

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The Israelites were at their lowest ebb. They had been enslaved. A decree had been issued that every male child was to be killed. Moses had been sent to liberate them, but the first effect of his intervention was to make matters worse, not better. Their quota of brick-making remained unchanged, but now they also had to provide their own straw. Initially they had believed Moses when he performed the signs God had given him and told them that God was about to rescue them. Now they turned against Moses and Aaron, accusing them: “May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.” (Exodus 5:20–21)

At this point Moses – who had been so reluctant to take on the mission – turned to God in protest and anguish: “O Lord, why have You brought trouble upon this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all.” (Exodus 5:22)

None of this, however, was accidental. The Torah is preparing the ground for one of its most monumental propositions: In the darkest night, Israel was about to have its greatest encounter with God. Hope was to be born at the very edge of the abyss of despair. There was nothing natural about this, nothing inevitable. No logic can give rise to hope; no law of history charts a path from slavery to redemption. The entire sequence of events was a prelude to the single most formative moment in the history of Israel: the intervention of God in history – the supreme Power intervening on behalf of the supremely powerless, not (as in every other culture) to endorse the status quo, but to overturn it.

God tells Moses: “I am Hashem, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you

with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:6-7). The entire speech is full of interest, but what will concern us – as it has successive generations of interpreters – is what God tells Moses at the outset: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty [E-I Shaddai], but by My name Hashem I was not known to them” (Ex. 6:3). A fundamental distinction is being made between the experience the patriarchs had of God, and the experience the Israelites were about to have. Something new, unprecedented, was about to happen. What is it?

Clearly it had to do with the names by which God is known. The verse distinguishes between E-I Shaddai (“God Almighty”) and the four-letter name of God which, because of its sanctity, Jewish tradition refers to simply as Hashem – “the name” par excellence.

As the classic Jewish commentators point out, the verse must be read with great care. It does not say that the patriarchs “did not know” this name; nor does it say that God did not “make this name known” to them. The name Hashem appears no less than 165 times in the book of Genesis. God Himself uses the phrase “I am Hashem” to both Abraham (Genesis 15:7) and Jacob (28:13). What, then, is new about the revelation of God that was about to happen in the days of Moses that had never happened before?

The Sages give various explanations. A Midrash says that God is known as Elokim when He judges human beings, E-I Shaddai when He suspends judgment and Hashem when He shows mercy.¹ Judah Halevi in *The Kuzari*, and Ramban in his Commentary, say that Hashem refers to God when He performs miracles that suspend the laws of nature.² However, Rashi’s explanation is the simplest and most elegant: It is not written here, “[My name, Hashem] I did not make known to them” but rather “[By the name, Hashem] I was not known to them” – meaning, I was not recognised by them in My attribute of “keeping faith,” by reason of which My name is “Hashem,” namely that I am faithful to fulfil My word, for I made promises to them but I did not fulfil them [during their lifetime].³

¹ Shemot Rabbah 3:6

² Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 2:2. Ramban, commentary to Exodus 6:2.

³ Rashi commentary to Exodus 6:3.



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The patriarchs had received promises from God. They would multiply and become a nation. They would inherit a land. Neither of these promises were realised in their lifetime. To the contrary, as Genesis reaches its close, the family of the patriarchs numbered a mere seventy souls. They had not yet acquired a land. They were in exile in Egypt. But now the fulfilment was about to begin.

Already, in the first chapter of Exodus, we hear, for the first time, the phrase *Am Bnei Yisrael*, “the people of the children of Israel” (Ex. 1:9). Israel was no longer a family, but a people. Moses at the burning bush was told by God that He was about to bring the people to “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8). Hashem therefore means the God who acts in history to fulfil His promises.

This was something radically new – not just to Israel but to humanity as a whole. Until then, God (or the gods) was known through nature. God was in the sun, the stars, the rain, the storm, the fertility of the fields and the sequence of the seasons. When there was drought and famine, the gods were being angry. When there was produce in plenty, the gods were showing favour. The gods were nature personified. Never before had God intervened in history, to rescue a people from slavery and set them on the path to freedom. This was a revolution, at once political and intellectual.

To most humans at most times, there seems to be no meaning in history. We live, we die, and it is as if we had never been. The universe gives no sign of any interest in our existence. If that was so in ancient times, when people believed in the existence of gods, how much more so is it true today for the neo-Darwinians who see life as no more than the operation of “chance and necessity” (Jacques Monod) or “the blind watchmaker” (Richard Dawkins).⁴ Time seems to obliterate all meaning. Nothing lasts. Nothing endures.⁵

⁴ Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1996)

⁵ We even find this sentiment in one place in Tanach, in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): “Man’s fate is like that of the animals;

In ancient Israel, by contrast, “for the first time, the prophets placed a value on history...For the first time, we find affirmed and increasingly accepted the idea that historical events have a value in themselves, insofar as they are determined by the will of God...Historical facts thus become situations of man in respect to God, and as such they acquire a religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer on them. It may, then, be said with truth that the Hebrews were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God.”⁶ Judaism is humanity’s first glimpse of history as more than a mere succession of happenings – as nothing less than a drama of redemption in which the fate of a nation reflects its loyalty or otherwise to a covenant with God.

It is hard to recapture this turning point in the human imagination, just as it is hard for us to imagine what it was like for people first to encounter Copernicus’ discovery that the earth went round the sun. It must have been a terrifying threat to all who believed that the earth did not move; that it was the one stable point in a shifting universe. So it was with time. The ancients believed that nothing really changed. Time was, in Plato’s phrase, no more than the “moving image of eternity.” That was the certainty that gave people solace. The times may be out of joint, but eventually things will return to the way they were.

To think of history as an arena of change is terrifying likewise. It means that what happened once may never happen again; that we are embarked on a journey with no assurance that we will ever return to where we began. It is what Milan Kundera meant in his phrase, “the unbearable lightness of being.”⁷ Only profound faith – a new kind of faith, breaking with the entire world of ancient mythology – could give people the courage to set out on a journey to the unknown.

That is the meaning of Hashem: the God who intervenes in history. As Judah Halevi points out, the Ten Commandments begin not with the words “I am the Lord your God who created heaven and earth,” but “I am the Lord your God who brought you out from Egypt, from the house of slavery.” Elokim is God as we encounter Him in nature and creation, but Hashem is God as revealed in history, in the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and Egypt.

I find it moving that this is precisely what many non-Jewish observers have concluded. This, for example, is the verdict of the Russian thinker Nikolai Berdyaev: I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in

the same fate awaits them both; as one dies so does the other.... Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, New York, Harper & Row, 1959, 104.

⁷ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber, 1984)

the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint...Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny.⁸

That is what God tells Moses is about to be revealed: Hashem, meaning God as He intervenes in the arena of time, "so that My name may be declared throughout the world" (Ex. 9:16). The script of history would bear the mark of a hand not human, but divine. And it began with these words: "Therefore say to the Israelites: I am Hashem, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians." *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd God spoke to Moses and said unto him, I am the Lord, and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, as Almighty God [El Shaddai], but My name YHVH [Four-letter Name of God] I have not made known to them." (Exodus 6:2–3) What is the secret of Jewish eternity? If medical opinion is beginning to maintain that one of the most important variables in achieving longevity is an optimistic outlook on life, one of the most unique and important messages that Judaism gave to the world is the optimistic notion of world redemption.

Our Western culture is formed by the Greco-Roman civilization and by what is generally known as the "Judeo-Christian" tradition. The Greeks saw the world and life in a cyclical pattern of endless repetition without purpose or end-game: the myth of Sisyphus who is doomed to take the boulder up and down the mountain endlessly; the tragedy of Oedipus who suffers the sins of his parents and whose children are doomed to repeat the very crimes committed by their forbears; Shakespeare's "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow beats on this petty pace to the last syllable of recorded time" and "life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Judaism, on the other hand, teaches that world and history are linear rather than cyclical, progressing towards repair and redemption, the prophetic notion of eventual human perfection at a time when "nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war any more" (Is. 2:4).

I would maintain that what has kept us going despite exile, persecution and pogrom is this fundamental belief that what we do counts and that eventually we will succeed in perfecting the world in the Kingship of God.

This revolutionary optimistic concept is built around the name of God revealed at the beginning of this Torah portion: "And God spoke to Moses, and said to him I am the Lord (YHVH)" (Ex. 6:2). The Bible goes on to say that our patriarchs only knew of the name "Almighty God" (El Shaddai), but this generation of Moses will be privileged to know the new name of God, the Lord (YHVH). And it is specifically within the context of this new revelation of the name that God confirms the establishment of the covenant, the entry of Israel the people into Israel the land, and the exodus from slavery and oppression to freedom and redemption.

What does this new revealed name have to do with redemption? In the previous Torah portion we read of the dialogue between God and Moses that is the beginning of the explanation. The Almighty reveals Himself to Moses in a burning bush, and bestows upon him the mission of taking the Jews out of Egypt (Ex. 3:10). Moses asks for God's name, which is another way of asking for a working definition of God which he could communicate to the Israelites. God said to Moses, "Ehyeh asher ehyeh" (Ex. 3:14), which is best translated, "I will be what I will be." What kind of name is this? It seems to be vague, not at all defined, and very much open-ended. Moreover, the verb form around which this phrase is built is identical to the verb form of the newly revealed name of God, both of them coming from the verb to be (H Y H).

In order to complete the elements of our puzzle, we must invoke the very first commandment which God will give the newly formed Jewish people: "This renewal of the moon shall be for you the beginning of the months..." (Exodus 12:1)

The Israelites are commanded to search the darkened sky for the new moon, the light which emerges each month from the blackened heavens devoid of light. The Zohar, in explaining the importance of the moon and our celebration of its renewal each month with Psalms of praise (Hallel), explains: The Jewish nation is compared to the moon. Just as the moon wanes and seems to have completely disappeared into darkness only to be renewed and reborn, so will the Jewish people often appear to have been overwhelmed by the forces of darkness and evil only to reemerge as a nation reborn in a march towards redemption.

Thus did the Babylonian Talmud emerge from the destruction of the Second Temple and the reborn State of Israel emerge from the tragedy of the Holocaust. From this perspective, the message of the moon is a message of ultimate optimism. The Almighty God Himself guarantees not only survival but also

⁸ Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (1936), 86–87

salvation. The paradigm for the optimistic and life-affirming pattern of exile and redemption is our experience of slavery in and exodus out of Egypt – and the fundamental change in Egyptian society and world mentality wrought by that exodus.

And let us pay special attention to the words of this first commandment: "This renewal of the moon shall be for you the beginning of the months..." The Hebrew phrase "for you" seems superfluous. Its meaning, however, as explained by the sages of the Talmud, makes it central and pivotal to the world as the Bible sees it. Our God is not only the God of creation, El Shaddai, the God who set limits on each element as He set boundaries on the heavens and the earth, the sands and the seas, mineral, vegetable, animal and human life and activity; He is also the God of history, "who will be what He will be," and who has a built-in plan for the world which includes its ultimate betterment and even perfection. And if creation was an act of One, events in history are the result of partnership between the divine and human beings, God, Israel and world. Hence in the marking of the renewal of the month, which is really the marking of historical time, the Lord clearly tells His people that time is in their hands to do with what they will. If indeed how many years we may have to live depends on many factors aside from ourselves, what we do with the time at our disposal depends mostly on us. ©2019 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

When the hardships imposed upon the Israelites became oppressive, Moses complains to heaven that the promises made to him have not been fulfilled. He has come to Pharaoh to ask him to free the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, and Pharaoh laughs at him and tells him to forget it. In addition, the Jewish people themselves are not really believers in Moses, or in the fact that they will be freed. They too complain that since Moses has come on the scene, the situation has worsened.

Moses, as a result, complains back to Heaven, in the form of a demand, so to speak, that an explanation is warranted. Why is this happening? At the burning bush, he was promised that the Jewish people would be freed and that he would be able to raise them to a great level of spirituality when they would accept The Torah and become an eternal people. These promises apparently remain unfulfilled. This is the problem he raises. It is this complaint that results in the answer that heaven gives to Moses in this week's reading.

It is interesting to note that heaven does not respond to Moses' specific complaints. Rather, Heaven, so to speak, says, "There were great people before you, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who I was able to deal

with. They never complained. They never asked why. They never pursued the question. Yet, you lack patience right at the start of your mission." This is an absolute non-sequitur to the questions and complaints that Moses has raised.

We find that this is a pattern that exists throughout the Holy writings of the Bible. In the Great Book of Job, part of the canon of the Bible, Job complains to God about his treatment. Why is he made to suffer? What is his sin? Why should he be subject to so much disaster? It is interesting that again the response from Heaven is that, so to speak, this is not his business. Again, it's a non sequitur. God describes how he created the world, how the universe is maintained, the wonders of nature, the intricacies of science and of medicine and of the human body. None of this answer his questions and God says, so to speak, "You're never going to understand, you're never going to know. You weren't here at the beginning and you're not going to be here at the end, so your question really has no basis. I will not respond."

There's a great lesson in this. Throughout human life, personal, and national, things happen to us that have absolutely no rational or even justified cause. Why do these things happen? What is the judgment that is leveled against people and against nations? We would like to understand it. Moses himself will say, "God, tell me about you. Show me you." Heaven does not respond that way. Heaven remains mysterious. Heaven answers always with a non-sequitur.

Heaven does always deal with us but only by saying that we are the created, that Heaven is the creator, and there isn't a basis of mutual understanding and rationality. The questions are better left unasked. It is difficult for people to deal with this because everyone wants to know and understand everything. We want it all to make sense, but as the Prophet says, "My ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts. You will never understand me." This is the basic lesson that we learn from the incident of Moses returning to fulfill his mission to deliver the Jewish people from Egypt and grant them The Torah. Moses now understands the difference between understanding Heaven and obeying Heaven. ©2019 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

Although the plagues may seem like random punishments, they are actually a Divine plan to teach the Egyptians some fundamental lessons. Consider for example the first plague of water turning into blood. It can, as the Midrash points out, be seen as

an attack on the Egyptian god—the Nile River. The point of this plague was to drive home to the Egyptians the true impotency of their god.

Alternatively, the plague of blood can be viewed as a measure for measure punishment. Since, as the Midrash adds, the Egyptians drowned Jewish children, shedding their blood in water, hence their water was turned into blood.

The Maharal insists that the plagues reveal God's unlimited power. The first three are attacks from below—turning the land and sea against the Egyptians (blood, frogs and lice). The next three are attacks from the ground level (beasts, pestilence and boils). And the last three emerge from the heavens (hail, locusts and darkness).

Most important: the plagues do not reveal a God of vengeance but a God of compassion. The movement of the plagues is from the external (blood first attacking water outside the house) to that which is closer (the frogs which enter the home) to the body itself (lice affecting individuals).

Rather than increasing in intensity, the plagues then diminish in power, withdrawing once again to the external (beasts), moving to the inner home (pestilence) and finally to the body (boils). The seventh, eighth and ninth plagues repeat the same cycle. The plagues fluctuate and after each triplet, they give the Egyptians the chance to repent.

Some commentators even insist that in reality there were only three plagues prior to the smiting of the first born as only the third, sixth and ninth plagues impacted directly on the bodies of the Egyptians. From this perspective, the first two of each triplet were in effect warnings for plagues three, six and nine.

Another display of God's compassion was the nature of the warning. Note that for the first, fourth and seventh plagues Pharaoh was warned near the Nile. For the second, fifth and eighth he is warned in the privacy of his palace. But for the third, sixth and ninth there are no warnings, as the first two of each of the triplets serve that purpose.

Even the plague of the first born, the one that seems to be the harshest, was not random and it reveals a God who judges mercifully. After all, the elders were the priests, the leadership in Egypt, who, together with Pharaoh masterminded the enslavement of the Jews. God's mercy is manifested in that virtually all of Egypt was spared. Only the elders who had orchestrated the whole plan were attacked.

There is one other approach to the plagues that ought to be noted. The story of Genesis is the story of a God unleashing his power to create the world. The story of the plagues is another display of that Godly creative energy. Our rabbis say that "with ten sayings the world was created." (Ethics 5:1) And here, with ten plagues, a section of the world was being unraveled.

As creation was carefully carried out by God for

a world that was potentially "very good," (Genesis 1:31) so too were the plagues a carefully designed plan by God to undo part of that creation which had gone wrong.

But when God undoes creation, he does so slowly. Indeed, all of these approaches to the plagues reflect a God who is reticent to inflict pain. It is a God of endless love who hesitates to destroy; and a God who, even when punishing, does so with the hope that those affected will examine themselves and learn from their mistakes. ©2019 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

Pharaoh and the Learning Curve

Parashat Va'eira contains the first seven of the Ten Plagues through which Hashem punished the Egyptians and Par'oh for making the B'nei Yisrael suffer throughout their slavery and for not allowing the B'nei Yisrael to leave when Hashem commanded them. Even though the Torah tells us that Hashem knew in advance that Par'oh would refuse to let the B'nei Yisrael leave, Par'oh still had to face the responsibility of his decisions and the consequences of his refusal. Each plague came to teach Par'oh a lesson about himself and his beliefs. It is important for us to study these plagues and to comprehend the important lessons which Par'oh failed to learn until it was too late.

The Torah tells us, "And Hashem said to Moshe, see I have placed you as a judge (god) to Par'oh and Aharon, your brother, will be your speaker (prophet). You will speak all that I command you and Aharon, your brother, will speak to Par'oh and he will send the B'nei Yisrael from his land. And I will harden Par'oh's heart and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. And Par'oh will not listen to you and I will place My hand on Egypt and I will take out My hosts, My people the B'nei Yisrael from Egypt. And Egypt will know that I am Hashem when I stretch out My hand over Egypt, and I will take out the B'nei Yisrael from their midst."

We see here the process by which Moshe would speak with Par'oh. Moshe would first speak to Aharon, his brother, and Aharon would then speak with Par'oh. According to the ibn Ezra, this was the process each time that Moshe spoke with Par'oh even during those occasions in the Torah where Aharon's name is not mentioned as the go-between for Moshe. Our Rabbis explain why this was necessary. In last week's parasha we learned that Moshe was of "uncircumcised lips". According to most this was an indication of a speech impediment, possibly a lisp, and this is supported by a Midrash. Others say that it only meant

that Moshe would be uncomfortable in his speech because he had been away from Egypt for fifty years and forgotten most of the language. Aharon, who had remained in Egypt throughout, would have a greater fluency in the language and could speak to Par'oh with the subtleties necessary in negotiations.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains part of the reason for Hashem assigning a middle-man between Moshe and Par'oh. Par'oh did not understand the entire concept of prophecy. Par'oh viewed a prophet as one who originates the words that he speaks: Hashem does not speak 'to' the prophet but 'in' him. This denies the actual revelations of Hashem and negates the idea that Hashem reveals Himself to the prophet and the prophet brings what Hashem has revealed to him to the people. This assumes an active role in prophecy, the creation of the words from an inspired or elevated state, which is the opposite of the Jewish principle that the prophet is passive and receives his words directly from Hashem. Using the model of Moshe as a god and Aharon as his prophet, one sees that the prophet says nothing to Par'oh that is not first dictated to him by Moshe. It becomes clear that Moshe, then, is acting as Hashem's prophet, and only relays messages from Hashem directly rather than making statements of his own.

Par'oh and the Egyptians had forgotten the power of Hashem from Yosef's time, and they no longer viewed Hashem as the Ruler over their world. The Egyptians had been able to subjugate the B'nei Yisrael for more than two hundred years and this proved to them their own superiority and the superiority of their own gods. But it was not only the Egyptians that Hashem needed to impress. The current generations of the B'nei Yisrael had been born as slaves. This was the only life that they knew. Here Hashem speaks of them as My hosts and My people. Hirsch explains that part of Hashem's goal was to turn the B'nei Yisrael from a group of unconnected "hosts" that supported Hashem, each in its own way, into a united "My People". This was done so that the people would know that the Torah was not limited to one group but "invites and appeals to every degree and shade of position and class and occupation, it calls the whole of humanity to submission to Hashem and His Law."

We still must ask how Hashem could harden Par'oh's heart and then punish him for not letting the Jews leave. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Man is given free will and always has the opportunity to choose the right path or the wrong one. It would appear that Hashem takes away Par'oh's choice. Sorotzkin argues that normally people learn from their mistakes and change their behavior. Par'oh could have learned from the first plague that he was incapable of fighting against Hashem. Sometimes a warning is enough to succeed in changing one's behavior. Par'oh is given warnings for two of every three plagues. When

Hashem tells Moshe that He will harden Par'oh's heart, He means that He will strengthen Par'oh's ability to choose so that Par'oh can choose not to learn from his mistakes and he will choose whichever path he truly desires. This reestablishes his free will and enables him to be punished for his choices.

The Or HaChaim deals with this same question from a slightly different perspective. The Or HaChaim tells us that Par'oh was evil and stubborn, and the more that he was struck down, the more determined he was to fight back. Hashem gave Par'oh the strength that he needed to continue to fight. Moshe had warned Par'oh on numerous occasions, but this only led to Par'oh's refusal to even listen. Hashem understood that there was even a limit to what Par'oh would be willing to hear. When Par'oh tells Moshe, "You will no longer gaze upon my face because on the day that you gaze upon my face you will die," Hashem immediately decided that the final plague would begin, the final decree was made.

We can understand Par'oh because in many ways we each fail to adjust to reality. We may not be evil like Par'oh, but we still fail to act on new truths and new requirements of us. Those of our religion who have experienced other world views find it difficult to abandon them when they realize that the Truth of Torah requires an adjustment of these ideas. We also must constantly learn and then adjust our behavior based on that knowledge. As we are more convinced of the Truths of the Torah, we must change our perceptions of other world views. Par'oh shows us the example of a person who lacks growth, and that failing is his downfall. May we each continue to grow and be willing to accept the change that this growth will demand.

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ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Astrology

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Pharaoh in this week's portion relied greatly on his astrologers and his magicians. What is the Jewish view on this subject?

In the view of Maimonides (*Rambam*) all of astrology and magic are foolishness and one should not rely upon them at all. However *Nachmanides* (*Ramban*) asserts that astrology can impact upon the world and the individual can be affected by its predictions for this is the way that G-d created the world. Yet from the standpoint of Almighty G-d these things have no effect and G-d could change anything that might be predetermined by the stars.

Given all this, is it permissible according to Jewish law for one to seek the advice of an astrologer or to rely on the daily horoscope?

The *Ramban* asserts that following your horoscope is permitted and does not fall into the category of the prohibition of magic or sorcery. Indeed if

a person's horoscope predicts that something bad will happen he should pray to G-d for mercy and perform Mitzvot because a person's actions can change what is predicted by the stars. Additionally if one's horoscope indicated that on a certain day something bad will happen to him, he may take its advice and avoid undertaking that event on that day.

Maimonides however states emphatically that not only is one forbidden to rely on astrology but if one does rely upon it he would be subject to receive lashes (*Malkot*).

The *Meiri*, one of the rationalists of the *Rishonim* (Rabbis who lived in the Middle ages) however, believes that there is nothing essentially wrong with scheduling your day according to your horoscope, for it is equivalent to someone deciding to do something in the middle of the day when the sun shines brightly. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states regarding the Plague of Blood: "And the Lord said to Moshe, say to Aharon: Take your rod and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their streams, their rivers and their pools, and over every gathering of their water, that they may become blood; throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone" (Exodus 7:19). Why is Aharon (Moses' brother) and not Moses commanded to initiate this plague?

Rashi, one of the greatest Biblical commentators, cites the Midrash *Shemot Rabbah* to answer this question. It explains that Aharon, rather than Moses, was chosen to initiate the plague of blood because the water had protected Moses when he was cast into it as an infant in a basket. It would, therefore, not be proper for Moses to smite the water which helped save him.

How can this be? Water is an inanimate object which does not have free will. When something floats in water and does not sink, it would not occur to us to give thanks to the water for its buoyancy. Nevertheless, we learn from this verse that if a person derives pleasure from an object, he should show his gratitude by being careful not to cause harm or damage to the object, even though it would not suffer pain. As the Talmud (*Bava Kama 92b*) states: "If you drank water from a well, do not throw stones at it". Although this advice is basically meant as a metaphor for people who have given you something, the literal meaning should not be ignored.

Since this is true concerning inanimate objects, all the more so we must show gratitude towards people who have shown us kindness. Unfortunately, there is a saying "No good deed goes unpunished". People often times not only don't show gratitude, but they return

indifference or bad for good. We must make it one of our personal goals in life to always think "who has helped me and who can I thank today?". Let your attitude be gratitude. Not only will you be happier, but so will those around you -- especially your friends and family. *Dvar Torah based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2019 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

The Parshiyos we are currently studying serve as Moshe Rabbeinu's introduction to Klal Yisrael. The narratives covered in these weekly Torah readings illuminate for us the attributes the Jewish people seek in choosing their leaders.

In describing the events of Moshe's early life, the Torah seems to be trying to make the case that Moshe is fit for his future position of leadership in the Jewish nation. Yet scant few "bullets" in Moshe's resume shed light on his qualifications for the job. Remember, when Moshe appeared before Pharaoh at the start of his mission of redemption, he was 80 years old! What kind of resume did he build during those first 80 years that would qualify him for becoming the chosen person to lead the Jewish people?

Rav Simcha Zissel (the 'Alter') from Kelm spends many chapters of his sefer discussing this idea. The Alter makes an elaborate case that we really only see one thing about Moshe Rabbeinu that qualified him for the job. There is one theme and quality, which begins in Parshas Shmos and continues in Parshas Vaera, which shows us why Moshe Rabbeinu was worthy of being chosen for this position. This quality is being "nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro" -- the capacity that Moshe Rabbeinu had to feel the pain of his fellow Jew.

Rav Simcha Zissel documents this for us: We read in last week's parsha "...and he went out to his brethren and he saw their suffering..." [Shmos 2:11]. Moshe Rabbeinu was a prince. He was almost like a grandson of Pharaoh. He could have remained in the lap of luxury and done nothing. However, our Rabbis say, commenting on the above quoted pasuk, "He focused his eyes and heart to be distressed over them. He said 'I wish I could be in your place.'"

Moshe saw the Egyptian beating up the Jew. Moshe saved the Jew from the hand of the Egyptian. Is that not a case of "nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro"? Again, the next day, when it was not a case of an Egyptian against a Jew but of Jew against Jew, what does Moshe Rabbeinu do? He does the same thing: Nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro. It costs him his entire secure position in the palace of Pharaoh. He becomes a fugitive of justice and must run away for his life from Egypt.

Then when Moshe went to Midyan, and he might have already 'learned his lesson' to keep himself out of other people's fights, he sees that the daughters of Midyan are being harassed and again he sticks up

for the underdog and jumps in to save them.

Moshe bears the burden of his fellow man's suffering. This and this alone is the primary quality that Moshe possessed, which qualified him for the job of Jewish leadership. His resume contained the fact that he was a "nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro".

Rav Yonosan Eibeshutz, in his sefer Tiferes Yonosan, uses this idea to explain why Pharaoh excused the entire Tribe of Levi from the Egyptian bondage. According to our Rabbis, the Tribe of Levi was not enslaved the entire time of our sojourn in Egypt. Rav Eibeshutz offers an interesting theory why Pharaoh did this. He says that Pharaoh saw through his astrologers that the eventual savior of the Jewish people would be a descendant of the Tribe of Levi. Pharaoh figured, and shrewdly so, that a person who was never enslaved in the first place would not be the leader of a rebellion. How can a person who was not a victim of oppression turn around and take the oppressed class out of slavery? He never felt the pain so he would not risk his status quo to attempt to lead a revolt to overthrow the current situation.

It was a brilliant plan. Pharaoh was willing to give up the labor of the Tribe of Levi as a means of stifling the ability of any Levite to aspire to become the savior of his people! Even the Jewish people themselves were skeptical of Moshe's ability to lead them out of slavery, due to his lack of familiarity with their situation. "...And they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of wind and hard work." [Shmos 6:9]

Pharaoh underestimated the Tribe of Levi. He failed to realize that the Tribe of Levi in general and Moshe Rabbeinu in particular had an unbelievable ability to empathize with their fellow man. In spite of the fact that they were not the victims of the slavery, they had this capacity of putting themselves in someone else's shoes as if they themselves were the victim.

The Shalo"h HaKadosh points out an anomaly in the Torah's pasukim [Shmos 6:14-19]: When the Torah introduces us to and tells us the genealogy of Moshe Rabbeinu, it begins with the Tribe of Reuven and lists the sons of Reuven. It then goes lists the sons of Shimon. There is similar syntax in both cases: "The sons of Reuven..." "And the sons of Shimeon..." We would expect to next find a parallel listing of Moshe Rabbeinu's tribe, beginning with the words "And the sons of Levi..." Instead, the Torah says, "And these ARE THE NAMES OF THE SONS OF LEVI..."

The Shalo"h says an amazing idea. Levi prophetically realized that his sons and grandsons were not going to be victims of the enslavement in Egypt. He did not want them to forget about their cousins who were slaves. Therefore, he took pains to name each of his sons with a name somehow connoting the enslavement in Egypt. Kehas (meaning dark) connotes the fact that "they blackened their teeth with the

suffering of the enslavement." Merari (coming from the word Mar) connotes that they made their lives bitter. Gershon (coming from the word Ger) connotes being temporary sojourners in this land of our exile. Levi anticipated what was coming and he took pains to imbue in his children the sense of kinship and empathy with other members of the family. Levi wanted to ensure that his descendants would not be able to sleep well at night -- even if they were not enslaved -- as long as another member of the family was in pain.

Moshe Rabbeinu in particular possessed this attribute. He was the prime example of this capacity to be nos'ei b'ol im chaveiro.

Rav Simcha Zissel explains that Moshe Rabbeinu's statement at the end of last week's parsha "My L-rd, why have You harmed this people, why have you sent me?" [Shmos 5:22] was a worse sin than what he did at Mei Meriva (when he hit the rock). Imagine the audacity to lecture the Almighty, as it were! The Medrash, in fact, states that at this very moment, the Attribute of Justice wanted to smite Moshe. However, G-d responded, "Leave him alone, he speaks this way only out of a sense of honor for the Jewish people."

Rav Matisyahu Solomon explains the Medrash: "Why did the Almighty say 'Let him be'? It was because it was not Moshe Rabbeinu talking. It was Klal Yisrael talking." Moshe Rabbeinu was so fused with the needs and suffering of the Jewish people, it was as if the Jewish people were talking through the voice box of Moshe. This expression of "Why have You harmed this people?" is what the people felt. Moshe Rabbeinu, as it were, was like a puppet who mouthed the words the people were feeling. For such speech, the Almighty said, one cannot be held accountable. The people could not be held accountable for such speech because "a person is not held accountable for what he says in his moment of anguish."

This then was the resume of Moshe Rabbeinu. He qualified for Jewish leadership because he had the preeminent quality required of a Jewish leader -- the ability to empathize with the suffering of the Jewish people. ©2015 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

