

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI ARI WEISS**

### Natural Occurrences

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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**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

The question is ancient. If G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it was G-d who made Pharaoh refuse to let the Israelites go, not Pharaoh himself. How can this be just? How could it be right to punish Pharaoh and his people for a decision – a series of decisions – that were not made freely by Pharaoh himself? Punishment presupposes guilt. Guilt presupposes responsibility. Responsibility presupposes freedom. We do not blame weights for falling or the sun for shining. Natural forces are not choices made by reflecting on alternatives. Homo sapiens alone is free. Take away that freedom and you take away our humanity. How then can it say, as it does in our parsha (Ex. 7: 3) that G-d hardened<sup>1</sup> Pharaoh's heart?

All the commentators are exercised by this question. Maimonides and others note a striking feature of the narrative. For the first five plagues we read that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart. Only later, during the last five plagues, do we read about G-d doing so. The last five plagues were therefore a punishment for the first five refusals, freely made by Pharaoh himself.<sup>2</sup>

A second approach, in precisely the opposite direction, is that during the last five plagues G-d intervened not to harden but to strengthen Pharaoh's heart. He acted to ensure that Pharaoh kept his freedom and did not lose it. Such was the impact of the

<sup>1</sup> Three different verbs are used in the narrative to indicate hardening of the heart: k-sh-h, ch-z-k and k-b-d. They have different nuances: the first means 'harden,' the second, 'strengthen,' and the third, 'make heavy.'

<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuvah 6: 3.

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plagues that in the normal course of events a national leader would have no choice but to give in to a superior force. As Pharaoh's own advisers said before the eighth plague, "Do you not yet realise that Egypt is destroyed." To give in at that point would have been action under duress, not a genuine change of heart. Such is the approach of Yosef Albo<sup>3</sup> and Ovadiah Sforno.<sup>4</sup>

A third approach calls into question the very meaning of the phrase, "G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart." In a profound sense G-d, author of history, is behind every event, every act, every gust of wind that blows, every drop of rain that falls. Normally however we do not attribute human action to G-d. We are what we are because that is how we have chosen to be, even if this was written long before in the divine script for humankind. What do we attribute to an act of G-d? Something that is unusual, falling so far outside the norms of human behaviour that we find it hard to explain in any other way than to say, surely this happened for a purpose.

G-d himself says about Pharaoh's obstinacy, that it allowed him to demonstrate to all humanity that even the greatest empire is powerless against the hand of Heaven. Pharaoh acted freely, but his last refusals were so strange that it was obvious to everyone that G-d had anticipated this. It was predictable, part of the script. G-d had disclosed this to Abraham centuries earlier when he told him in a fearful vision that his descendants would be strangers in a land not theirs (Gen. 15: 13-14).

These are all interesting and plausible interpretations. It seems to me, though, that the Torah is telling a deeper story and one that never loses its relevance. Philosophers and scientists have tended to think in terms of abstractions and universals. Some have concluded that we have freewill, others that we don't. There is no conceptual space in between.

In life, however, that is not the way freedom works at all. Consider addiction. The first few times you smoke a cigarette or drink alcohol or take drugs, you do so freely. You know the risks but you ignore them. As

time goes on, your dependency increases until the craving is so intense that you are almost powerless to resist it. At that point you may have to go into rehabilitation. You no longer, on your own, have the ability to stop. As the Talmud says, "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison."<sup>5</sup>

Addiction is a physical phenomenon. But there are moral equivalents. For example, suppose on one significant occasion, you tell a lie. People now believe something about you that is not true. As they question you about it, or it comes up in conversation, you find yourself having to tell more lies to support the first. "Oh what a tangled web we weave," said Sir Walter Scott, "when first we practise to deceive."

That is as far as individuals are concerned. When it comes to organisations, the risk is even greater. Let us say that a senior member of staff has made a costly mistake that, if exposed, threatens the entire future of the company. He will make an attempt to cover it up. To do so he must enlist the help of others, who become his co-conspirators. As the circle of deception widens, it becomes part of the corporate culture, making it ever more difficult for honest people within the organisation to resist or protest. It then needs the rare courage of a whistle-blower to expose and halt the deception. There have been many such stories in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

Within nations, especially non-democratic ones, the risk is higher still. In commercial enterprises, losses can be quantified. Someone somewhere knows how much has been lost, how many debts have been concealed and where. In politics, there may be no such objective test. It is easy to claim that a policy is working and explain away apparent counter-indicators. A narrative emerges and becomes the received wisdom. Hans Christian Anderson's tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, is the classic parable of this phenomenon. A child sees the truth and in innocence blurts it out, breaking the conspiracy of silence on the part of the king's counsellors.

We lose our freedom gradually, often without noticing it. That is what the Torah has been implying almost from the beginning. The classic statement of freewill appears in the story of Cain and Abel. Seeing that Cain is angry that his offering has not found favour, He says to him: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4: 7). The maintenance of freewill, especially in a state of high emotion like anger, needs willpower. As we have noted before in these studies there can be what Daniel Goleman calls an 'amygdala hijack' in which instinctive reaction takes the

<sup>5</sup> Berakhot 5b.

<sup>6</sup> On Enron, see Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind. *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*. New York: Portfolio, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Albo, *Ikkarim*, IV, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Commentary to Ex. 7: 3.

place of reflective decision and we do things that are harmful to us as well as to others.<sup>7</sup> That is the emotional threat to freedom.

Then there is a social threat. After the Holocaust, a number of path-breaking experiments were undertaken to judge the power of conformism and obedience to authority. Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments in which eight people were gathered in a room and were shown a line, then asked which of three others was the same length. Unknown to the eighth, the seven others were associates of the experimenter and were following his instructions. On a number of occasions the seven gave an answer that was clearly false, yet in 75 per cent of cases the eighth was willing to give an answer, in conformity with the group, he knew to be false.

Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram showed that ordinary individuals were willing to inflict what appeared to be devastatingly painful electric shocks on someone in an adjacent room when instructed to do so by an authority figure, the experimenter.<sup>8</sup> The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by Philip Zimbardo, divided participants into the roles of prisoners and guards. Within days the 'guards' were acting cruelly and in some cases abusively toward the prisoners and the experiment, planned to last a fortnight, had to be called off after six days.<sup>9</sup>

The power of conformism, as these experiments showed, is immense. That I believe is why Abraham was told to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house. These are the three factors – culture, community and early childhood – that circumscribe our freedom. Jews through the ages have been in but not of society. To be a Jew means keeping a calibrated distance from the age and its idols. Freedom needs time to make reflective decisions and distance so as not to be lulled into conformity.

Most tragically there is the moral threat. We sometimes forget, or don't even know, that the conditions of slavery the Israelites experienced in Egypt were often enough felt historically by Egyptians themselves. The great pyramid of Giza, built more than a thousand years before the exodus, before even the birth of Abraham, reduced much of Egypt to a slave labour colony for twenty years.<sup>10</sup> When life becomes cheap and people are seen as a means not an end, when the worst excesses are excused in the name of

tradition and rulers have absolute power, then conscience is eroded and freedom lost because the culture has created insulated space in which the cry of the oppressed can no longer be heard.

That is what the Torah means when it says that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart. Enslaving others, Pharaoh himself became enslaved. He became a prisoner of the values he himself had espoused. Freedom in the deepest sense, the freedom to do the right and the good, is not a given. We acquire it, or lose it, gradually. In the end tyrants bring about their own destruction, whereas those with willpower, courage and the willingness to go against the consensus, acquire a monumental freedom. That is what Judaism is: an invitation to freedom by resisting the idols and siren calls of the age. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

**W**hat makes Moses Moses? He is certainly the consummate prophet, the man of G-d whose vision of ethical monotheism was expressed in a moral code of law which commands to this very day, more than 4000 years later. He is certainly the consummate leader who took a bedraggled slave-people into freedom and nationhood. But I believe that the central characteristic of Moses is his love of the Jewish people, his "brotherly" love. When he witnesses the slaying of a Hebrew by an Egyptian, he takes action and kills the Egyptian, but he suffers a tremendous loss. All of Egypt sees him as a Prince and, like a Prince of Egypt, he might have concluded his career with his own pyramid one day. Yet Moses risks all because one of his "brothers" has been slain.

Ordinarily, revolutionary careers begin with selfless acts and it would be logical to assume that a fugitive from the law who has put his life on the line for the Hebrews should become a hero at home, among his own people. Moses experiences the exact opposite. On the following day, when he chanced upon two Israelites fighting, he wants to stop their wickedness, to defend his brother the underdog, but their response is cynical and arrogant. "Who made you our judge? Do you want to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?" (Ex. 2:14)

In an instant Moses realizes the difficulty in attempting to work with his "brothers" as well as the fact that his prior deed is public knowledge and so Pharaoh's palace is no longer open to him. Moses becomes a refugee, escaping into the desert with only a shirt on his back.

There, with his new wife and child, earning a living from his flock of sheep, he can live out his years as one more person who tried to make a difference, failed, and left the stage of human history. Let others tackle the problem. But G-d still has His eye on Moses.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

<sup>9</sup> Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> It has been calculated, based on a ten hour working day, that one giant block of stone weighing over a ton, would have to be transported into place every two minutes of every day for twenty years.

The text then tells us that G-d appears to Moses from within the flame of a burning bush, urging him to become the Redeemer of his people. Moses demurs, fearing that as a stutterer, a man whose words trip over his tongue, he will never manage to convince Pharaoh. It is precisely because he loves the Jewish people so much that he wants the best candidate to present their case. Only when G-d informs Moses that his brother Aaron will become his mouthpiece does his resistance cease...for the moment.

The next stage of the redemptive process begins when Moses presents his credentials and G-d's instructions to Pharaoh. But the result is utter failure. Instead of relenting, Pharaoh tightens the screws, and now the Israelite slaves must gather their own straw for the bricks they bake in the hot sun.

Our portion for the week, Vaera, opens with the verse, "G-d spoke to Moses, and said to him, I am the Lord..." (Exodus 6:2). The Chatam Sofer writes in his work *Torat Moshe* that we should note an interesting use of language in this verse. It relates directly to three verses earlier when Moses' response to Pharaoh's increased tyranny was a pointed rebuttal to G-d. "Lord, why do you do evil to this people?" (5:22) Instead of being angered by such strong language, G-d is pleased with Moses' willingness to confront Him. Better to speak tough with G-d than to speak out against the Jewish people.

The English translation of the opening verse of Vaera does not completely capture the significance the Chatam Sofer alerts us to. The first use of G-d is rendered Elokim, signifying the powerful or judging aspect of G-d, while the next use of G-d's name, translated LORD, is in fact the four letter name of G-d. This name signifies the merciful, compassionate nature of G-d. Similarly, the first "speak" uses the word "vayedaber," which is a harsher form of speaking, while the second "speak" uses the word "vayomer," a softer, gentler form of speaking.

According to the Chatam Sofer, G-d greatly values the extent to which Moses defends the Jewish people, and once Moses calls G-d to task, so to speak, G-d replaces his initial, judgmental name E-lohim for the compassionate Y-HVH, and his original harsher form of Va'yedaber for the gentler Va'Yomer.

Even after Moses was rejected by his own "brothers" and forced to live in Midian, Moses nevertheless forgives the Jewish people. Moses is the leader G-d wants for this new nation because he is ready for anything the Jewish people may throw at him. He has no illusions about the people he will lead. He has experienced their ingratitude and sensed their independence. He can sympathize with Ben-Gurion's comment to Truman: "You may be President of 140 million citizens but I am the Prime Minister of 600,000 Prime Ministers."

Rabbi Yitzchak Levi of Berditchev, the great

Hassidic master, was banished from two rabbinic posts because of his Hassidic sympathies. His students wondered what he would do next and he answered that he would seek a third position. But why? they asked. For the honor, he answered. They waited for the wink of his eye, but Rabbi Yitzchak Levi was not being ironic - he was very serious. He explained that leading a Jewish town was always an honor for the rabbi, even if the people didn't honor you in return. Apparently he learned this from Moses.

Moses' outreach towards his hapless and enslaved brothers and his willingness to assume a leadership role only if it is together with his brother as his "front" man, makes him the archetypal brother, the towering figure of the Book of Exodus who is cured of the "brotherly hatred" of the Book of Genesis. It is not easy to love one's brothers, but a true leader is someone who can feel connected to every other Jew, whether from a far away tribe or a DNA related brother. Often parents work out their own problems and shortcomings through their children, but siblings have the potential to love each other unconditionally, even when the love is repaid with a curse. This was Moses' greatest gift and his most impressive legacy. ©2015 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he extended, tension filled, confrontation between Moshe and Pharaoh forms the backdrop for the story of the plagues and the redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt. Pharaoh, from the outset, is unwilling to consider the request of Moshe to allow the Jewish people a three day furlough to worship G-d in the desert. The commentators to the Torah differ as to whether or not this was a sincere request by Moshe or simply a negotiating gambit to loosen the grip of Pharaoh on the Jewish slaves.

We do not find that G-d specifically endorsed or instructed Moshe to make such a proposal to Pharaoh. Nevertheless, all of these questions and difficulties are rendered moot by the fact that Pharaoh never for a moment really considered giving in to the demands of Moshe.

Even later, after coming under the pressure of the plagues and the wishes of his own advisors, and after agreeing to the three-day sojourn in the desert, Pharaoh refuses to allow the families of the slaves to accompany them, thus obviating his seeming concession to Moshe.

Pharaoh's stubbornness, his intransigence in the face of the reality of the plagues is characteristic of people who view themselves as G-ds and superior beings. Pharaoh cannot afford any show of compromise or accommodation to the demands of Moshe. By so doing, he would admit to the fact that, in truth, he is not a G-d and thus his entire basis for rule

over Egypt would be threatened.

Complete dominion over others that is based upon a colossal lie of superhuman status eventually is doomed to collapse. It may take centuries for this to occur but history has shown us that it always does occur. It is Pharaoh's false claim to superhuman qualities that motivates his stubbornness and is what will doom him and Egypt to defeat and destruction.

Moshe, on the other hand, does possess superhuman qualities. But the one main quality that the Torah itself most emphasizes in its description of Moshe, over his decades of leadership, is a most human one -- humility, modesty, and the realization of the difference between the created and the Creator. The opening verses of this week's parsha teach us this lesson of humility.

The Jewish people and Moshe himself complained to G-d that somehow things were not going according to the plan that they envisioned. G-d's response is that one of the limitations of humans is that they can never truly fathom G-d's will and His direction of human affairs. This is an important lesson that Moshe must learn and assimilate into his personality. As he journeys through life, it is this quality that will eventually make him "the most humble of all human beings."

Someone who is able to communicate with Heaven freely, almost at will, and who can perform miracles and bring plagues upon a mighty empire, can easily be seduced into believing in his own powers and abilities. Thus the opening sentences of this week's Torah reading are vitally important for they are the key to the humility of Moshe and thus to the salvation of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage.

We must always be wary of the great human being who slips into the belief that he is somehow superhuman. It is this issue that highlights and contrasts the two antagonists -- Pharaoh and Moshe -- in the drama of the Jewish redemption from Egypt. ©2015 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd G-d spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and He commanded them regarding the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh the king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt" (Sh'mos 6:13). Although Rashi quotes a Midrashic approach to explain this verse (that G-d told Moshe and Aharon how to deal with the nation and with Pharaoh while fulfilling G-d's mission of taking the nation out of Egypt), he acknowledges that the plain meaning of the verse is that G-d gave them instructions

to relay to the nation and to Pharaoh in order to accomplish the mission of taking the nation out of Egypt. Making demands of Pharaoh is easily understood, as he had to let the nation go before they could leave. But what kind of demands had to be made on the Children of Israel before they would leave Egypt? Wouldn't they be want to leave willingly, as soon as Pharaoh said it was okay to go?

When Moshe came back from Midyan the second time and relayed G-d's message that He was going to take them out of Egypt (6:6), "the Children of Israel didn't listen to Moshe because of their limited spirit and their hard labor" (6:9). Therefore, G-d instructed Moshe to counter this "not listening," i.e. not being willing to be redeemed, so that He could take them out of Egypt. The question then becomes what Moshe was commanded to do to accomplish this.

The Mechilta (Bo 5) explains specifically what they were unwilling to do and how this was to be undone. Midrash HaGadol (6:9, mirroring the Mechilta, see also Sh'mos Rabbah 6:5) puts it this way: "Is there any slave who, when you tell him he can go free doesn't go? Rather, Moshe had told [them that in order to be redeemed they must] become circumcised and separate from the Egyptian deities and purify themselves and accept the Torah. They said to him 'is there any servant who [willingly] takes upon himself two masters? We are Pharaoh's slaves; how can we violate his decrees? We are too afraid to.'" Pharaoh had prohibited circumcision and began mandating idol worship (see Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 29 and Torah Sh'laimah 2:181), but it was necessary for the nation to stop worshipping false deities and to be circumcised before they could be redeemed; Moshe was commanded to get them to do so. This was finally accomplished right before they left Egypt, by having them slaughter an animal that the Egyptians worshipped for the Passover offering (as the Mechilta explains earlier in that chapter) and undergoing circumcision in order to be able to eat the offering (see Sh'mos 12:43-48).

Although there are numerous Midrashim which tell us that the nation worshipped idols in Egypt (including the ones cited above), and numerous Midrashim that tell us that they didn't fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision in Egypt (e.g. Sh'mos Rabbah 1:8; see <https://rabbidmk.wordpress.com/2015/01/08/parashas-shemos-5775/>), thereby necessitating Moshe reversing this, Eliyahu Rabbah (23) tells us that when [the nation of] Israel was serving only their Father in heaven in Egypt and wouldn't change their language, the Egyptians would say to them, 'why won't you serve the Egyptian deities, and lighten your workload from Him (implying that they won't need to keep His commandments anymore, not that they would have less work from the Egyptians)?' They said to them, 'did our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov

abandon our Father in heaven that their sons should abandon Him?' The Egyptians said to them, 'no,' and Israel said to them, 'our forefathers didn't abandon our Father in heaven; so too we will not abandon Him.'" Eliyahu Rabbah then continues by saying that "when Israel would circumcise their sons in Egypt, the Egyptians said to them, 'why are you circumcising your sons if a short time afterwards they will be tossed into the river?' Israel would say to them, 'we will circumcise them and afterwards you do what you want.'" (Their commitment to circumcision is expressed again in Chapter 24.) How are we to understand these seemingly contradictory Midrashim? Did the Children of Israel keep the mitzvah of circumcision in Egypt, or not? Did they worship the Egyptian deities, or not?

Torah Sh'laimah (1:86), after quoting numerous Midrashim saying that they didn't keep circumcision in Egypt, adds that other Midrashim disagree, quoting Eliyahu Rabbah and other sources that say that they did keep circumcision in Egypt. And, if we are going to just attribute these seemingly differing statements to differing opinions, we can say the same about the differing Midrashim about whether the nation worshipped idols in Egypt. However, as Rabbi Yitzchok Sorotzkin, sh'lita, (Rinas Yitzchok II, Sh'mos 6:13) points out, the Mechilta quotes verses in Yechezkel (20:7-8) which say they worshipped idols in Egypt. How can any Midrash say that they didn't if there are explicit verses telling us that they did? And once we need to explain how the Midrashim regarding worshipping idols aren't contradictory, there is good reason to believe that there must be a way to reconcile the Midrashim regarding circumcision as well.

Rav Sorotzkin references the Beis Halevi (on Parashas Sh'mos), who reconciles the Midrashim regarding circumcision by suggesting that the nation did circumcise their sons, but then stretched the skin around the circumcision to hide it so that they would "fit in" with the Egyptians, hoping it would lead to being treated better (it had the opposite effect). Although doing so is forbidden, which is why they were taken to task for it, the mitzvah of circumcision was fulfilled with the initial circumcision. The Beis HaLevi admits that the wording of one Midrash (he references the Yalkut Shimoni, Hoshea 520, which is a quote of the Tanchuma Yoshon, Sh'mos 7) is not consistent with his suggestion, and says it must be a scribal error. However, this is not the only Midrash (see Sifre B'ha'alosecha 67) whose wording indicates that they didn't do any circumcision at all rather than doing a valid circumcision and then covering it up, severely diminishing the chances of it being a scribal error. Additionally, if they had covered their circumcisions so that the Egyptians wouldn't know they were different, how (according to Eliyahu Rabbah) did the Egyptians know they were circumcising their sons to try to convince them to stop? Besides, if they were

considered to have been circumcised, how would we explain all the sources that say they were first circumcised right before they left Egypt? [Even though the Beis HaLevi is trying to explain the Midrash that says they stopped keeping the mitzvah of circumcision after Yosef died, he is trying to reconcile it with the Eliyahu Rabbah (actually with Yalkut Shimoni 268, which is quoting the Eliyahu Rabbah), which relates the conversation when the Egyptians were throwing the babies into the river, which was well after Yosef passed away.]

Rav Sorotzkin makes a similar suggestion to explain the differing Midrashim regarding idol worship, saying that they never really believed the Egyptian deities had any validity, but only worshipped them because of their fear of the Egyptians. And the wording of some of the Midrashim supports this suggestion. Nevertheless, several Midrashim indicate that they worshipped the Egyptian deities even after they had to. Why was there a commandment to stop worshipping idols just a few days before the exodus (Mechilta Bo 5), well after the slavery had ended, if they didn't really want to worship idols? What about the angels questioning why G-d was saving Israel and drowning the Egyptians if both were idol worshippers (see Mechilta B'Shalach 6)? Some Midrashim (e.g. Bamidbar Rabbah 16:26) even have them bringing an idol with them through the split sea!

Numerous Midrashim (e.g. Midrash HaGadol on Sh'mos 1:8 and Sifre, B'ha'alosecha 67) tell us that even though the nation (as a whole) stopped circumcising their sons, the Tribe of Levi kept this mitzvah throughout the exile in Egypt. Shir HaShirim Rabbah (4:7) says that every Tribe but R'euvein, Shimon and Levi worshipped idols in Egypt (which explains why only their lineage is given). I would therefore suggest that the Midrashim describing the nation worshipping idols in Egypt and not keeping the mitzvah of circumcision, are referring to most of the nation, but not to the Tribe of Levi. And The Midrashim that refer to keeping the mitzvah of circumcision and describe an unwillingness to worship idols are only referring to the Tribe of Levi, not to the nation as a whole.

As I alluded to last week, it was necessary for a sizable segment of the nation to remain steadfast in their commitment to G-d and His covenant, as this allowed the nation to still be associated with the ideals of our forefathers. And everyone who was redeemed had to recommit themselves to those ideals, something that would not have been possible without role models to bring them back into the fold. Even those who weren't up to par likely understood the need to have a segment of the still-separate and distinct nation maintain their "traditions," and might have helped and encouraged them to do so. The Egyptians, whose fear was having a fifth column that could overtake them (see

Sh'mos 1:9-10), also understood the significance of this nation remaining distinct, and tried whatever they could to undermine that. After all, if the Israelites assimilated into Egyptian culture, there would no longer be any "them" to take "us" over. Therefore, as Eliyahu Rabbah describes, the Egyptians tried to convince the Levi'im to forego their traditions. [Since Levi's refusal was necessary to maintain any identity of a separate "Israel," and the whole point of the Egyptian attempt was to remove the distinctness of "Israel," the conversation is described as being between Israel and the Egyptians, not just between the Egyptians and the Tribe of Levi.]

Did the nation worship idols? Unfortunately, yes. Did a segment of the nation, conceptually representing the nation, refuse to worship idols? Once again, the answer is yes. The same is true of circumcision; most were not circumcised, and had to become circumcised before leaving Egypt. At the same time, though, one group did circumcise their sons the whole time, no matter how hard the Egyptians tried to stop them. © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**O**n most occasions when the Torah states that G-d issues a command, the details of the directive are spelled out. Our portion offers an exception to the rule. The text reads, "and the Lord spoke to Moshe (Moses) and Aaron and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel." (Exodus 6:13). But the specific command is not spelled out.

The reality is that the power of certain situations go beyond words. When the emotion is so high, words simply do not suffice. For example, in the Hagaddah we proclaim that had G-d taken us to Sinai, but not given us the Torah-dayenu, it would have been enough. Is this true? What value is there in coming to Sinai if the Torah is not given? But perhaps it can be suggested that the experience of coming to Sinai, the revelation moment, even without words, has intense power. The rendezvous with G-d would have been enough. Following this idea, it can be suggested that the mere experience of being commanded was enough - nothing more had to be said.

One wonders, however, why here specifically were no words required? After all G-d commands Moshe and Aaron many times-and the specific mandate follows? But perhaps the command was indeed fully spelled out. Note that after the Torah says, "and He commanded them (va-yetzavem)," the Torah adds the two letter word, "el" which literally means, "to." Here, Moshe and Aaron were commanded "to" the Jewish people; in other words they were to become involved with the Jewish people in a way that they would connect with them no matter what.

Sifrei makes this very point by declaring "G-d

said to Moshe and Aaron, I want you to know that the Israelites are a stubborn and troublesome lot; but you must accept this mission on the understanding that they will curse you and stone you." Ibn Ezra follows this idea by stating that Moshe and Aaron were commanded to be patient with Israel and not be angry with them, even if the nation refused to believe in their leadership.

This idea also makes contextual sense. It follows immediately after the Jewish people had bitterly complained to Moshe and Aaron that their efforts to free the people had only made things worse. (Exodus 5:21)

This approach rings true today. Debate has emerged on how to deal with Jews who have strayed. In Israel for example, there are those who throw stones at Jews who do not keep the Sabbath. Our analysis points us in a different direction-rock throwing is counter productive. Patience and love are the way.

A chassid once approached his rebbe. "My child is desecrating the Sabbath. What shall I do?" "Love him" replied the rebbe. "But he is desecrating the Sabbath publicly," retorted the chassid. The rebbe looked up with a smile and responded, "Then, love him even more."

Hence, G-d's command to Moshe and Aaron-"to the children of Israel." "El" teaches that the gateway to the soul is not through stones or harsh words, but rather through love. © 2009 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ**

### **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**T**he Torah states that: "Moshe (Moses) spoke thus (that the Almighty will take you out, rescue you, redeem you with great judgments, take you for a people, be a G-d to you and bring you into the land of Israel) to the Children of Israel and they did not listen to Moshe because of anguish of spirit and hard work." (Exodus 6:9)

Why didn't the Jewish people listen inasmuch as Moshe was giving them such fabulous news?

Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen, in his commentary Meshech Chochmah, explains that they did not listen to the message that Moshe gave them because when someone is suffering very much, all he wants to hear is that his suffering will be removed. He is not yet ready to hear that he will have good fortune and much success in the future. If someone paints a too positive picture of the future, it is so far removed from his present reality that he will not be able to relate to it. Therefore, we read in verse 6:13 that the Almighty told Moshe to just tell them that they will be taken out of Egypt, without any mention a bright future.

This is an important principle when trying to give people emotional support and encouragement. If

you given a picture that is beyond their present ability to relate to, your words will not be comforting even if you have very good intentions. Telling someone who is in deep emotional distress, "Don't worry all will be well in the future" might not have a positive effect. Show the person how to get out of the present pain and only then will you be able to give more optimistic messages!

Our hearts go out to the victims of Terror in France and to their families, friends and community. *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin*  
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### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **Raise the Baton**

In this week's portion, once again, Hashem sent Moshe and Ahron to Pharaoh in a second effort to sway his heart and have him change his mind to let the Hebrews leave Egypt. Unlike the unembellished appeal in last week's portion, this time they were equipped with more than pleas -- this time they came with miracles. Standing in front of the ruler, Ahron threw his stick down and it turned into a snake. Pharaoh was not impressed. He countered with a little magic of his own. His sorcerers matched the miraculous stick-to-snake act by having his spooks throw down their sticks and by transforming them into snakes.

Ahron one-upped the Egyptian magicians as his stick swallowed all of their sticks. But that obviously was not enough. Pharaoh's heart was once again hardened and he refused to let the Jews leave Egypt. And so, Hashem decided that the benign miracles would not be effective with the stubborn king. It was time for the heavy artillery -- the ten plagues.

Hashem commands Moshe: "Go to Pharaoh in the morning -- behold! He goes out to the water -- and you shall stand opposite him at the river's bank, and the staff that was turned into a snake you shall take in your hand" (Exodus 7:15). A simple question bothers me. Moshe had only one special stick. There are various Midrashic explanations as to its origin, but everyone agrees it was a unique one. It was a special one with special powers. Moshe may have been a leader of many hats, but he only carried one stick. Why did Hashem need to define the stick as the one that turned into a snake? He could have simply asked Moshe to come with his stick. Moshe would surely have known exactly which stick Hashem wanted him to take.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson is better known to us as Lewis Carroll, author of the 1865 children's fantasy story, *Alice in Wonderland*. What most of us do not know about him was that he was also a brilliant mathematician spending more than twenty-five years teaching at Oxford University.

An apocryphal story relates that Queen Victoria was so delighted after reading his fantasy-laced novel, *Alice in Wonderland* that she asked him to send her any other works penned by the same quill. Dodgson

responded immediately, but the Queen was somewhat taken aback when she received two of his other works, *Syllabus of Plane Algebraical Geometry* and *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants*.

We tend to look at the world and forget that routine natural events are also replete with awe-inspiring miracles and supernatural properties. We become acclimated to the mundane miracles of life so that we also shrug when Hashem turns proverbial sticks into proverbial snakes. We feel we can do that too!

Therefore, before orchestrating the largest insubordination of natural law in world history, by turning the flowing Nile into a virtual blood bath, Moshe is told to bring with him the stick that Pharaoh only considered to be capable of performing minor miracles. Moshe is told that the same stick that was not able to impress Pharaoh has the ability to shatter the Egyptian economy and with it the haughty attitude that kept the Hebrew nation enslaved.

Sometimes our marvel of G-d's wonders is dulled by the scoffing of the naysayers. They lead us to forget that the same power behind the minor miracles of life are the generators of great miracles that we can hardly fathom and surely not anticipate! Even the incomprehensible miracle of life itself is blunted by its ongoing regularity. Our emotions become bored and our intellect spoiled with the majestic events that are considered trite by their regular reoccurrence. And when we fail to see the greatness of genius in the wonderland in which we live, we expect G-d to send us a more prominent message. But we must never forget that even the most awe-inspiring message comes from the same Hand and Stick that bring us the simplest benign worms! © 2013 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

