures and assaults.

We have to enter into their mindset and not merely appear before them to debate issues in a diplomatic and logical manner. The greatness of God is illustrated through the hard heart and stubborn will of the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Moshe should not be disappointed that he was unable to convince the Pharaoh to release the Jewish people to freedom through persuasion and logic. By entering into the Pharaoh's mind he will recognize the irrationality of hate and the greatness of the God of Israel. ©2018 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**T**he Torah states: "And Moshe said, 'This is what the Almighty said, "Around midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt will die" ' " (Exodus 11:4).

Rashi cites the Sages of the Talmud that the Almighty actually told Moshe that exactly at midnight He would cause the plague of the death of the firstborn. Why did Moshe then change His words to "around midnight" when he repeated the Almighty's words to the Egyptians?

Rashi brings the answer of the Sages that "Perhaps Pharaoh's astrologers will err in their calculation of the precise midpoint of the night and say that 'Moses is a liar' " (Talmud Bavli, Berachot 4a).

Amazing! Nine plagues have already hit the Egyptians. Moshe has warned them and been correct each time. Now the firstborn of each family throughout Egypt dies. What difference does it make whether it is a few minutes before or after midnight?

The answer: This illustrates the power of a person to find fault. From what might have been a minor discrepancy -- and perhaps a discrepancy due to their own calculations -- they would seek to call Moshe a liar and discredit him totally. When a person wants to find fault, he will find something.

Our lesson: 1) Be aware of when we fall into the trap of finding fault when we should be focusing on the positive in others and on the bigger picture. 2) Be aware when others are fault-finders... and tread gently because these personalities are easily irritated and difficult to deal with. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2018 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**I**n this week's portion, the Torah begins to present commandments given to the Jewish people. One wonders why so many commandments are proscribed in such detail.

The Sefer Ha-Hinukh (13th century) offers a comment that reveals a basic message about the purpose of commandments. He writes, "Know that human beings are influenced by their actions and their intellectual and emotional life is conditioned by the things they do, good or bad." In other words, what we do very much influences what we feel.

Hundreds of years later, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler offers an understanding of love that reflects the Sefer Ha-Hinukh's sentiments. While all people walk a type of balance between giving of themselves to others, and taking from others, by and large, Rabbi Dessler argues, each person can be categorized as either a "giver" or a "taker." Rabbi Dessler insists that the cornerstone of love is the capacity to give to the loved one.

And he adds, it's not necessarily the case that one first loves and from the loving comes the giving. The reverse is equally true, and even more powerful. One gives, and from the giving comes loving. The more one gives, the more one loves. In fact, the real test of love is not only what I feel towards you, but what I am prepared to do for you.

What is true in personal relationships involving love of others is also true about ritual commandments, religious observance, which connects us and expresses our love to God. Perform the ritual, and from the act, this feeling may come. Hence, Jews at Sinai first proclaimed, "we will do." Only then did they say, "we will listen."

A story illustrates this idea. My mother and father, of blessed memory, made aliyah in the late 70's. Whenever my parents flew to New York, it was my responsibility to meet them at the airport. One time, my father called me to inform me that at the last moment their arrival was moved up by 24 hours. Professing my deep love for my parents, I insisted that I couldn't

change my schedule on such short notice. "You became a hot shot Rabbi," my father responded, "and don't have time for your parents?" "I love you deeply," I protested, "but it's difficult to alter plans at the last moment." I'll never forget my father's response. "Don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport!"

Not coincidentally, the word ahavah, love, is associated with the two letter Aramaic word hav, to give. It reflects the point made by the Sefer Ha-Hinukh that "actions shape character." It is nothing more than what my Abba said: "don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport." ©2018 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 DAVID S. LEVIN**

## Why Kill the Firstborn?

**P**arashat Bo marks the freedom of the B'nei Yisrael from slavery. The final three plagues are brought on Par'oh and the Egyptians and the Jews are freed from bondage and leave Egypt. The B'nei Yisrael as a people are given their first mitzvot and begin their lives as a nation dedicated to Hashem. They acknowledged Rosh Chodesh and counted from that day to the tenth day of the month at which time they took the lamb that they would sacrifice on the fourteenth of the month. They brought the lamb and took the blood from that sacrifice and placed it on their mezuzot. They gathered in their homes and ate from that lamb while all around them the Egyptian firstborn males and animals died during the final plague. But what exactly was that plague and why was that the conclusive plague of their quest for freedom?

In pasuk (11:4,5) the Torah tells us of the warning prior to the plague: "And Moshe said like this said Hashem, around midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt. And all of the firstborn of the land of Egypt will die from the firstborn of Par'oh who will sit on his throne to the firstborn of the slave-woman (shifcha) who is behind the millstone and all the firstborn animals." Our Rabbis contrast this warning with the change in the language at the actual carrying out of the plague in pasuk (12:29); "And it was in the middle of the night and Hashem struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt from the firstborn of Par'oh who will sit on his throne to the firstborn of the captive (sh'vi) who was in the dungeon and all the firstborn animals." Rashi is so concerned by this blatant inconsistency that his comment about the captive (sh'vi) actually occurs immediately prior to his comment about the slave-woman (shifcha). Rashi is concerned that we should not blame Moshe for withholding from Par'oh the inclusive truth that the deaths would extend to the captive, sh'vi, also. Rashi's explanation here deals with two things: (1) he posits that the sh'vi, the captive, is at

a lower status than the shifchah, the slave-woman, and (2) he explains that the firstborn of the sh'vi did not die as a punishment to Par'oh and the Egyptians but for a separate reason having to do with the sh'vi himself and therefore did not have to be part of the original warning. Rashi believes that the sh'vi would claim that the slaying of the firstborn was carried out not by Hashem but by his own deity as a punishment to the Egyptians for taking him captive. We see that if also his firstborn died, then he could not make that claim. Since the death of the firstborn of the sh'vi was not a punishment for Par'oh it follows that there was no need to warn him of the shvi's death.

One problem that we could have is the inclusion of either the sh'vi or the shifcha in this punishment, as they have no power in Egypt. The Aznayim L'Torah gives us an interesting psychological perspective to the difference between the shifcha and the sh'vi. He believes that their jealousy towards the B'nei Yisrael stemmed from different perspectives. The shifcha and her son were avdei olam, slaves forever or permanent slaves. They had no chance for freedom. The sh'vi on the other hand had hope that if his own country and the country in which he was a captive made a treaty, he might be freed as part of that deal. He might also be freed if a war took place after which the victor might free him. The B'nei Yisrael began as permanent slaves like the shifcha and since they were like each other there was room for jealousy. When Moshe rose to greatness and Par'oh began to treat the Jews as if some could leave for even a short time (l'chu na hag'varim, let the men go), then it appeared as if the Jews were now in the position of the sh'vi, a captive who might go free. Now that the Jews were like the sh'vi, the sh'vi became jealous of them. A person can only develop a jealousy of someone who is like him, domeh b'domeh, so the sh'vi was not included in the original decree but was included after he saw that the Jews had now moved into his category of prisoner.

Da'at Mikra and Chizkuni give us other parameters of the firstborn who was to be killed. The Torah specified the firstborn of Par'oh which would include the firstborn of all male Egyptians. The Torah included the firstborn of the shifcha, a female slave, to include the firstborn of all females. Since the Torah tells us also "kol b'chor Mitzrayim, all the firstborn of Egypt," this includes any firstborn no matter what nationality who was in Egypt at the time. We are also told that that this included an Egyptian firstborn who was not in Egypt. Still we are told that any firstborn Egyptian who decided to believe in Hashem and bring the lamb for slaughter (having first designated it on the tenth of the month) and placed the blood on his door and ate from the lamb that night did not die with the other Egyptians. This was the eruv rav, the multitude of non-Jews who accepted Hashem and left together with the Jewish people.

What as yet has not been answered is why this was chosen as the last plague. The firstborn child in any family maintains a special place within that family. He is proof of continuity into the next generation. He is a sign of survival, a major psychological concern in every society. The death of the firstborn, regardless of additional children in the family, is a blow to that concept of survival and continuity. The ascension of the firstborn to the throne also means stability. Only if the eldest is deemed inappropriate for leadership do we find intrigue and intense rivalry destroying a family. HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the message that Hashem wished to give Par'oh was that Hashem did not kill his firstborn out of hatred of Par'oh's son but for the salvation of Hashem's son, the B'nei Yisrael. Hashem's message was clear; You, Par'oh, disregarded the suffering and enslavement of My son so I must help you to understand the suffering I have gone through watching My son suffer by your hands. Perhaps if you can sympathize with his pain you can understand the injustice of keeping him in slavery. It was through that same suffering that Par'oh would become aware of the suffering of others.

A major responsibility that we have as Jews is to be sensitive to the suffering of not only Jews but others. Jews have always been in the forefront of all social causes. This can often be dangerous as we become easily swayed to support causes that can even harm us. Still we must maintain sympathy for others while we examine each cause in light of the Torah. Hashem demands our sensitivity but also our adherence to Torah Laws and Values. May Hashem guide us to ease the suffering of others but only through the ideals of the Torah. ©2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## No See - No Find

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**O**ne is prohibited to see or find Chametz –leaven (Baal Yeraeh ubaal Yimatze) on Passover and one is forbidden as well to eat Chometz. In addition one is required to destroy all the Chametz (Tashbitu) in their possession. Our sages are unclear, however, as to when these prohibitions begin.

All seem to agree that the prohibition to eat and to destroy Chametz begins on Passover eve. However according to the "Raived", the prohibition to "see or find" is only on Passover itself as it says in the Torah "Seven days grain shall not be found in your house". However according to Rashi all of these prohibitions begin on the eve of Passover.

There is a difference of opinion as to the minimum amount that one would be culpable for eating Chametz. As in all prohibitions in the Torah, half of an amount (Chatzi Shiur) is prohibited. However this might only be true in a case where a person is intentionally doing an action and therefore it becomes significant

(Achshiveh) however in the case of passive doing (Shev v'al Taaseh), such as the prohibition of "to see or find" chametz, one would not be liable.

An additional reason for the prohibition of "half" (Chatzi Shiur) would be the fact that this amount could conceivably be increased to a full Shiur ( a designated amount). However this would only be applicable to eating within the required amount of time (Achilat pras) . With reference to the prohibition of "to see" this reasoning would not apply. ©2018 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

#### RABBI LABEL LAM

## Dvar Torah

**"P**haraoh's servants said to him, 'How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship HASHEM their G-d! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?'" (Shemos 10:7)

Now Pharaoh was not a completely foolish person. He was the leader of a powerful nation. Why would he risk the welfare of his kingdom to hold the Jews back from going out to serve their G-d? The cost benefit calculation renders Pharaoh a suicidal lunatic but we know that it cannot be so.

Sure HASHEM hardened his heart to make an example for all time but that was only after he hardened his own heart. Why is he so obstinate and principled in his refusal to let the Jewish People go? What's he thinking?!

It's not easy to read with perfect accuracy the mind of an evil dictator but perhaps we can try with the help of an amazing insight from Rebbe Nachman from Breslov.

The Mishnah in Pirke Avos Chapter 3 offers a parable for the way HASHEM manages the affairs of this world. "He (Rabbi Akiva) would say: 'Everything is given as collateral, and a net is cast over all of life. The shop is open, and the shopkeeper grants credit, and the accounting ledger is open, and the hand writes, and everyone who wants to borrow can come and borrow, and the collectors go constantly on their daily rounds and exact payment from man -- with his knowledge and without his knowledge -- and they have upon what to rely, and the judgment is true judgment, and everything is prepared for the feast'"

Rebbe Nachman quotes his grandfather the Baal Shem Tov and says the following, ""Before any decree of judgment comes to the world, all the world is gathered together to see if they agree to that judgment. Even the person that the decree of judgment is against is asked if he agrees. Then the final decree is sealed. Certainly if they told him explicitly that it was about him he would refuse and say that the judgment is not correct. So he is tricked in this way that they ask about a case similar to his situation and he gives the deciding opinion, sealing his own fate."

He goes on to explain that this is what Nossan

the Navi did when he approached David. He told him a parable about someone who took advantage of a person in a weaker position. When King David recognized the injustice he was told that it was about him. He repented immediately. He explains that this is the meaning of the Mishne when it states that the collectors are exacting payment with and with without his knowledge. "With his knowledge" -- means that he agrees in principle that such a case is guilty and worthy of judgment. "Without his knowledge" -- means that he does not know that his decision is about himself.

Now this could help explain the mindset of Pharaoh. He is responding to the question, "What should be done to a nation which rebels against its master?" He believes they should be utterly humbled and the leader should be brought to his knees. He thinks the decree is referring to the Jewish People who only desire to serve HASHEM but in truth his enemy is lurking within. © 2018 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

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

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

According to S'fornu (Sh'mos 7:3), G-d never took away Pharaoh's free will. Rather, G-d "strengthened his heart" so that he could withstand the beating Egypt was taking, thereby allowing his decision-making process to continue to be based on free will. Instead of being forced to give in when he

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

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

suffering anymore.

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

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

### **RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

## **Be'eros**

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

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

This midrash provides the basis for the famous words of the Rambam: "It is possible that a person might sin a great sin or many sins, so that the judgment reached by the great Judge demands that the payment exacted from the sinner (who sinned of his own knowledge and will) be that they prevent him from

repenting. They do not permit him to repent of his evil, so that he will die, lost to the sin that he committed...For this reason the Torah writes, 'I will harden Paroh's heart,' because Paroh first sinned of his own accord...Why did Hashem continue to warn him through Moshe, 'Send [them out] and repent' after He had already told Paroh 'You will not send them out?' -- in order to teach humans that when G-d withholds the possibility of teshuvah from the sinner, it is impossible for him to repent, and he will die in his evil." (Hilchos Teshuvah 6:3)

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

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

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

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

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

