

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

The question is ancient. If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it was God 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? 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 God hardened¹ 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 God doing so. The conclusion they draw therefore is that the last five plagues were therefore a punishment for the first five refusals, freely made by Pharaoh himself.²

A second approach, in precisely the opposite direction, is that during the last five plagues God intervened not to harden but to strengthen Pharaoh's heart. He acted to ensure that Pharaoh kept his freedom and did not lose his resolve. Such was the impact of the 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?" (Ex. 10:7) To give in at that point would have been action under duress, not a genuine change of heart. Such is the approach of Yosef Albo³ and Ovadiah Sforno.⁴

A third approach calls into question the very meaning of the phrase, "God hardened Pharaoh's

heart." In a profound sense God, 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 God. 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 God? Something that is unusual, falling so far outside the norms of human behaviour that we find it hard to explain in any way other than to say, surely this happened for a purpose.

God 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 (Ex. 7:5; 14:18). Pharaoh acted freely, but his last refusals were so strange that it was obvious to everyone that God had anticipated this. It was predictable, part of the script. God had actually 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, 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 someone gambles or drinks alcohol or takes drugs, they may do so freely, knowing the risks but ignoring them. Time goes on and their dependency increases until the craving is so intense that they are almost powerless to resist it. At a certain point they may have to go into rehabilitation. They no longer have the ability to stop without external support. As the Talmud says, "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison." (Brachot 5b)

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," Sir Walter Scott famously said, "when first we practise to deceive."

That is as far as individuals are concerned.

¹ 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.'

² Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuvah 6:3.

³ Albo, Sefer Ikkarim, IV, 25.

⁴ See Ovadiah Sforno's Commentary to Ex. 7:3.

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. They will make an attempt to cover it up. To do so they must enlist the help of others, who become 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.⁵

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 monarch's counsellors and townspeople.

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, God 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" (Gen. 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,⁶ what Daniel Goleman calls an 'amygdala hijack' can occur in which instinctive reaction takes the place of reflective decision and we do things that are harmful to us as well as to others.⁷ 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 person, the seven others were associates of the experimenter and were following his instructions.

⁵ 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.

⁶ See *Beyond Nature*, a Covenant & Conversation piece on parshat Noach.

⁷ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, New York: Bantam, 1995.

On a number of occasions the seven conspirators gave an answer that was clearly false, yet in 75 per cent of cases the eighth person was willing to agree with them and give an answer 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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 by Egyptians themselves over many generations. 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.¹⁰ 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 God 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,

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

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

¹⁰ Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*, London: Bloomsbury, 2010, pp. 72–91. 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.

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. *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 5775 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd I will bring you into the land that I promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you as a morasha (heritage): I am the Lord." (Exodus 6:8) It is only natural for parents to want to leave a legacy for their children and grandchildren. For those fortunate enough to be able to do so, this wish expresses itself in the form of an inheritance. But for most people, this is simply not realistic. How might they transmit a legacy to the next generation? I believe the answer can be found in the important distinction the Torah makes between the words yerusha (inheritance) and morasha (heritage).

We are all more familiar with the concept of yerusha, used throughout the Torah to describe the passing down of material possessions from parents to children. Far less common is the concept of morasha, mentioned in the Torah in reference to only two things: Torah ["Moses prescribed the Torah to us, an eternal heritage (morasha) for the congregation of Jacob" (Deut. 33:4)] and Land of Israel (the verse cited above at the outset).

The different contexts in which these words appear reveals a great deal about the different kinds of relationships between parents and children, and different priorities that these bequests engender, as they are handed down from generation to generation. I would like to explore three different examples in which the differences between yerusha and morasha will clarify the significance of each.

The first point of distinction is in the realm of effort. The Jerusalem Talmud [Bava Batra 8:2] speaks of yerusha as something that comes easily. When a person dies, leaving a yerusha, the heir need not do anything other than receive the gift. Morasha, however, requires much more.

The added letter mem in morasha, suggests the Jerusalem Talmud, is a grammatical sign of intensity, the pi'el form in Hebrew grammar. In order for an individual to come into possession of a morasha, he must work for it.

While an inheritance is what you receive from the previous generation (without your particular input), a heritage requires your active involvement and participation. A yerusha is a check your father left you; a morasha is a business that your parents may have started, into which you must put much sweat, blood and tears.

This certainly explains why morasha is used only with regard to Torah and the Land of Israel. Our sages [Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 5a] remark that there are three gifts that God gave the Jewish people that can be acquired only through commitment and suffering: "Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come." And we understand very well that neither Torah nor the Land of Israel can be easily acquired.

Pirkei Avot 2:10 specifically teaches, "Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you." All achievement in Torah depends on an individual's own efforts. A student of Torah must be willing to suffer privation.

Similarly, the Land of Israel cannot be acquired without sacrifice and suffering. One of the tests in the life of Abraham—and the source of the Jewish claim to Jerusalem—is the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. The message conveyed by the Torah is that we can only acquire our Holy Land if we are willing to place the lives of our children on the line. Every parent in Israel who sends his/her child to the army understands this message very well. A heritage doesn't come easily, and our national heritage is Torah and Israel.

The second distinction between the terms is not how the gift is acquired, but rather how it may be dispersed. Even the largest amount of money inherited (yerusha) can be squandered or legitimately lost. In contrast, a morasha must be given intact to the next generation. Morasha literally means "to hand over to someone else." Silver is an inheritance, and can be used in whatever way the heir desires; silver Shabbat candlesticks are a heritage, meant to be passed down from parent to child and used from generation to generation.

Finally, in the case of an inheritance, one must have the object of yerusha in one's possession. This need not be the case with regard to a morasha. Jewish parents bequeathed the ideals of Torah and the Land of Israel to their children for countless generations, even while living in exile far from the Promised Land, and even when poverty and oppression made it near impossible for them to become Torah scholars. Values can be passed down regardless of one's physical or material station in life.

For this reason, an inheritance, regardless of its size, pales in comparison to a heritage. We all want to be able to bequeath a yerusha to our children and grandchildren, and we should do what we can to make that possible. Nevertheless, the most important legacy that we can leave them is a morasha, the eternal heritage of Torah and the Land of Israel. ©2021 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Many of the Torah commentaries point out that unlike our forefathers, Moshe, in this week's

opening verses to the Parsha, did not accept that God's promises of redemption for the Jewish people had not yet been fulfilled. In God's response to this, we sense a veiled criticism of our great teacher and leader Moshe.

Heaven responded to Moshe by saying that he enjoyed a higher and different relationship to the Revelation from God than those original founders of the Jewish people. Because of this state of elevated Revelation, Moshe's complaint was unnecessary. Moshe should have realized that Heaven has its own timetable, and that its promises will always be fulfilled, but not necessarily according to the time schedule established by human beings.

It is difficult to understand the attitude in Moshe's statement to Heaven that it had not yet freed the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage. Moshe certainly realized through his powers of Revelation that he had experienced, and through the commitments made to him and to the Jewish people about redemption, that Heaven was aware of the promises, and that there was no need to be prompted by Moshe to fulfill its commitments.

However, Moshe, like all leaders, was subject to public pressure, complaints and hostility directed towards him by the Jewish taskmasters after the decree of the Pharaoh to withhold straw from them, while demanding the same number of bricks to be produced. These complaints by the people were deeply disturbing to Moshe. He deflects the criticism directed towards him and, instead, holds Heaven accountable for the situation.

Moshe, himself, has no doubt as to the eventual outcome and the inevitable redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Unlike Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob though, he was subject to popular opinion in the mood of the Jewish people, whom he had to convince that redemption would in fact take place.

According to the Midrash, many, if not most, of the Jewish people in Egypt did not believe Moshe's promises that they would soon be delivered from Egyptian slavery. Even after the series of plagues and punishments visited upon the Egyptians, most of the Jews still did not believe in their coming redemption. In contending with this psychological and emotional state of mind by a large part of the Jewish people, Moshe necessarily turns the Heaven for help. He has no doubt that the redemption from Egyptian slavery will shortly take place. However, he must bring the masses of Israel along with him in this belief and faith.

Because of his great modesty and humility, Moshe does not rely upon his own powers of persuasion to accomplish this task, and he turns to Heaven in an almost provocative fashion. He implores God to hasten the process of the delivery of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage. His courageous words to Heaven, which seem like a complaint, are, indeed, but an expression of the greatness of his character and

the forcefulness of Moshe's leadership. ©2021 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

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Astrology

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Pharaoh works closely with his astrologers and magicians in Parshat Va'era. What is the Jewish view of these practitioners?

The Rambam feels strongly that astrology and magic are nonsense and lies, with no power whatsoever. In contrast, Ramban and other *Rishonim* maintain that astrology is a tool through which G-d rules the world. He Himself, of course, is not subordinate to it. He is free to do whatever He wants, and change anything that might be predetermined by the stars.

Given this debate, is it permissible according to Jewish law, for us to seek the advice of an astrologer, or to allow the daily horoscope to guide our decisions?

The Ramban asserts that following one's horoscope is permitted and does not fall into the category of the Torah prohibitions of magic and divination. If a person's horoscope predicts that something bad will happen to him, he should respond by praying to G-d for mercy and performing many *mitzvot*. This is because a person's actions can change what is predicted by the stars. Nevertheless, if a person's horoscope predicts that a certain day would not be a good time for him to undertake a certain activity, he should avoid doing it, as it is not appropriate for him to defy his horoscope and rely on a miracle.

In contrast, Rambam maintains that someone who plans his activities based on astrology is not only transgressing, but is even subject to lashes.

The Meiri is one of the rationalists among the *Rishonim*, but he takes a more moderate position than the Rambam. What is forbidden is to relate to the stars as having power independent of G-d. But they do have an effect, the same way that the sun does when it produces light and heat. Accordingly, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with taking a horoscope into account when planning one's day. The Meiri sees it as the equivalent of a person who wants bright light for an activity, so he plans it for the middle of the day, when the sun is at its maximum strength. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

On most occasions when the Torah states that God issues a command, the details of the directive are spelled out. The portion of Va'era offers an exception to the rule. The text reads, "and the Lord

spoke to Moses and Aaron, and He commanded them to [el] the children of Israel” (Exodus 6:13). But the specific command is not articulated.

The power of certain situations goes beyond words. When the emotion is so high, words simply do not suffice. For example, in the Haggadah, we proclaim that had God 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 God would have been enough. Following this idea, it can be suggested that the mere experience of God commanding Moses and Aaron was enough – nothing more had to be said.

One wonders, however, why specifically here were no words required? After all, God commands Moses and Aaron many times, and the specific mandate follows. But perhaps the command in this situation was indeed detailed. Note that after “and He commanded them [va'yetzavem],” the Torah adds the two-letter word el, which literally means “to.” Here, Moses and Aaron were commanded “to” the Jewish People; in other words, they were to connect with the Jewish People regardless of the circumstances.

Sifrei makes this very point by declaring, “God said to Moses 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’” (Sifrei, Bamidbar 11:12).

Ibn Ezra follows this idea by stating that Moses 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 Moses and Aaron that their efforts to free the people had only made matters worse (Exodus 5:21).

Perhaps the Ibn Ezra’s call for patience could be expanded, and speak to the necessity that Moses lead with unconditional love, indicated by the word el, to come towards the people. This approach rings true today. In Israel, for example, some Jews throw stones at fellow Jews who do not observe the Sabbath. Our analysis points us in a different direction: rock throwing is counterproductive. 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,” the man lamented.

The rebbe looked up with a smile and responded, “Then love him even more.”

Hence, God’s command to Moses and Aaron – “to [el] the children of Israel.” El teaches that the gateway to the soul is not through stones or harsh

words but through love. ©2021 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 LEVIN

From Judgment to Mercy

I have always been bothered by a pasuk at the beginning of Parashat Va'eira that deals with the different names of Hashem. In the first two sentences of the parasha, we find three (or four) different names by which Hashem is known to the Jewish people. The parasha begins, “And Elokim spoke to Moshe and He said to him, I am Adoshem (Lord). I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchok, and to Ya'akov as Keil Shakai (Almighty), and my name Adoshem (Hashem) was not known to them.” These sentences would be complex enough by themselves, but become even more so upon careful examination. Each name that is given to Hashem does not indicate a different deity, as some “scholars” suggest, but indicates a different perception that Man has in viewing the actions of Hashem. When Man describes Hashem as Elokim, he refers to that aspect of Hashem which we associate with Judgment (Din), reward and punishment. If Man is good, he receives reward, and if bad, he is punished. Keil Shakai (two names of Hashem that are often used together) is an Omnipotent G-d, One Whose power is over everything and everyone. The name of Hashem, which I have rendered here more phonetically as Adoshem or my Master, is the characteristic of Mercy and Forgiveness.

Harav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch describes the transition from Elokim in B'reishit to Adoshem in Sh'mot. Hirsch points out that the characteristic of Judgment functions within Nature without changing it. Even though any benefit that Elokim gives to the Avot is miraculous, it is not visible by Man as a miracle. Keil Shakai gives Avraham the strength to overcome the four kings in battle and to outwit Par'aoah. These seem to be natural events without changing the course of Nature as compared to the plagues at the time of Moshe. Hirsch argues that it would have been possible for Elokim to begin the rise of the Jewish nation through this characteristic of Din. The Jews could rise like any other civilization, developing more and more power and wealth. But this was not desirable. If the Jews rose to power in this manner, they would have pursued spiritual growth as secondary to material growth. They may have grown spiritually but only at a time when they could spare themselves from their material pursuits.

In order to accomplish this emphasis on spiritual growth, Hashem had to make the miraculous rise of the Jewish people clearly visible to them. For this reason, there was a steady decline in the status of the Avot from the time of Avraham. Avraham was a

strong and powerful leader, but we find that Yitzchok has to fight to establish the same wells that Avraham dug. When we come to Ya'akov, we find that he is nearly enslaved by his father-in-law both before and after his marriage. And finally we find Yosef who was sold by his own brothers into slavery and eventually the enslavement of all of the Jews. The Jews needed to feel despondent, with no hope that there could be a natural way for them to escape their misery. Only at this point could the characteristic of Mercy and Forgiveness work against Nature and outside of Nature to save the Jewish people. When the Jews would rise miraculously, they would understand the importance of Hashem within their lives and devote their lives to their spiritual growth, with their material growth limited to time that they could spare from that spiritual growth. According to Hirsch, this necessitated the different midot which appeared in B'reishit and Sh'mot.

The Ramban's approach is somewhat different. He felt that the Avot never really experienced Mercy as they only experienced Hashem through Judgment or through Kel Shakai. Their prophecy existed in the realm of dreams which could at best give them a clouded picture of the true aspect of Mercy. Only Moshe experienced Hashem and received his prophecy in daylight. His vision of Hashem was clear and unclouded. When Avraham referred to Hashem, he always used the name together in the form of Judgment, therefore indicating that his experience of Mercy was tied to Judgment. The Ramban also indicates that the miracles that happened for the Avot were hidden miracles in that they could be explained within Nature, whereas the miracles of the plagues and the Red Sea were outside of Nature and clearly miracles. This remark is controversial and does not take into account the clearly visible miracles that are found in Midrashic texts. Nevertheless, the Ramban's argument helps to explain the difference between B'reishit and Sh'mot in terms of the emphasis in Sh'mot given to the name of Hashem.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin adds another insight into the meaning of Adoshem. One can only understand the concept of forgiveness and its greatness if one has been forgiven for having done a sin to Hashem. Since the Avot were devoid of sin, it was impossible for them to fully comprehend Hashem's Mercy. The Jews in Egypt had strayed so far from Hashem that they could not imagine that Hashem would still fulfill the promises that He made to the Avot. That is the reason that Moshe questioned Hashem at the Burning Bush about the name of Hashem that would save the Jewish people. If His name was the characteristic of Judgment, no Jew would believe Moshe that Hashem would save such an unworthy people. At least with the characteristic of Mercy, even with their limited comprehension of that characteristic, the people would believe that they had a chance.

The name, Hashem, is the highest form of G-d's essence, for only one who has true power is not limited to the use of power to gain obedience. On Rosh Hashana, we compare Hashem to an Earthly King because that King cannot relent and forgive or he will lose his power. When Hashem uses Mercy, he does not weaken His power. The Or HaChaim explains that even though the Avot knew that name and its significance, only Moshe had the degree of prophecy to comprehend that essence to the highest degree capable by Man.

We are also unworthy of Hashem's Mercy, yet may we be blessed to receive Hashem's Mercy in the rebuilding of the Bet Hamikdash in our time. ©2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd you shall know that I am Hashem, your G-d, who takes you from under the burdens of Egypt." (Shmos 6:7) Most of us are familiar with the "four expressions of Geula," V'hotzaisi - I will take you out, V'hitzalti - and I will save you, V'goalti - and I will redeem you, V'lokachti - And I will take you to Me. These each represent a different level of redemption, freeing us from slavery physically, mentally, and emotionally. Only after all four took place were both we out of Egypt, and Egypt out of us. The four cups of wine we drink at the Seder on Pesach night represent these different expressions. But we weren't done yet.

The "fifth" expression of Geulah is: V'hayvaisi - I will bring you to the land I promised to your forefathers. Though there may have been a fifth cup of wine in the Seder at one time, when we were living as a sovereign nation in the land of Israel, there is not one today. Some suggest that the kos shel Eliyahu, the cup of Elijah, represents this fifth expression, as he will be the one to announce the ultimate redemption and our return to Eretz Yisrael as a single nation under the Melech HaMoshiach, a nation firmly established on the principles and rules of Torah.

Our posuk connects the fourth and fifth expressions of redemption, and if we pay attention, we'll realize why the fifth expression is not automatic. Yes, Hashem can rescue us from Egypt, release the bonds that shackle us, and allow us to roam free, but that is not yet freedom.

The precursor to V'hayvaisi must be V'yedatem ki Ani Hashem - You must know that I am Hashem who took you from the burdens of Egypt. The Ohr HaChaim explains that you must know, with complete clarity, that I took you from subservience to Egypt and to give you the "burdens" of My being your G-d. It doesn't say to "make you My servants" but to "give you" those burdens. It isn't forced upon us, but neither do we automatically get the promised reward if we don't

choose this.

Becoming free is only accomplished once we willingly accept Hashem as our King and agree to serve Him with all our power. We must connect to Him and be part of His "household" in order to merit the Land of Israel. Thus, while the first four expressions can be done unilaterally by Hashem, only we can set the fifth into motion, by choosing our Master wisely and joyfully.

Chazal say, "Hakol b'yedei Shomayim, chutz mi'yiras Shomayim – everything is in the hand of Heaven except fear of Heaven." That is up to us, each day, each moment, whether we will choose to serve Hashem and see Him in our lives, knowing that this is the greatest benefit for us. Therefore, before Hashem brings us to the land he promised Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, we need to know with the same clarity they had that the ultimate freedom comes from relinquishing control to Hashem and being confident that He will take better care of us than we could of ourselves.

When R' Leib Eiger returned home after spending several years learning at the feet of the Kotzker Rebbe, his father, who was not a Chasid, asked what he had accomplished. "I came to know that Hashem runs the world," replied R' Leib.

"And for that you had to spend years in Kotzk? Just ask the chambermaid and she will tell you that G-d runs the world," said his father.

"Yes," R' Leib answered. She says - I know."

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RABBI AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

The Hippo in the Room

During the 1970's, Western Africa was hit with severe drought and famine. One of the hardest hit countries was Gambia, a tiny coastal country dominated by the Gambia River which flows through its center.

Scores of ecologists were brought in to conduct studies and evaluations. While limited rainfall was a major contributor, the scientists were surprised by another factor.

Several years prior, the Gambian government enacted a law permitting the hunting of hippopotami. Due to the diminished hippopotami population, the agriculture in Gambia suffered increasingly.

As one ecologist wrote...

Hippos are ecosystem engineers. Because of their massive size, they create new paths and channels as they move through the water and between water and land. Water flows through these channels during the wet season, which creates new habitat and shelter for birds, insects, and other species. And in the dry season, the lagoons left behind provide a safe haven for small fish and other creatures. Hippos are also critical to the health of wetland ecosystems because of the role they play, through defecation, in fertilizing the

water. Thanks hippos.

And how exactly does this relate to our Parsha?

The catalyst for the Jewish people's exodus were the 10 Makkot (plagues) that HaShem visited upon Egypt.

Each plague was preceded with several weeks of warning followed by the plague itself.

The execution of the first 3 differed from the others by way of whom initiated the punishment.

While Moshe was commanded to give warning and execute the plagues, when it came to blood, frogs and lice, it was Aharon who was instructed to strike the water or sand rather than Moshe himself.

The reason given is that it would not be proper for Moshe to strike the water which saved him as a baby. Similarly, the sand concealed the corpse of the Egyptian overlord whom Moshe killed in defense of a slave being mercilessly attacked.

By instructing Aharon to carry out the plague, Moshe would be displaying true Hakarat HaTov for the benefits that he received.

The glaring questions are, "would the water even know it was hit? Does sand have feelings?" Why emphasize this detail of Aharon striking rather than Moshe as part of the narrative?

There are so many better examples of Hakarat HaTov involving people. Why does the Torah use a case of inanimate objects to teach us about showing appreciation?

Perhaps the answer lies within the term Hakarat HaTov itself. Hakarat Hatov means the recognition of the good one benefits from. If Hakarat HaTov applied to people only, it would be more correct to "express appreciation". The beneficial party is able to feel the good will received.

Herein lies the beauty of Jewish philosophy. Every person and everything has the potential to contribute to society. Even when the benefactor is an inanimate object, such as water, sand or a piece of furniture, we should recognize how it affects our lives for the better. Hence the word Hakarat, recognition, is the key to appreciation. A desk that enables one to learn or to serve guests or the car that makes life more convenient, are deserving of our praise.

The lesson of the water and sand is simple. We are required to recognize something that can't feel our gratitude. If so, it is certainly incumbent upon us to constantly recognize the good that we receive from the people in our lives.

There is abundant good that we receive from our spouses, parents, relatives, neighbors and friends.

Great service in a restaurant or store should be recognized through a "thank you", tip and smile. Our mail delivers, garbage collectors, military personnel, police, medics and firemen enable us to have a better and safer quality of life. They deserve our appreciation,

even if its simple thank you or smile.

As Jews, our name “Yehudim” imbues within us the obligation to constantly appreciate the good that we receive.

That good comes in many forms, from Above, from those around us or even from the water, sand and hippopotamus that plays in them.

By conditioning ourselves to recognize and acknowledge all of the gifts in our lives, we can and become better, happier and more fulfilled inhabitants of this great world. ©2021 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org

RABBI YAAKOV ASHER SINCLAIR

Torah Weekly

The necromancers did the same by means of their incantations; so Pharaoh's heart was strong and he did not heed them..." (7:22) What would you do if someone came along and turned the rivers into blood? You'd try to turn the river back to normal. What would you do if someone made all the frogs come up out of the river? You'd try to get rid of them.

But Pharaoh didn't seek to get rid of the plagues, rather he had his magicians duplicate them. This may have been very impressive and certainly boosted his self-confidence, but he was really shooting himself in the foot.

Wouldn't it have been better to get the magicians to get rid of the blood and the frogs? That would have been just as impressive and much more useful.

This is the way of evil. It doesn't matter if I lose—just as long as the other person doesn't win. © 1997 Rabbi Y.A. Sinclair and Yeshivat Ohr Somayach

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. © 2013 Rabbi A. Weiss

