

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In parshat Va'era we read for the first time, not of Pharaoh hardening his heart but of God doing so: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," said God to Moses, "and multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 7:3). And so indeed we find in the sixth plague, boils (Ex. 9:12), the eighth, locusts (Ex. 10:1, 20), and the tenth, the firstborn (Ex. 11:10). In each case the hardening is attributed to God.

Hence the problem that troubled the sages and later commentators: if God was the cause and Pharaoh merely His passive vehicle, what was his sin? He had no choice, therefore no responsibility, therefore no culpability. The commentators give a broad range of answers. One: Pharaoh's loss of freewill during the last five plagues was a punishment for his obstinacy in the first five, where he acted freely.¹ Two: the relevant verb, ch-z-k, does not mean "to harden" but "to strengthen." God was not taking away Pharaoh's freewill but, to the contrary, preserving it in the face of the overwhelming disasters that were hitting Egypt.² Three: God is a partner in all human action, but we only usually attribute an act to God if it seems inexplicable in ordinary human terms. Pharaoh acted freely throughout, but it was only during the last five plagues that his behaviour was so strange that it was attributed to God.³

Note how reluctant the commentators were to take the text at face value – rightly so because freewill is one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism. Maimonides explains why: If we had no free will there would be, he says, no point to the commands and prohibitions, since we would behave as we were predestined to, regardless of what the law is. Nor would there be any justice in reward or punishment since neither the righteous nor the wrongdoer is free to be other than what they are.⁴

So the problem is an ancient one.⁵ But it has become much more salient in modern times because of

¹ This is roughly the position of Maimonides, who argues that after the first five refusals, God "closed the door of repentance" to Pharaoh. See Hilkhoh Teshuvah 5:2-3, 6:1-3.

² This is the view of Sforno to Ex. 7:3.

³ This is the view of Samuel David Luzzatto to Ex. 7:3.

⁴ Maimonides, Hilkhoh Teshuvah, 5:4.

⁵ It was raised by Aristotle also.

the sheer accumulation of challenges to the belief in human freedom. Marx said history is formed by the play of economic forces. Freud argued that we are what we are because of unconscious drives. Neo-Darwinians say that however we rationalise our behaviour, we do what we do because people who behaved this way in the past survived to hand on their genes to future generations. Most recently, neuroscientists have shown, using fMRI scans, that in some cases our brain registers a decision up to seven seconds before we are consciously aware of it.⁶

All of this is interesting and important, but contemporary secularists usually fail to see what the ancient sages knew: that if we genuinely lack freewill, our entire sense of what it is to be human will crumble into dust. There is a glaring contradiction at the heart of our culture. On the one hand, secularists believe that nothing should constrain our freedom to choose to do whatever we want to do, or be whatever we want to be, so long as we do not harm others. Their supreme value is autonomous choice. On the other hand, secularists tell us that human freedom does not exist. Why then should we invoke freedom-to-choose as a value if it is, according to science, an illusion?

If hard determinism is true, there is no reason to honour liberty or create a free society. To the contrary: we should embrace Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, where children are conceived and hatched in laboratories, and adults programmed to stay happy by a regime of drugs and pleasure. We should implement the scenario of Anthony Burgess's The Clockwork Orange, in which criminals are reformed by brain surgery or conditioning. If freedom does not exist, why be bothered by the addictive nature of computer games and social media? Why prefer genuine reality to virtual reality? It was Nietzsche who rightly observed that the greater our scientific achievements, the lower our view of the human person. No longer the image of God, we have become mere incarnated algorithms.

The truth is that the more we understand about the human brain, the better able we are to describe what free action really is. At present, scientists distinguish between the amygdala, the most primitive part of the brain, conditioned to sensitise us to potential danger; the limbic system, sometimes called the "social brain," which is responsible for much of our emotional

⁶ See <https://tinyurl.com/sacks01>

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
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life; and the prefrontal cortex, which is analytical and capable of dispassionately weighing the consequences of alternative choices.⁷ The tensions between these three form the arena within which personal freedom is won or lost.

Patterns of behaviour are shaped by neural pathways connecting different parts of the brain, but not all of them are good for us. So, for instance, we might turn to drugs or binge eating or thrill-seeking to distract us from some of the unhappy chemicals – fears and anxieties, for instance – that are also part of the architecture of the brain. The more often we do so, the more myelin gets wrapped around the pathway, and the more rapid and instinctive the behaviour. So the more often we behave in certain ways, the harder it is to break the habit and create a new and different pathway. To do so requires the acquisition of new habits, acted on consistently for an extended period of time. Current scientific thinking suggests that a minimum of 66 days is needed to form a new habit.⁸

So we now have a scientific way of explaining the hardening taking place in Pharaoh's heart. Having established a pattern of response to the first five plagues, he would find it progressively more difficult at every level – neuro-scientifically, psychologically and politically – to change. The same is true of every bad habit and political decision. Almost all our structures, mental and social, tend to reinforce previous patterns of behaviour. So our freedom diminishes every time we fail to exercise it.

If so, then today's parsha and contemporary science tell the same story: that freedom is not a given, nor is it an absolute. We have to work for it. We acquire it slowly in stages, and we can lose it, as Pharaoh lost his, and as drug addicts, workaholics, and people addicted to computer games lose theirs. In one of the most famous opening lines in all literature, Jean-

⁷ The amygdala and the limbic system are what the Zohar and other Jewish mystical texts call the nefesh ha-behamit, the "animal soul" within us.

⁸ One easily accessible recent book on the subject is Loretta Graziano Breunin, *Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain Your Brain to Boost Your Serotonin, Dopamine, Oxytocin, & Endorphin Levels*, Adams Media, 2016.

Jacques Rousseau wrote, at the beginning of *The Social Contract*, that "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." In fact, the opposite is true. Our early character is determined partly by DNA – the genetic heritage of our parents and theirs – partly by our home and upbringing, partly by our friends,⁹ and partly by the surrounding culture. We are not born free. We have to work hard to achieve freedom.

That takes rituals, whose repeated performance creates new neural pathways and new rapid-response behaviour. It requires a certain calibrated distance from the surrounding culture, if we are not to be swept away by social fads and fashions that seem liberating now but destructive in retrospect. It needs a mental mindset that pauses before any significant action and asks, "Should I do this? May I do this? What rules of conduct should I bring to bear?" It involves an internalised narrative of identity, so that we can ask of any course of action, "Is this who I am and what I stand for?"

It is no accident that the elements listed in the previous paragraph are all prominent features of Judaism, which turns out to be an ongoing seminar in willpower and impulse control. Now that we are beginning to understand the plasticity of the brain, we know at least a little of the neuroscience that lies behind the ability to overcome bad habits and addictions. Keeping Shabbat, for example, has the power to liberate us and our children from smartphone addiction and all that goes with it. The religion whose first festival, Pesach, celebrates collective freedom, gives us, in its rituals, the skills we need for personal freedom.

Freedom is less a gift than an achievement. Even a Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the ancient world, could lose it. Even a nation of slaves could, with the help of God, acquire it. Never take freedom for granted. It needs a hundred small acts of self-control daily, which is what halakhah, Jewish law, is all about.

Freedom is a muscle that needs to be exercised: use it or lose it. That is a life-transforming 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

"**T**hese are Aaron and Moses, whom God has said are to take out the People of Israel from the land of Egypt...they are Moses and Aaron" [Ex. 6:26-27]. By virtue of an acclaimed Broadway production of recent vintage, many have come to a renewed appreciation of the fascinating story of an

⁹ See Judith Harris, *The Nurture Assumption*, Free Press, 2009.

American “Founding Father.” His roller coaster life, punctuated by the key role he played in the shaping of the great experiment called American democracy, inspired the opening words of “Hamilton”: “How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by Providence, impoverished, in squalor, grow up to be a hero and a scholar?”

This triumphant question speaks to our delightful wonderment when “underdogs” succeed in the face of tremendous challenges and adversity. It reminds us that greatness is not reserved for the privileged few with “good yichus”, but rather is available to anyone willing to make the effort necessary to attain it. It is in this context that we can perhaps best appreciate the Torah’s curious presentation of Moses in this week’s Torah reading, Va’era.

Curiously, the Torah withholds information about the lineage of Moses until well into his life and career. Why wait? We would have expected to learn of Moses’ “yichus” at the time of his birth. Instead, we are merely told at the time that “a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi, and the woman conceived and bore a son...” (ibid., 2:1-2). This anonymous entry to the world is hardly the introduction we would expect for the most consequential figure in Jewish history.

Only later, in Parshat Va’era, is a more detailed genealogical account finally given, beginning with the tribe of Reuben, first-born to Jacob [ibid., 6:14], and culminating with the birth of Moses from the tribe of Levi: “And Amram married Yocheved...and she bore him Aaron and Moses” [ibid., v. 20]. Why do learn of this lineage at this time, rather than at the time of Moses’ birth?

To arrive at an answer, let us examine an important juxtaposition of passages earlier in Exodus: God instructs Moses to declare to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord, ‘My first-born son is Israel. And I say to you, send out my son so that he may serve Me, and if you refuse to send him out, I shall kill your firstborn son!’” [ibid., 4:22-23].

Then, in the very next two verses, we read of an almost unfathomable incident: “And it happened on the road to the inn, and God met him desiring to slay him. And Tziporah [Moses’ wife] took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, causing it to touch his feet. And she said, ‘You are a bridegroom of blood for me!’, and He released him; then she said, ‘A bridegroom of blood for circumcision!’” [ibid., v. 24–26].

The common thread connecting these two passages is the serious consequence stemming from failure to comply with God’s commands. If Pharaoh refuses to free God’s “first-born son” (Israel), then Pharaoh’s first-born son, and the first-born sons of all Egyptians, would be slain as a measure-for-measure punishment. Similarly – and ironically – Moses faces a similar punishment for his failure to circumcise his son.

Why is the Torah discussing God killing of the son of the man who attained a nearness to God unmatched by anyone before or since?! The lesson is striking: if Moses – the chosen of God to lead His first-born Israel – is lax in circumcising his son, a crucial religious obligation of initiating one’s progeny into Jewish fate and destiny – then even Moses stands to be punished by God! By extension, the People of Israel will retain its elevated status only if it deserves to retain it, by keeping up to its national and religious ideals.

This dovetails with the Torah’s adamant opposition to primogeniture. As we find throughout Genesis, there is nothing inherently superior about first-born status. Rather, it is achievement in life rather than birth order; merit and morality rather than biology, which are of paramount importance. This explains the significance of the Torah’s switching of the order of the brothers’ names: “These are Aaron and Moses, whom God has said are to take the People of Israel from the land of Egypt...they are Moses and Aaron” [ibid., v. 26–27]. Even the elder brother, Aaron, must play second fiddle to the younger and more worthy Moses.

The success of the underdog has always, and will always, stir within us feelings of hope that we, too, can achieve great things in life. After all, if a penniless orphan from an island in the Caribbean can become one of the most important figures in American history, and a foundling Hebrew child born to nameless parents doomed for Egyptian slavery can grow to adulthood as one of the greatest liberators in world history, every single one of us can make it big despite our lack of pedigree or lack of aristocratic standing. ©2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Moshe had complained to God that since the Lord had sent him on a mission to the Pharaoh, the situation of the Jewish people had not only not improved but in fact had worsened. Moshe’s view of the matter was that somehow the Lord had not fulfilled the Divine part of the bargain. This opinion was based on Moshe’s human logic and understanding, which, even though Moshe was on such a high level, was still only a human response.

He is described later in Scripture as being “slightly less than Divine” and that “slightly” is the difference between the created and the Creator. No matter how long our life span may be, we all realize that



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there are limits. Therefore we view time and schedules in a compressed, immediate and demanding manner. The one human trait that is perhaps most common with all of us is the lack of patience.

When personal computers first appeared on the market only a few decades ago, we thought it miraculous that in 30 seconds we could be connected to the whole world. Today any computer that takes 30 seconds to reach the Internet is absolutely obsolete, unmarketable and assigned either to the trash or to a computer museum.

The governing word in human society is "now." Only things and ideas that are "now" are to be treasured and respected. However, the Lord of history is not bound by our standards. Here Moshe is taught a basic lesson, that God's promises are always fulfilled but on the basis of Divine and not human scheduling and time.

Later, when Moshe glimpses Divinity and is taught the 13 attributes of God, so to speak, one of these attributes is inordinate patience. It is one of the supreme traits of the Divine that we are privileged to witness. And, it is not within the purview of our own life spans, at least not within the serious study of human and Jewish history. It is our human impatience that causes our lack of faith and belief in the fulfillment of prophecy and Godly promises.

A famous English statesman once stated that "the wheels of history grind exceedingly slow but they grind exceedingly fine." Generations upon generations of Jews longed to see the events that we are now experience and even take for granted. The state of Israel and the strength of Torah life in our time after one of the worst tragedies in the history of the Jewish people, are events that are historically breathtaking and nothing short of miraculous.

Yet we are impatient for more and for quicker developments. We are hard-pressed to take a long-term view of life and history. But we should take to heart the Lord's response to Moshe that patience is a Godly virtue meant to be emulated by humans. History is a process and so is Jewish history and Jewish life. There was a famous phrase in Yiddish that a workman should never show a lame man a job that is still in progress. Well, our job is still in progress and snap judgments on its accomplishments should be held in abeyance. ©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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

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. *Dvar Torah based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2018 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.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 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. ©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

Moshe's Voice

In Parashat Shemot we learned that one of the reasons for Moshe's reluctance to speak to Par'oh was because he was aral s'fatayim, a phrase often translated as uncircumcised lips. Our Rabbis describe this as either a speech impediment or a lack of oratorical skills. Hashem assures Moshe that Aharon will accompany him and speak for him to Par'oh. Moshe angers Hashem by suggesting that He should send the one who could accomplish the task on his own, namely Aharon. It is clear from this request that Moshe is troubled by the same question that we have: why does Hashem need Aharon to become Moshe's voice to the people and to Par'oh? As we examine the relationship between Moshe and Aharon, we will begin to understand the value of Aharon's task.

Part of Moshe's reluctance to speak to Par'oh stemmed from his speech but part of it also stemmed from the appointment of Aharon as his subordinate. Moshe was Aharon's younger brother, and although he was familiar with the fact that the Avot were replete with the younger brother becoming the leader of the next generation, Moshe also understood that in each of those cases the older brother was not worthy of leadership. This was not the case with Aharon who was currently the leader of the Leviim and would become the Kohein Gadol, the Head Priest. Moshe did not wish to insult his older brother by placing him in a subordinate role. Aharon, on the other hand, was happy to greet his brother and gladly accepted the task that Hashem had placed before him.

In last week's parasha the Torah told us: "And it was on that day that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the land of Egypt. Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, I am Hashem, speak to Par'oh, the King of Egypt, all that I speak to you. And Moshe said before Hashem, behold I have blocked lips (aral s'fatayim) so how shall Par'oh listen to me? Hashem said to Moshe, see I have placed you as a master (elohim, a god) over Par'oh and Aharon your brother will be your prophet (speaker). You will speak that which I will command you and Aharon your brother will speak to Par'oh that he will send the B'nei Yisrael from his land." HaRav Zalman Sorotskin, the Aznayim L'Torah, tells us that Moshe was commanded three times to speak to Par'oh: (1) at the Burning Bush on Har Sinai, (2) in Midyan where he was told to tell Par'oh that his son would die, and (3) now in Egypt. It is clear that Moshe would also speak to Par'oh prior to and after most of the plagues. Moshe is reminded that he would speak only the words that Hashem would speak to him and Aharon would clarify

those words to Par'oh. Rashi explains that the word navi is normally translated as prophet which means a person who speaks rebuke to those whom Hashem has indicated have sinned. The Ibn Ezra informs us that even though Aharon's name is often not mentioned in the conversations with Par'oh, the same process that is described here with Moshe first saying the words of Hashem and Aharon interpreting them for Par'oh occurs throughout. The Or HaChaim tells us that originally the command was for Moshe alone. At Moshe's reluctance Hashem included Aharon but at a lesser role. At this time, however, Hashem equates the two brothers in this mitzvah. Hashem demonstrates his anger with Moshe's consistent deprecation of his ability to speak to Par'oh by the use of the word "vay'hi, and it was", which our Rabbis explain always indicates a negative aspect in the words that follow.

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. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains part of the reason for Hashem assigning a middle-man between Moshe and Par'oh. Par'oh has difficulty with the concept of prophecy. Par'oh views the prophet as one who originates the words that he speaks: "Hashem does not speak 'to' the prophet but 'in' him. This denial of the actual revelations of Hashem to the prophet negates the idea that Hashem reveals Himself to the prophet. The prophet brings what Hashem has revealed to him to the people. But Par'oh reduces the prophet to an inspired poet or lawgiver out of whom, while he is in a state of ecstasy, or elevation of spirit, Hashem speaks." 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. Taking this one step further it becomes clear that Moshe is acting as Hashem's prophet and only gives relayed messages from Hashem directly rather than making statements of his own. The proof of Moshe's prophecy and the relationship between a prophet's words and the Word of Hashem can only come through the position of Aharon in this relationship.

Aharon's name is seldom mentioned here yet we have seen from our Rabbis that Moshe would never have been successful without Aharon's assistance. His presence taught Par'oh and the B'nei Yisrael the true nature of prophecy. Israel was to have many prophets after Moshe and the people needed to understand that the prophet's words were only the words given to him

by Hashem. Aharon's role appears to be minor yet in hindsight we can now understand its full significance.

Each of us has a role to play, a task to accomplish within the structure that Hashem has planned. Each role is significant though we may not ever understand the part which we are playing in Hashem's plan for mankind. Others may appear to gain fame and success and are known for their achievements. Most people, however, may be unaware of the crucial, yet unnoticed part which they play. For a select few, people will appreciate their contributions to the world in their lifetime. For others it will only be through hindsight that their children and friends will begin to see what they have added to the world. This may be frustrating since one is seldom certain that he has accomplished his task. Yet if one follows the Torah and performs the mitzvot, Hashem will guide him to that task and assist him in accomplishing it. May we be zocheh (worthy) to receive Hashem's guidance and assistance and may we be satisfied that we have lived our lives in such a way that our responsibility and our task will have been met. ©2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

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 PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"**M**oshe told it to the Children of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses because their spirit was broken, and because of the hardness of their work." (Shemos 6:9) Here we are, exactly 3,330 years since the first redemption from Egyptian Exile, waiting for the final one from the "Roman Exile." Even though the Roman Empire is long gone, since it was the one to kick off this fourth and final exile, the name stuck. Yet, the difference between today's world and that one are not as great as one might assume.

Perhaps "waiting" is the wrong word, at least for many. This stage of this exile, at least since the Holocaust, and certainly after the collapse of the "Iron Curtain," hasn't been too bad, thank God. Jews enjoy unprecedented religious and material freedom. In the opinion of many Jews today, especially those who prosper at this time, Moshiach can take his time.

Of course, our opinion does not count in THAT vote. You can be sure that if we "delay" Moshiach's arrival, it will cost us. It already has on countless occasions. Jewish prosperity in exile has always only been temporary, and the welfare of the nation has been in the hands of a Divine timetable, not our own.

A major part of the problem is that we do not read Heaven very well. We don't have prophets today to help us do that, but we do have profits to "help" us avoid it. As the expression goes, "There is nothing better for the Jew than Anti-Semitism." Material prosperity has brought us spiritual drought.

There are many reasons for this, but they basically all boil down to two negative traits: *givah* and *tivah*, pride and desire. Not all pride is bad and not all desires are dangerous, but the ones that are end up becoming the real "bars" behind which we are locked away in life.

How many people have a difficult time accepting God because they do not like relinquishing control over their lives to anyone else? Or, how many people are just too busy making a name for themselves that they consider religion a very unwanted obstacle along their path to success? Of course, they are only fooling THEMSELVES if they think that ignoring God makes Him go away.

Other people just like physical comfort too much. They want Paradise in THIS world, not the NEXT one, and, they want it on THEIR terms, not God's. They

think religion is something you can opt out of because, anyhow, it is MANMADE. "Of course religious people think it's Divine," they argue. "Just as I want to believe it is not, they want to believe that it is."

Out of a world Jewish population of just over 12,000,000, the VAST majority of Jews belong to one of the two categories, with many having a "dual membership." They may be wide awake materially, but they are FAST asleep spiritually, and it would take a massive "alarm clock" to wake them up.

It was the same way in Egypt just prior to the redemption. Even though the Jewish people were enslaved, they were still "asleep" because they had come to accept their fate. They had given up on ever becoming free again, and most had been born right into slavery. Redemption wasn't even on their radar.

The first stage of redemption was to change that. That was redemption, Part 1. That included Moshe Rabbeinu going down to Egypt, gathering the elders to inform them of God's plan to redeem them, demanding Pharaoh let the Jewish people go, watching Pharaoh do just the opposite, and then hightailing it back to Midian for another six months in despair while the Jewish people suffered in the meantime.

This phase of redemption was called "Moshiach Ben Yosef." It is MBY's job to wake the nation up spiritually and to ready them for redemption, based upon the needs of the time. For this phase of redemption, therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu acted in the role of "Moshiach Ben Yosef." He complained to God because he wanted to already be functioning in the Moshiach Ben Dovid role.

This is why God reacted so harshly to Moshe's complaint at the end of Parashas Shemos. Moshe complained about his lack of redemption success while God extolled the progress they had made. Moshe at the moment was just not on the same page of redemption as God was.

Who could blame him? HE had to deal with the bitterness of the Jewish people who had also expected a MBD level of redemption. It wasn't like he could tell them, "I'm going in to Pharaoh, but don't expect him to agree to let you go. On the contrary, HE'S going to greatly increase the slavery to the point that it is going to break your spirit entirely. But don't worry! It's all part of the Divine plan, and I'll be back SIX months later to destroy Egypt and free you!"

Would anyone have agreed to that?! More than likely they would have told Moshe to go and redeem some OTHER slave nation and let them serve Egypt in peace! Or, at least more peace than they would have Moshe's path to redemption.

That was the redemption from Egypt. It was similar in the redemption from Persia as well. Esther became queen (whom the GR"A says was the MBY in her time), but then things only became a lot worse, and because of Mordechai as well. But then that led to the

Jewish people doing massive teshuvah, and the complete redemption.

Many sources compare the Final Redemption to the first one. If anything, it seems as if the final one is really the completion of the first one. So, expect a similar path to redemption: MBY first, and MBD second. A wake-up call to redemption first, and the actual redemption second. And, the Talmud points out, just as four-fifths of the Jewish people ignored the signs of redemption in Egypt and died instead, likewise will it occur similarly during the Final Redemption (Sanhedrin 111a).

It's all about the signs, and the proper interpretation of them. There are, and have been so many throughout history. There are so many these days. The question is, what to make of them? So far there has been a lot of disappointment and frustration. So many times it looked as if "this was it," and then everything went back to "normal," and the Jewish people remained in exile. People just went back to Midian thinking that it had all been a false start.

The annoying thing is that the signs seemed so real. Getting back the land after thousands of years of losing it. Waves of aliyah for the last couple hundred years. Miraculous military victories against a backdrop of tremendous infrastructure and social development. Being able to withstand the onslaught of countless nations against tremendous odds. Does that not sound like redemption to you?

Yet here we are. Millions of Jews happily living in the Diaspora. Millions of Jews living in Eretz Yisroel who'd rather Israel be more like Europe than Israel. Countless Jews who have no connection to God, and don't want one. Does that not NOT sound like redemption? Hence, the despair.

Hence the need for redemption definitions. The signs so far have been part of the Moshiach Ben Yosef phase of geulah. They are real, and need to be appreciated. This way, as we move into the Moshiach Ben Dovid phase of redemption, we will be primed to recognize those signs, and be ready, unlike the proverbial four-fifths, for the FINAL Redemption, it should come in our time. Amen. ©2018 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI ARI WEISS

Choosing to See

I was watching my children play with my cell phone and was struck by the fact that to them there was nothing extraordinary about what they were holding. The idea of a device that can communicate with anyone from anywhere at the touch of a button, can get television reception, and can take and display pictures and video was the stuff of science fiction when I was growing up. And yet here it is, and my children play with it as though it is nothing out of the ordinary. To me it's miraculous. To them it's commonplace.

In this week's Parsha, G-d confronts Pharaoh with plague after plague of the most supernatural and bizarre occurrences imaginable, in an effort to make him admit to G-d's existence and then release the Jews from bondage. As we know, after every plague Pharaoh "hardens his heart" and refuses to set the Jews free. Interestingly, after the sixth plague, Pharaoh no longer hardens his heart, but rather G-d does it for him. The commentators notice the change and offer some explanations. One most famous explanation is that Pharaoh had his opportunity to repent during the first six plagues. Since he did not take advantage and repent then, he now has to suffer through the "long haul" as the last four plagues are to be meted out upon him and his country. In other words, Pharaoh's heart was hardened for him so that he would not repent.

The Seforno, in his commentary on the Torah, suggests exactly the opposite. He explains that Pharaoh needed to come to a realization of G-d's supreme authority on his own and to only then release the Jews from slavery, thereby expressing his choice to believe in the existence of the Jewish G-d. However, there was no way he would have been able to do so given the fear and wonder he was experiencing because of the plagues. Only by seeing the plagues as part of the natural order and not as being caused by G-d could Pharaoh choose on his own to believe in G-d, and not have the choice "made for him", so to speak. Therefore, in order to allow Pharaoh the ability to make his own choice, G-d had to harden his heart to not be swayed by his fear or wonder. In other words, Pharaoh's heart was hardened so that he'd be able to repent.

The lesson to us is that there are miracles that are happening around us constantly, but we take no notice of them because we see it as commonplace or simply as nature. G-d will always portray His miracles in a fashion allowing us to pass them off as "natural occurrences" if we choose to. To those who choose to see them as events caused by Hashem, which they are, they become opportunities through which we can see G-d's existence based on our own choices. Just as I try to explain to my children the miracle of the technological wonder they are casually playing with, so too our sages point us in the direction of realizing G-d's hand in the natural order of creation, and thereby help us choose to see G-d in our otherwise mundane world.

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