

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

Go to Washington and take a tour of the memorials and you will make a fascinating discovery. Begin at the Lincoln Memorial with its giant statue of the man who braved civil war and presided over the ending of slavery. On one side you will see the Gettysburg Address, that masterpiece of brevity with its invocation of "a new birth of freedom." On the other is the great Second Inaugural with its message of healing: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right..." Walk down to the Potomac basin and you see the Martin Luther King Memorial with its sixteen quotes from the great fighter for civil rights, among them his 1963 statement, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." And giving its name to the monument as a whole, a sentence from the I Have a Dream speech, "Out of the Mountain of Despair, a Stone of Hope."

Continue along the tree-lined avenue bordering the water and you arrive at the Roosevelt Memorial, constructed as a series of six spaces, one for each decade of his public career, each with a passage from one of the defining speeches of the time, most famously, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

Lastly, bordering the Basin at its southern edge, is a Greek temple dedicated to the author of the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Around the dome are the words he wrote to Benjamin Rush: "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Defining the circular space are four panels, each with lengthy quotations from Jefferson's writings, one from the Declaration itself, another beginning, "Almighty God hath created the mind free," and a third "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?"

Each of these four monuments is built around texts, and each tells a story.

Now compare the monuments in London, most conspicuously those in Parliament Square. The memorial to former Prime Minister David Lloyd George contains three words: David Lloyd George. The one to Nelson Mandela has two: Nelson Mandela, and the

Winston Churchill memorial just one: Churchill. Winston Churchill was a man of words, in his early life a journalist, later a historian, author of almost fifty books. He won the Nobel Prize not for Peace but for Literature. He delivered as many speeches and coined as many unforgettable sentences as Jefferson or Lincoln, Roosevelt or Martin Luther King Jr., but none of his utterances is engraved on the plinth beneath his statue. He is memorialised only by his name.

The difference between the American and British monuments is unmistakable, and the reason is that Britain and the United States have a quite different political and moral culture. England is, or was until recently, a tradition-based society. In such societies, things are as they are because that is how they were "since time immemorial." It is unnecessary to ask why. Those who belong, know. Those who need to ask, show thereby that they don't belong.

American society is different because from the Pilgrim Fathers onward it was based on the concept of covenant as set out in Tanach, especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The early settlers were Puritans, in the Calvinist tradition, the closest Christianity came to basing its politics on the Hebrew Bible. Covenantal societies are not based on tradition. The Puritans, like the Israelites three thousand years earlier, were revolutionaries, attempting to create a new type of society, one unlike Egypt or, in the case of America, England. Michael Walzer called his book on the politics of the seventeenth century Puritans, *The Revolution of the Saints*.^[1] They were trying to overthrow the tradition that gave absolute power to kings and maintained established hierarchies of class.

Covenantal societies always represent a conscious new beginning by a group of people dedicated to an ideal. The story of the founders, the journey they made, the obstacles they had to overcome and the vision that drove them are essential elements of a covenantal culture. Retelling the story, handing it onto one's children, and dedicating oneself to continuing the work that earlier generations began, are fundamental to the ethos of such a society. A covenanted nation is not simply there because it is there. It is there to fulfil a moral vision. That is what led G. K. Chesterton to call the United States a nation "with the soul of a church," (*What I Saw in America*, p. 10) the only one in the world "founded on a creed" (*Ibid.* pg. 7. Chesterton's antisemitism prevented him from

crediting the true source of America's political philosophy, the Hebrew Bible).

The history of storytelling as an essential part of moral education begins in this week's parsha. It is quite extraordinary how, on the brink of the Exodus, Moses three times turns to the future and to the duty of parents to educate their children about the story that was shortly to unfold: "When your children ask you, 'What is this service to you?' you shall answer, 'It is the Passover service to God. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians, sparing our homes' (Ex. 12:25-27). 'On that day, you shall tell your child, 'It is because of this that God acted for me when I left Egypt'" (Ex. 13:8). "Your child may later ask you, 'What is this?' You shall answer them, 'With a show of power, God brought us out of Egypt, the place of slavery' (Ex. 13:14).

This is truly extraordinary. The Israelites have not yet emerged into the dazzling light of freedom. They are still slaves. Yet already Moses is directing their minds to the far horizon of the future and giving them the responsibility of passing on their story to succeeding generations. It is as if Moses were saying: Forget where you came from and why, and you will eventually lose your identity, your continuity and your *raison d'etre*. You will come to think of yourself as the mere member of a nation among nations, one ethnicity among many. Forget the story of freedom and you will eventually lose freedom itself.

Rarely indeed have philosophers written on the importance of storytelling for the moral life. Yet that is how we become the people we are. The great exception among modern philosophers has been Alasdair MacIntyre, who wrote, in his classic *After Virtue*, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Deprive children of stories, says MacIntyre, and you leave them "anxious stutters in their actions as in their words." (*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, p. 216)

No one understood this more clearly than Moses, who knew that without a specific identity it is almost impossible not to lapse into whatever is the current idolatry of the age -- rationalism, idealism, nationalism, fascism, communism, postmodernism, relativism, individualism, hedonism, or consumerism, to name only the most recent. The alternative, a society based on tradition alone, crumbles as soon as respect for tradition dies, which it always does at some stage or another.

Identity, which is always particular, is based on story, the narrative that links me to the past, guides me in the present, and places on me responsibility for the future. And no story, at least in the West, was more influential than that of the Exodus, the memory that the Supreme Power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless, together with the covenant that

followed whereby the Israelites bound themselves to God in a promise to create a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, where individuals were respected as the image of God, where one day in seven all hierarchies of power were suspended, and where dignity and justice were accessible to all. We never quite reached that ideal state, but we never ceased to travel toward it and believed it was there at journey's end.

"The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us," said the BBC's political correspondent, Andrew Marr. (*The Observer*, Sunday, 14th May 2000) God created man, Elie Wiesel once wrote, because God loves stories. (*The Gates of the Forest*, preface) What other cultures have done through systems, Jews have done through stories. And in Judaism, the stories are not engraved in stone on memorials, magnificent though that is. They are told at home, around the table, from parents to children as the gift of the past to the future. That is how storytelling in Judaism was devolved, domesticated, and democratized.

Only the most basic elements of morality are universal: "thin" abstractions like justice or liberty tend to mean different things to different people in different places and different times. But if we want our children and our society to be moral, we need a collective story that tells us where we came from and what our task is in the world. The story of the Exodus, especially as told on Pesach at the Seder table, is always the same yet ever-changing, an almost infinite set of variations on a single set of themes that we all internalize in ways that are unique to us, yet we all share as members of the same historically extended community.

There are stories that ennoble, and others that stultify, leaving us prisoners of ancient grievances or impossible ambitions. The Jewish story is in its way the oldest of all, yet ever young, and we are each a part of it. It tells us who we are and who our ancestors hoped we would be. Storytelling is the great vehicle of moral education. It was the Torah's insight that a people who told their children the story of freedom and its responsibilities would stay free for as long as humankind lives and breathes and hopes. *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

I have always been most fascinated—and confounded—by the ninth plague, the plague of darkness. How can darkness be "tangible," touchable? Yes, darkness can be oppressive, foreboding and forbidding. But darkness is not substantive; much the opposite, it is usually defined as the absence of light, a phenomenon more akin to

nothingness than to something that can be touched or felt.

But then one phrase in the text, especially in view of how the Hebrews got to Egypt in the first place (because the jealous brothers of Joseph never “saw” the hapless favorite son of Jacob as their brother), cried out to me: “No man could see his brother”—because of darkness (Ex. 10:23).

Herein is depicted a spiritual, social darkness, a veritable blindness on the part of the Egyptians, who refused to see their Hebrew neighbors as their siblings under God; therefore, since they were the more powerful, they enslaved the able-bodied Hebrews and murdered their defenseless male babies. It was this spiritual blindness that certainly could be “felt” in the daily acts of inhumanity perpetrated against the Hebrews; it was this blindness that was miraculously expressed in this ninth, palpable plague of darkness.

This may very well serve as the key to understanding all of the plagues. The Egyptians turned their life-giving river into a bloodbath of innocent Hebrew babies; God turned the Nile into blood against the Egyptians.

Then, instead of much-needed water for crops, frogs poured out of the Nile, with their death-heralding “croaks” signaling disasters to come. The Egyptians forced cruel and unsanitary living conditions upon the Hebrews; God sent lice to the Egyptians. The Egyptians came after the Hebrews like wild beasts; God sent a plague of wild beasts to afflict the Egyptians. The Egyptians denuded their slaves of livestock; epidemic destroyed the Egyptian livestock. The taskmasters’ whippings caused the Hebrew slaves to suffer boils on their bodies; God sent the Egyptians a plague of boils and blisters.

The whiplashes stung the bodies of the suffering Hebrews, and a heavy rain of stinging, slaying hail fell down on the Egyptians. The Hebrew slaves saw the last of their crops confiscated by their masters, and God sent swarms of locusts to remove the last residue of Egyptian produce; locusts which covered their land and filled their houses. And finally, just as the Egyptians plunged the world into spiritual darkness by enslaving and murdering God’s “firstborn” Israel, God engulfed the Egyptian world in darkness and then slew the firstborn of the Egyptians—providing new hope for humanity when Pharaoh submitted to God’s will and allowed the Hebrews to leave Egypt as free men and women.

The peaceful Islam of the Sufi and moderate Sunni variety (11th to 13th centuries), the Islam which gave the world translations of the Greek mathematicians and philosophers, has given way to extremist Wahhabi Islam of world domination, of Jihad and conquest by the sword. Meanwhile, the free world is sleeping at the wheel. Iran is being allowed to continue to develop nuclear weaponry; European

countries are siding with Mahmoud Abbas in his request for UN recognition even after he makes a pact with terrorist Hamas; Islamic State is on the march, beheading innocent people and taking over more and more territory in Iraq, and America is putting up too little opposition too late.

Shari’a domination is every bit as dangerous as Hitler’s Nazism, and is even more fanatically determined to make the world non-Islam free. The world once again is being engulfed in darkness. We are returning to the dark, black Middle Ages, and our response must be strong and immediate. We must prevent the victory of extremist Islam.

The Jewish people must understand that in these quickly changing times, we must be cognizant of the fact that God provides the cure before the knockout strike. One of the great miracles of this fateful and extraordinary period in Jewish history is the rapprochement between Christianity and Judaism after 2,000 years of Christian anti-Jewish persecution. A great majority of Christian leadership today renounces anti-Semitism, accepts our unique Covenant with God, and deeply respects the Jewish roots of their faith.

In light of the fact that our world war against extremist Islam is a religious war and although we are fewer than 13 million Jews worldwide while there are 1.2 billion Muslims, thankfully there are also two billion Christians. Hence, we Jews and Christians who believe in a God of love, morality and peace must join hands and hearts together and fulfill our mission as God’s witnesses and a light unto the nations. Together we must reach out to our Muslim brothers and sisters, first to those who understand and deplore the fact that ethical monotheistic Islam is being hijacked by fanatic mono-Satanistic Islam.

We must strengthen their voices to recapture the true faith of Islam. Then all of us, together, must reach out to our errant Muslim siblings and remind them that we are all children of Abraham, the father of those who believe in a God of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. With strength and spirit, faith and fortitude, the free world will not only survive, but will prevail. ©2022 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online



This week’s Torah reading highlights the final contentious debate between Moshe and the Pharaoh of Egypt. The opening sentence that introduces the drama describes that Moshe should somehow come to Pharaoh and warn him of the consequences that the continuing oppression of the Jewish people will bring upon him and his nation.

The Hebrew text lends itself in the reading that Moshe should somehow come into Pharaoh, i.e., the name of the Parsha, “Bo”. Moshe is supposed to get to

Pharaoh's palace and gain some sort of understanding that will explain the stubbornness and masochism that dominates Pharaoh's relationship with the Jewish people and his refusal to free them from subjugation and slavery.

What is undoubtedly perplexing is the adamant refusal by Pharaoh to listen to the words of his own officers and advisors, who tell him that Egypt is lost. Yet despite everything - the plagues, the advice of his consultants and the imminent destruction of Egypt that Pharaoh is undoubtedly also aware of, he continues his suicidal course, and finds it impossible to save himself and his people from further tragedy. What drives Pharaoh to this extreme?

The Torah itself provides an answer, that the Lord has hardened the heart of the Pharaoh to such an extent that, no matter what blows will be visited upon him, and what the cost to Egypt will be, he will attempt to persevere and enforce this policy of enslavement over the Jews. Pharaoh has lost control of the situation, for Heaven is intervening and Pharaoh's judgment is clouded.

Because of this circumstance, the hardening of the Pharaoh's heart by Heaven, the moral question is raised by all the great commentators. If free will has been taken away from Pharaoh, then how can he be held accountable for his actions, and why should the Egyptian people be punished if they really have no choice but to pursue the cause of enslaving the Jewish people?

There have been many ideas advanced over the ages that deal with this logical, philosophical, and moral issue. It is clear the Torah informs us that there is a point of no return regarding the behavior of nations and individuals. Once that line is crossed, even though initially it is a matter of free will, there is no longer any way to avoid the consequences of their choice.

It is analogous to missing the exit on a superhighway and finding that there is no other road that can lead them back to make the correct turn off the highway. The hardening of the heart of the Pharaoh recognizes the set of choices that he originally made in enslaving the Jewish people and refusing to listen to the words and warnings by others. Having made that choice in his own heart, he suffers the consequence of his behavior. He simply has 'missed the exit' and isn't able to return to the correct path and direction. ©2022 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

The biblical term for midnight, the time Moses says God will slay the firstborn, is ka'chatzot halailah ("at about midnight"; Exodus 11:4). The prefix ka

can be interpreted in a range of ways, providing a key to the true meaning of this phrase.

On its simplest level, ka, says Rashi, means "when." From this perspective, ka'chatzot is a delineation of time, i.e., that actual moment when the night was divided: midnight.

The Talmud, instead, suggests that ka means "approximately." Although the plague actually occurred ba'chatzi halailah, precisely at (ba) midnight, Moses instead says ka'chatzot (Exodus 12:29). According to this view Moses, says ka instead of ba because he fears the Egyptians will miscalculate and believe midnight had arrived when it had not. The Egyptians would then accuse Moses of being a false prophet (Berachot 4a).

Or Hachayim, on the other hand, understands ka as referring to a moment in the past. The term refers to that midnight in the Book of Genesis when Abraham, the first patriarch, rescued his nephew Lot (Genesis 14). As Abraham was victorious at midnight, so would the Jews overcome the Egyptians at midnight.

Yet another approach can be suggested. Perhaps ka does not refer to the past, but rather to the future. Consider the following: night in the Torah symbolizes suffering and exile. The word chatzi in this phrase takes the interpretation a step further: The time is not only night, but it is the night of the night – midnight, the time of the deepest suffering and exile, when the voice of God seems silent. Hence, the Torah here states ka'chatzot. As we were saved from Egypt, so will we in the future survive other midnights – other times of pain and despair.

The Zohar asserts that we were told to count by the lunar calendar as the first commandment because doing so will increase our resilience in the darkness of night (Exodus 12:2). Just as the moon diminishes in size and ultimately disappears, so too do we often face obstacles and insurmountable challenges. But the message of the moon is that from the waning comes the waxing: one should never be overcome by despair, but always, like the moon, be alive to the message of hope and rebirth.

In the will of the fictional character Yossel Rakover (in the eponymous novella by the author Zvi Kolitz), an imagined last testament left in the ruins of Eastern Europe during the Holocaust, this idea of ka'chatzot and the waning and waxing of the moon is expressed powerfully: "I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine. I believe in love, even when I am alone. I believe in God, even when He is silent."

What is true about the nation of Israel is similarly true about individual lives. Often God intervenes precisely when one thinks there is no hope. Ka, a one-letter Hebrew prefix that could easily be overlooked, teaches – as does the moon – that the darkest moments contain sparks of hope. ©2022 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the

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ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Chametz on Pesach

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The laws relating to *chametz* on Pesach include the prohibition of eating *chametz*, the obligation to get rid of *chametz*, and the prohibition of owning *chametz*.

However, it is not clear if these laws all go into effect at the same time. The prohibition of eating *chametz* and the obligation to get rid of it both begin a number of hours before the holiday starts. However, the Ra'avad is of the opinion that the prohibition of owning *chametz* applies only during the actual holiday, based on the verse, "No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days" (*Shemot* 12:19). Rashi, in contrast, maintains that this prohibition too begins in the afternoon, at the same time as the other prohibitions.

There is also a difference of opinion as to the minimum amount (*shiur*) of *chametz* a person would have to possess in order to transgress the prohibition of ownership. The *shiur* in this case would seem to be an olive (*kezayit*). However, there is a general principle that even less than a *shiur* (*chatzi shiur*) is biblically prohibited (although the transgressor does not receive lashes). Some maintain that *chatzi shiur* is forbidden only when someone is doing something with the food (such as eating it), which makes it clear that this amount is significant to him (*achshevei*). However, if no action is involved (*shev ve-al ta'aseh*), as is the case with the prohibition of owning *chametz*, this principle might not apply. If so, owning a small amount of *chametz* (less than a *kezayit*) would be permitted on the biblical level.

Why should less than a *shiur* be prohibited? Shouldn't the criterion, almost by definition, be the full *shiur*? One of the reasons for this stringency is the fear that someone will start by eating only part of a *shiur*, but will keep nibbling until, within a relatively short amount of time, he ends up eating an entire *shiur*. All that he ate combines together (*mitztaref*), and he is considered to have violated the prohibition from when he began eating. However, when we are dealing with a prohibition of ownership, even if someone ultimately acquires a full *shiur*, he will transgress only from the point of full acquisition onward, but not retroactively.

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RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Rosh Chodesh, Renewal

Parashat Bo contains what is considered the first mitzvah of the Torah: the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, the declaring of the New Month. There are many intricate laws of Rosh Chodesh which help us to understand that it is more complex than the few

words of the Torah lead us to believe on first reading. It is worth our effort to comprehend the significance of this "first" mitzvah and to understand why this mitzvah was appropriate as the first given to us by Hashem.

Chapter 12 of Shemot, Exodus, begins with the following words: "And Hashem said to Moshe and Aharon in the Land of Egypt saying. This month will be for you a beginning of the New Moons, it will be for you the first of the months of the year." Our Rabbis ask several questions about these sentences both because of their content and their brevity. From these few words stem several midrashim and laws including the procedure for declaring each new month for all times in the future. Though we find no mention here of these laws and procedures, they are detailed in the Gemara, the Oral Law which accompanied and explained the laws of the Torah.

Hashem used the word *lachem*, to you, twice in the second pasuk. Our Rabbis tell us that we are to learn that all testimony of sighting a "new moon" must be presented before a court of law, Beit Din, that is not only comprised of intelligent men but men who have received ordination in a direct line from Moshe and Aharon. The testimony was not necessary to declare a new month, but the Gemara Rosh Hashana (22a) describes the testimony as a tradition. The court accepted testimony from anyone who came to report, but the court did not need testimony to know when the new moon would occur. Long before testimony was given, they had already calculated the exact time and position at which the moon would reach its renewal.

Moshe and Aharon were directed by Hashem to see the moon at that precise moment so they would know the appearance of the moon when it was renewed. Though Jews were able to calculate when each month would begin, knowing the precise time did not fulfill their obligation to declare the month. There was a specific "commandment to sanctify (the month) by testimony of seeing." Only when it was cloudy or no testimony was received that first night, did the court declare that the thirtieth day belonged to the previous month in calculation, and the thirty-first day was the first of the coming month. (When the precise moment of the new moon occurred during the day, it was clear that no "new month" would be declared the night before.) The calculation of the exact moment (the molad) was given to Moshe by Hashem.

Rosh Chodesh is termed one of the fixed times of assembly, mo'eid. We find in Vayikra, Leviticus 23:4, "These are the fixed times of Hashem that you will call them by their fixed times." According to HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, Rosh Chodesh fits the term mo'eid in the broadest and most comprehensive of ways. Mo'eid refers to a meeting between Hashem and His people. This meeting is voluntary on both sides. Hashem sets the time for these meetings but depends on His people to set the exact day. If the times for

these “meetings” were set by an astronomical phase of the planets, then both we and Hashem would be bound by the unalterable laws of Nature. This might lead Man to worship Nature which is the opposite of its purpose. Hashem wanted Man to set the time of the moon with his eyes. Even if Man’s testimony proved to be incorrect, we maintain that declaration and Hashem abides by our declaration.

HaRav Eliyahu KiTov brings a conversation from Yalkut Bo between Hashem and the angels. “The ministering angels gather before Hashem and say to Him: ‘Lord of the Universe, when is Rosh Hashana?’ And He answers: ‘Do you then ask Me? Let us both ask the Beit Din below.’” Even Hashem must adjust His schedule to the decreed Rosh Chodesh of the Beit Din. Even if the Beit Din realizes its mistake after already decreeing that Rosh Chodesh is a particular day, the law says that we observe the month by the beginning date that was decreed by the Beit Din. This seems amazing to the average person. We might be fasting on the wrong day of Yom Kippur or eating chometz on Pesach, yet because of the Beit Din’s power that was given to them by Hashem we are neither fasting on the wrong day nor eating chometz at the wrong time.

Hirsch elaborated on his explanation of mo’eid to explain our unique relationship to Hashem that this mitzvah entails. Each time that the moon “finds” the sun again and receives the sun’s rays anew it is a message to the B’nei Yisrael that Hashem wants His people to be renewed in their relations with Hashem and once again receive the rays of His light. Rosh Chodesh is not an astrological occurrence; it is an opportunity for us to make our renewal and fix our own mo’eid (meeting with Hashem).

It now becomes evident why Hashem chose this mitzvah as the first mitzvah of the Torah. Hashem was reestablishing with the B’nei Yisrael that close relationship that He had enjoyed with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov. The B’nei Yisrael had drifted away from Hashem when He had hidden His face from them. For the generations that had been born in slavery and were now to go free, they needed to come together with Hashem and be rejuvenated spiritually and morally. Hashem showed the B’nei Yisrael His rays of light which they could see epitomized in the moon. They could be assured that they would grow in their closeness with Hashem just as the moon would begin to grow from Rosh Chodesh. Even though the light that they now saw was a small fraction of Hashem’s rays, they were encouraged that this light would expand with time.

We, too, have a wonderful opportunity to become closer to Hashem each Rosh Chodesh as we experience our own personal rejuvenation. We can begin again, as the B’nei Yisrael did in Egypt, to understand and appreciate Hashem’s love for His people and for us individually. Perhaps this is why our

parasha occurs near Rosh Chodesh Shevat. It is a perfect scene of renewal, as this month marks the beginning of the renewal of the trees. May we all take this opportunity for our own spiritual growth and renewal. © 2022 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Stretch your arm towards the sky and let darkness be upon the land of Egypt; a tangible darkness.'" (Shmos 10:21) In a noticeable change, the plague of darkness came with no warning. While every plague had as much as three weeks of warning, and was dependent on Pharaoh relenting or not, Choshech simply came about after the Torah tells us Hashem hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he refused to let the Jews go.

We know that Hashem follows the Torah’s laws Himself, and we have a principle that we don’t punish until we provide a warning. In that case, how could the punishment of darkness have descended on the Egyptians without one? It must be that this plague was different, and that it wasn’t a punishment.

In each preceding plague, the Egyptians lost something. Access to drinking water, the ability to walk and live unencumbered by various animals, or else they suffered physical or monetary damage. But not by darkness. Instead of a change, this plague strangely consisted of a heavy status quo. One who was standing remained standing and one who was sitting could not rise. They could not move. The Egyptians were stuck in whatever position and act they had been doing at the moment the plague struck. And therein lie the message for them.

Though the Midrash tells us that they deserved darkness for making the Jews work day and night without regard to the actual time, what this plague did was underscore just how blind the Egyptians had been by refusing to acknowledge the truth they would have seen if they’d been willing to. That there is a G-d Who runs the world, and He is greater than any god man can create.

The darkness provided them time to think about what they’d seen and experienced, and forced them to reflect on what they were doing. They could not change from the moment the darkness fell, and this cast the greatest light on their lives. The Vilna Gaon writes that “Gehinnom, purgatory,” consists of that instant after death, when all of a person’s life is clear and visible to him, and he sees all that he did, and more so, all that he could have done. The regret he has at that moment burns him like no fire ever could. And that’s what the Egyptians experienced. It was a revelation – not a penalty.

Rather than taking away something, it gave them the perspective they’d refused all along. It was at that point that the Egyptian People realized they were

wrong and should have let the Jews go. That's when they revolted against Pharaoh, but it was too late. Hashem intended to see the makos through to the end, and smite the first-born.

Sadly, during the plague of darkness, many of the Children of Israel died because they refused to let their eyes be opened. Let's learn from them to let the light in and think about what we're doing, before it's too late to change.

R' Noach Weinberg z"l, who devoted his life to teaching people how to return to Hashem, was once approached by one who told him, "I don't need your Yeshiva. I already have a great relationship with G-d. He loves me the way I am and does miracles for me." Impressed, R' Noach asked for details.

"I ride a motorcycle," he explained. "Once, I was riding on a narrow road and a truck came around the corner out of nowhere. I swerved and went over a cliff. As I began to fall, I called out to G-d to save me. Suddenly, my bike caught between two rocks and I was thrown into a soft hedge. I lived to tell the tale. See? G-d does miracles for me. I don't need to learn your Torah."

R' Noach smiled, then asked the young man: "And Who do you think sent the truck? Do you want Hashem to send you another reminder of how much He loves you?" © 2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

Und Vos Zogt Gott?

"**A**nd He said" - ויאמר - is one of the most frequently occurring words in all of the Torah.

During the narrative of the bondage and exodus of the Jewish people, we encounter numerous conversations between HaShem and Moshe. Those directives were then repeated to Pharaoh.

Time and time again the word ויאמר introduces a particular segment.

Moshe reiterates to Pharaoh that it is not he, Moshe, giving the orders or making the requests. It is G-d Himself who is directing the scenario. Moshe, and at times Aharon, are simply the messengers. There are several instances in the Torah where Moshe and Aharon are praised for fulfilling G-d's directives to the letter.

Why should that be praiseworthy? As messengers of G-d, wouldn't one expect them to transmit and fulfill the exact directives?

The answer is simple. It is human nature for someone, even inadvertently, to interject their personal feelings or agenda when giving over a message. At times, it could even be omitting a single word or the inflection in their voice.

Moshe and Aharon understood that the word of G-d must be given verbatim, in its pure form. Notwithstanding that there are "70 facets to the Torah", those facets all emanate from the "Diamond" of His

Word.

The praise is awarded because of their ability, despite being great men themselves, to give over the message free and clear of any personal interests.

They also recognized that as messengers of HaShem, they were His representatives to Pharaoh, to the nation and to the world.

Rabbi Berel Wein recounts stories about Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg, Z'L, the first kashrut administrator of the Orthodox Union and a Rav in Yonkers, New York. Rav Rosenberg was once approached by an individual who sought consent from the rabbi for something that was, at best, ethically questionable. The person qualified his position by quoting several sources that were in line with his thinking. After hearing all of those who gave backing to the man's actions, Rav Rosenberg responded: "Und vos zogt Gott?—And what does God say?" Rabbi Wein said that this was a common question of Rabi Rosenberg.

Und Vos Zogt Gott? What does G-d say? Such a simple, yet fundamental measuring device for anyone truly wishing to emulate HaShem and His Torah.

We must ask ourselves if our words and deeds would meet the approval of G-d Himself. What would HaShem "say" about the way in which we conduct our business, our relationships and our daily behavior?

Are we trustworthy representatives?

Too often, our behavior is influenced more by the opinions and "norms" of our society of friends, neighbors, school administration and shadchanim than by what G-d and the Torah truly expect from us.

When a tragedy occurs, people seek comfort, guidance, assurance and inspiration. Not excuses, agenda or finger pointing. Even when the speaker can quote many "sources" for their stance.

These days, it seems as if everyone has an opinion or an insight into how and why "things happen". And thanks to our digital world there is a virtual stage from where to broadcast it.

Und vos zogt Gott? Would He approve of the message from those speaking "In His Name"?

Are their words inspired by the truth of Mount Sinai or the soapbox of public opinion? Is their concern for the honor of Heaven and the Jewish people or in boosting their own popularity and agenda?

Sometimes the deepest and most powerful words and actions are rooted in simplicity and sincerity. Simplicity in their goal with sincerity of the heart.

As the Ibn Ezra said: דברים היוצאים מן הלב נכנסים אל הלב – words of the heart enter the heart.

So to whom should we listen? What does G-d really want from us?

Perhaps we should listen to Him in His own words: ומה אני מבקש מכם אלא שתהיו אוהבים זה את זה, ותהיו מכבדים זה את זה, ולא ימצא בכם עבירה כח וגזל ודבר מוסר - אליהו רבה פרק כח

What do I request from you? Only that you should love one another, and that you should honor one another and be in awe one from another and there shouldn't be found among you sin, theft or ugly things....

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה ה' דורש ממך כי אם עשות משפט ואהבת חסד והצנע לכת עם אלוקיך (מיכה ו)

He has told you, person, what is good, and what HaShem requires of you: only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God; (Micha 6)

Without politics, pundits or personal/communal agenda, this is what He wants from us, simply and sincerely. ©2022 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

The celebration of Pesach, and particularly the Seder night as described in Parshas Bo, is marked by stark contrasts. In the days of the Beis Hamikdash, the night of Pesach centered around the eating of the korban Pesach. There are two seemingly contradictory themes that emerge from how the korban Pesach is eaten. Its meat must be roasted rather than cooked since roasted meat was a sign of wealth and royalty. Similarly, the meat must not be left over as such a practice would resemble one who can't afford fresh meat the following day. Bones of the korban Pesach may not be broken since this is something one who lacks enough meat would usually do. The Sefer Hachinuch (in mitzvos 7,8, and 16) elaborates upon how observing these intricacies of halacha creates the mindset of our state of royalty as the nation of Hashem.

Even as we celebrate our exalted status on Pesach night, we perform mitzvos that invoke a very different image of ourselves. Accompanying the korban Pesach we partake of matza and marror. Matza is referred to as lechem oni -- a poor man's bread. We highlight an existence of poverty and suffering even as we celebrate our newfound freedom. This aspect of matza is so essential that we introduce the matza at the seder by declaring "Ha lachma anya" -- this is a poor man's bread. Completing the mitzvos of eating on Pesach night is the obligation to partake of marror, which is the ultimate reminder of the bitterness of our lives as slaves prior to being redeemed on this very night.

Freedom and slavery, wealth and poverty, not only permeate the mitzvos of Pesach, Matza, and Marror, but the mitzva of sippur yetzias Mitzrayim revolves around these very themes as well. We are taught by Chazal that the Torah commandment of telling the story of yetzias Mitzrayim at the seder must include beginning with how lowly we were, both physically and spiritually, as slaves, and culminating in

the glory bestowed upon us. The actual mitzvos as well as our entire discussion on this night encompass this theme of transformation.

Such a change in our existence, from those who survived on mere matza and tasted the bitterness of slavery to becoming a royal nation, should mentally take a great deal of time; perhaps generations would have to pass before a glorious nation could emerge. Yet, Hashem performed this transformation in literally the blink of an eye.

The symbolism of a downtrodden suffering people all of a sudden celebrating as the beloved royal nation of Hashem has great meaning for us both personally and nationally. Situations that appear bleak and hopeless can turn around in a moment. Personal suffering and pain can be transformed instantaneously to joy. Over the course of generations Jews have often sat down to the Seder in the most difficult circumstances. What gave our people the strength to celebrate the first Pesach after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed? From where did Jews get the inspiration to perform a Seder knowing that the dangers of a blood libel could be upon them at any moment? How were Jews able to find the faith to commemorate the night of redemption from Mitzrayim even as they were suffering during the horrors of the Holocaust?

It was the Seder night that kept alive the dream of nobility of the Jewish people. Just as matza and marror gave way to korban Pesach over three thousand years ago, so too Klal Yisrael will emerge from galus and once again return to the Beis Hamikdash to partake of the korban Pesach and celebrate its glorious destiny.

As we read Parshas Bo, although still several months away from Pesach, let us focus on the dream of geula that we eagerly wait for at any moment. ©2022 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky and TorahWeb.org

