

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The Torah sometimes says something of fundamental importance in what seems like a minor and incidental comment. There is a fine example of this near the beginning of this parsha.

In the previous parsha, we read of how Moses was sent by God to lead the Israelites to freedom, and how his initial efforts met with failure. Not only did Pharaoh not agree to let the people go; he made the working conditions of the Israelites even worse. They had to make the same number of bricks as before, but now they had to gather their own straw. The people complained to Pharaoh, then they complained to Moses, and then Moses complained to God.

"Why have You brought trouble to this people? Why did You send me?" (Exodus 5:22)

At the beginning of Va'era, God tells Moses that He will indeed bring the Israelites to freedom, and tells him to announce this to the people. Then we read this: "So Moses told this to the Israelites but they did not listen to him, because their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh." (Exodus 6:9)

The italicised phrase seems simple enough. The people did not listen to Moses because he had brought them messages from God before which had done nothing to improve their situation. They were busy trying to survive day by day. They had no time for utopian promises that seemed to have no grounding in reality. Moses had failed to deliver in the past. They had no reason to think he would do so in the future. So far, so straightforward.

But there is something more subtle going on beneath the surface. When Moses first met God at the Burning Bush, God told him to lead, and Moses kept refusing on the grounds that the people would not listen to him. He was not a man of words. He was slow of speech and tongue. He was a man of "uncircumcised lips" ([69]Ex. 6:30). He lacked eloquence. He could not sway crowds. He was not an inspirational leader.

It turned out, though, that Moses was both right and wrong, right that they did not listen to him, but wrong about why. It had nothing to do with his failures as a leader or a public speaker. In fact, it had nothing to do with Moses at all. They did not listen "because their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh." In other words: If you want to improve people's spiritual

situation, first improve their physical situation. That is one of the most humanising aspects of Judaism.

Maimonides emphasises this in *The Guide for the Perplexed* (III:27). The Torah, he says, has two aims: the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body. The well-being of the soul is something inward and spiritual, but the well-being of the body requires a strong society and economy, where there is the rule of law, division of labour, and the promotion of trade. We have bodily well-being when all our physical needs are supplied, but none of us can do this alone. We specialise and exchange. That is why we need a good, strong, just society.

Spiritual achievement, says Maimonides, is higher than material achievement, but we need to ensure the latter first, because "a person suffering from great hunger, thirst, heat or cold, cannot grasp an idea even if it is communicated by others, much less can he arrive at it by his own reasoning." In other words, if we lack basic physical needs, there is no way we can reach spiritual heights. When people's spirits are broken by harsh labour they cannot listen to a Moses. If you want to improve people's spiritual situation, first improve their physical conditions.

This idea was given classic expression in modern times by two New York Jewish psychologists, Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) and Frederick Herzberg (1923-2000). Maslow was fascinated by the question of why many people never reached their full potential. He also believed - as, later, did Martin Seligman, creator of positive psychology - that psychology should focus not only on the cure of illness but also on the positive promotion of mental health. His most famous contribution to the study of the human mind was his "hierarchy of needs."

We are not a mere bundle of wants and desires. There is a clear order to our concerns. Maslow enumerated five levels. First are our physiological needs: for food and shelter, the basic requirements of survival. Next come safety needs: protection against harm done to us by others. Third is our need for love and belonging. Above that comes our desire for recognition and esteem, and higher still is self-actualisation: fulfilling our potential, becoming the person we feel we could and should be. In his later years Maslow added a yet higher stage: self-transcendence, rising beyond the self through altruism and spirituality.

Herzberg simplified this whole structure by distinguishing between physical and psychological factors. He called the first, Adam needs, and the second Abraham needs. Herzberg was particularly interested in what motivates people at work. What he realised in the late 1950s - an idea revived more recently by American-Israeli economist Dan Ariely - is that money, salary, and financial rewards (stock options and the like) is not the only motivator. People do not necessarily work better, harder, or more creatively, the more you pay them. Money works up to a certain level, but beyond that the real motivator is the challenge to grow, create, find meaning, and to invest your highest talents in a great cause. Money speaks to our Adam needs, but meaning speaks to our Abraham needs.

There is a truth here that Jews and Judaism have tended to note and live by more fully than many other civilisations and faiths. Most religions are cultures of acceptance. There is poverty, hunger, and disease on earth because that is the way the world is; that is how God made it and wants it. Yes, we can find happiness, nirvana, or bliss, but to achieve it you must escape from the world, by meditation, or retreating to a monastery, or by drugs, or trance, or by waiting patiently for the joy that awaits us in the world to come. Religion anaesthetises us to pain.

That isn't Judaism at all. When it comes to the poverty and pain of the world, ours is a religion of protest, not acceptance. God does not want people to be poor, hungry, sick, oppressed, uneducated, deprived of rights, or subject to abuse. He has made us His agents in this cause. He wants us to be His partners in the work of redemption. That is why so many Jews have become doctors fighting disease, lawyers fighting injustice, or educators fighting ignorance. It is surely why they have produced so many pioneering (and Nobel Prize-winning) economists. As Michael Novak (citing Irving Kristol) writes: "Jewish thought has always felt comfortable with a certain well-ordered worldliness, whereas the Christian has always felt a pull to otherworldliness. Jewish thought has had a candid orientation toward private property, whereas Catholic thought - articulated from an early period chiefly among priests and monks - has persistently tried to direct the attention of its adherents beyond the activities and interests of this world to the next. As a result, tutored by the law and the prophets, ordinary Jews have long felt more at home in this world, while ordinary Catholics have regarded this world as a valley of temptation and as a distraction from their proper business, which is preparation for the world to come." (This Hemisphere of Liberty, p. 64.)

God is to be found in this world, not just the next. But for us to climb to spiritual heights we must first have satisfied our material needs. Abraham was greater than Adam, but Adam came before Abraham. When the physical world is harsh, the human spirit is

broken, and people cannot then hear the word of God, even when delivered by a Moses.

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said it well: "Don't worry about the state of someone else's soul and the needs of your body. Worry about the needs of someone else's body and the state of your own soul."

Alleviating poverty, curing disease, ensuring the rule of law, and respect for human rights: these are spiritual tasks no less than prayer and Torah study. To be sure, the latter are higher, but the former are prior. People cannot hear God's message if their spirit is broken and their labour harsh.

Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2016 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 desire to leave their children and grandchildren with a legacy. 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 that the answer can be found in an important distinction in the Torah 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" (Deuteronomy 33:4) and Land of Israel (the verse cited above at the outset).

The different contexts in which these words appear is quite revealing about the different kinds of relationships between parents and children, and different priorities handed down from generation to generation, that these bequests engender. 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, they 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, but 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 comes hard, not 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 over 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. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

As the narrative of the redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage unfolds, I am continually struck by the apparently gradual process that is described for us in the Torah. What does all of the detail associated with each of the plagues visited upon Egypt come to teach us? And would not one great plague alone have sufficed? After all, in the past century we witnessed how two bombs, alone, forced the powerful and fanatical Japanese Empire to surrender unconditionally. So, what is the message of the ten plagues and the elapse of time from the onset of the mission of Moshe to its final successful conclusion?

These issues are raised and discussed by all of the great rabbinic commentators over the ages. As is usual in Jewish biblical commentary, there is no one definitive answer, for the Torah itself is said to have seventy different “faces.” Yet, there is much ground for a general understanding of the matter in their writings and opinions.

The main thrust of rabbinic opinion is that all of this was necessary to give the Egyptians an opportunity to repent and save themselves and, just as importantly, to give the Jews an opportunity to begin to think of themselves as a free and independent people and no longer as slaves and pagans. It takes time and a series of many events to turn around the mentality and preconceived ideas of human beings.

The Egyptians had to somehow become accustomed to the fact that they had no right to rule over others and be cruel to their fellow human beings. The Jews had to become accustomed to the responsibilities of freedom and an independent life and to realize that they were destined to be a special people dedicated to the service of God and humankind.

These things cannot happen suddenly and if they do, then they are not of a long-lasting nature. Judaism is not built upon sudden epiphanies but rather upon the long, grinding routine. Only after ten plagues have visited Egypt, the Egyptians and the Jews as well begin to understand what God wants from them.

We see from many incidents recorded for us throughout the Bible that one-shot miracles, no matter how impressive and meaningful they are at the moment they occur, do not really change the mindset of people in the long run. The miracle performed through Elijah, when all of Israel proclaimed that Hashem is the God of the universe, was not of a long-lasting nature and/or

influence.

The people soon sank back into the swamp of idolatry and immorality. Regularity, consistency and repeated instruction and education are necessary to make miracles truly influential and long-lasting. If the Jews had been delivered from Egyptian bondage by one great miracle, they would have had a much harder time grasping the unique role that God intended them to play in world history.

They would have been much more reticent to accept that role at Sinai had it not been for the fact that they witnessed so many miracles. Those miracles were repeated regularly and explained to them by Moshe in the light of the godly Torah, which they now willingly accepted. ©2023 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 Torah emphasizes that God will harden Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 7:3). If so, why should Pharaoh be punished for refusing to allow the Jews to leave Egypt? After all, he had no choice in the matter.

Sforno argues that were it not for God hardening Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh would have had no choice but to let the Jews go because of the severity of the plagues. They were so harsh that Pharaoh would have promptly acceded to Moses's requests in order for the plagues to stop. God therefore hardened Pharaoh's heart as a counterbalance, to provide Pharaoh the choice of allowing the Jews to leave not because he was coerced but out of true repentance. In other words, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart gave Pharaoh equal choice.

Another answer comes to mind. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler argues that every act has two elements: the pe'ulah (the act itself) and the totza'at hape'ulah (the consequences of the act upon the actor). For example, if a person steals, not only has something been taken, but the thief has been affected; his or her conscience has been altered, making it easier to rob again.

So too with Pharaoh. Every time Pharaoh refused to allow the Jews to leave, his personality changed, and it became psychologically easier for him to refuse to free the Jewish People. "Such is the law of conscience," writes Dr. J. H. Hertz in his commentary on the Torah. "Every time the voice of conscience is disobeyed, it becomes duller and feebler and the heart grows hard."

Note that after the first five plagues, the Torah records that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, as it was realistically still within the realm of possibility that he might allow the Jews to leave (7:23; 8:11,15,28; 9:7).

Only from the sixth plague on does the Torah state that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Having said "no" so many times, Pharaoh's very personality had changed. He no longer had equal choice, as the chances that he would choose to let the Jews go was seriously limited, and for all practical purposes, nonexistent (9:12,35; 10:20,27; 11:10).

When the Torah states that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, it means that God allowed the natural psychological consequences of behavior to influence Pharaoh's personality, making it virtually impossible for him to allow the Jews to leave. ©2023 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Moshe said before Hashem, "Behold I have blocked lips, and how will Pharaoh listen to me?" (Shmos 6:30) This phrase appears twice in our Parsha, 6:12 and 6:30. Moshe questioned Hashem on his efficacy as the messenger since he had a speech impediment. Whether Moshe actually asked this twice, or whether the Torah mentions the same question twice is a subject of dispute, but regardless, this question was at the forefront of Moshe's mind.

In both cases, the Torah ends off that section with a letter 'pei,' indicating a break. We are to infer that the next paragraphs, which begin with Hashem's commands, are actually Hashem's response to Moshe. So, what was the answer? How did Hashem suggest Moshe overcome his difficulty?

In the first case, Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and sent them to Pharaoh. Moshe's understanding was that with Aharon as his spokesman, he would not have to be the mouthpiece of Hashem. However, explains Rabbeinu Bachya, when Hashem told Moshe, "Speak to Pharaoh all that I shall tell you," and didn't speak to Aharon, Moshe's question came back. He again wondered how Pharaoh would listen to him with his slurred speech.

This time, Hashem responded that Moshe would be like a god to Pharaoh, and Aharon would be his prophet. That is to say, Moshe would speak to Aharon, and Aharon would be his intermediary to the king. Presumably this would avert the issue of Pharaoh denigrating Moshe because of his manner of speaking.

The Torah seems to give us two different approaches to dealing with the issue, both of which are appropriate. The second way, to have Aharon act as the interpreter, was not the primary method Hashem suggested. Only because Moshe was concerned did Hashem arrange things this way. But what was Hashem's first option?

Verse 6:13 says that Hashem commanded

Moshe and Aharon about the Jewish People and about Pharaoh, in order to take the Jews from Egypt. Rashi explains that they were instructed to be sensitive and patient with the Jews, and to give Pharaoh his due honor when they spoke to him.

Moshe was concerned his superficial flaw would prevent him from being heard. Hashem responded by explaining that if he were patient and loving to the Jews, and respectful to Pharaoh, then the way he spoke would not matter. What would make Moshe's voice heard was the way he treated those to whom he was speaking. Not only him, but Aharon, who was his "entourage" had to be this way. Those who are associated with leaders must also be above reproach and act properly.

The lesson here was that if we want to reach people, we must focus on how they feel about what we're saying, and not on how we feel we will sound when we say it.

When R' Yechezkel Abramsky z"l was the head of the Bais Din in London, he was approached by Dayan Fischer, one of the Rabbinical Court judges.

"Between you and me," said the judge to R' Abramsky, "You know that I can learn Torah just as well as you can, and you also agree that you speak English as badly as I do. Why, then, is it that people flock to your speeches, while mine are barely attended, and even then the attendees don't pay attention?"

R' Abramsky's simple answer is a message for all of us with buried talents: "The difference is," explained R' Yechezkel, "that when I get up to speak, I focus on how well I know how to learn. When you get up, you focus on how poorly you speak English."
© 2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

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 DAVID LEVIN

The First Plague

In parashat Va'eira, we find the beginnings of the ten plagues in Egypt. In our parasha, the first seven of the plagues occur, and only the last three plagues are presented in next week's parasha, Bo. Hashem sent Moshe to confront Par'oh while he bathed in the Nile River. "You shall say to him, 'Hashem, the G-d of the Hebrews, has sent me to you, saying: Send out My people that they may serve Me in the Wilderness – but, behold you have not heeded until now.' So says Hashem, 'Through this shall you know that I am Hashem; behold, with the staff that is in my hand I shall strike the waters that are in the river, and they shall change to blood. The fish-life that is in the water shall die and the river shall become foul; and the Egyptians will grow weary trying to drink water from the river.'" Hashem said to Moshe, "Say to Aharon, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt: over their rivers, over their canals, over their ponds, and over all their gatherings of water, and they shall become blood; there shall be blood in all the land of Egypt, and in the wood and in the stones.'" Moshe and Aharon did so, as Hashem had commanded. He held the staff aloft and struck the water that was in the river in the presence of Par'oh and in the presence of his servants, and all the water that was in the river changed to blood. The fish-life that was in the river died and the river became foul; Egypt could not drink water from the river, and the blood was throughout the land of Egypt. The necromancers of Egypt did the same with their charms; and Par'oh's heart became hardened and he did not listen to them, as Hashem had spoken. Par'oh turned away and came to his house. He did not to his heart this either. All of the Egyptians

dug roundabout the river for water to drink, for they could not drink from the waters of the river. The seven-day period was filled after Hashem struck the river.”

Several questions arise among the Rabbis concerning this first plague. These questions seek both general reasons why “Blood” was the first plague as well as specific questions concerning the process and the nature of the events. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that there are several natural divisions of the plagues based on a pattern of two plagues with warnings followed by a single plague without warning. There is also the division from Rabbi Yehuda of the words inscribed on the staff, Datzach, Adash, B’achav (3,3,4). Hirsch shows that the divisions also represent the three different, progressive types of crimes of the Egyptians: (1) geirut, non-citizenship, strangers, (2) avdut, slavery, and (3) inui, suffering. Each of these plagues was “to bring home to them (the Egyptians) the actual bitterness of the misery they dealt to their unhappy victims.” The first of each set of plagues, Dam (Blood), Arov (Wild Animals), and Barad (Hail), “showed the Egyptians how they themselves were no better than geirim (from geirut) in their own land, and so how little justification they could find for treating the Jews as geirim and depriving them of all civil rights.” Hirsch continues, “A geir is he whose stay in a country is dependent on the goodwill and tolerance of others.

The Nile was chosen as the foundation of the first plague for several reasons. Hirsch explains, “The self-consciousness of the Egyptians had its base in their river, through the Nile and its annual overflowing they felt themselves more secure and prouder than any other nation.” They failed to grasp the message of overflowing, namely, that Egypt was unworthy of receiving the blessings of rain, yet Hashem provided for the people through the river, hoping that they might recognize His gift. Hashem also hoped that, through sharing their grain with others when the entire region was suffering through a famine, they might realize that Hashem had placed them in a position of potential power, if they would turn to Hashem and change their evil ways. Instead, we see that the Egyptians viewed the Nile, not as a gift, but as a source of their own power. Perhaps this is why Par’oh chose the Nile as the place to drown the newborn, male children, as this would demonstrate his power over Hashem.

The Or HaChaim explains that Moshe did not have to introduce his words (beginning with “Hashem, the G-d of the Hebrews”), but could have started with Hashem’s message (from “So says Hashem, ‘Through this shall you know that I am Hashem.’”). Par’oh had gone out early in the morning to bathe and relieve himself in the river. He could easily have insisted that Moshe wait until he had returned to his palace and was seated at his throne. This interruption of his morning activities was inappropriate by someone of lesser authority than the King. Moshe began by saying that

Hashem had told him to speak now, and Hashem was a higher authority than Par’oh. This was also part of the unspoken message of all the plagues: Hashem is the ultimate authority and power.

The Kli Yakar gives various reasons for each of the plagues. He explains that the Nile River was struck because Par’oh claimed that the River belonged to him and that he had made it. This claim is stated in Yechezkael (Ezekiel, 29:3 “Li y’ori va’ani asitani,”) and because of the sin in which Par’oh had the Jewish babies thrown into the River. The fish in the River died because Par’oh attempted to abort the blessing given to the B’nei Yisrael by Ya’akov, “vayidgo larov b’kerev ha’aretz, and may they proliferate abundantly like fish within the land.” Professor Nechama Leibovits explains that the phrase, “that you will know that I am the Lord” occurs ten times throughout the plagues, and that the Nile was often used to show that the gods of the Egyptians were no match to Hashem.

In the Passover Haggadah, immediately following the listing of the plagues and the division of those plagues into the three groups mentioned by Rabbi Yehuda, there is a section beginning with Reb Yosi HaG’lili, where he quotes a statement made by Par’oh’s magicians that they saw the “finger” of Hashem as He performed the plagues in Egypt, and the “hand” of Hashem at the Red Sea. This is to say that there were ten plagues in Egypt and fifty plagues at the Red Sea. Rabbi Eliezer quotes another pasuk which implies that each plague was like four plagues. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin shows that the plague of Blood fit this pattern: (1)the waters turned to blood, (2) the fish in the river died, (3) the river became foul, and (4) Egypt could not drink from the waters. In the Haggadah, Rabbi Akiva showed that each plague was like five plagues. HaRav Sorotzkin suggests that we would then need to add the strain of having to dig for water as this fifth part of the plague.

From the beginning, Par’oh could have saved his people from all of the suffering if he had only acknowledged Hashem’s power over him. We, too, must acknowledge Hashem’s power over us if we are to truly understand our place in the world. ©2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Slight divergences between the Torah’s words or phrases and Targum Onkelos’ rendering of them are often laden with meaning.

One such seemingly minor change is in the Targum’s translation of Moshe’s words: “Were we to slaughter the deity of Mitzrayim in their sight, will they not stone us?”

Moshe, of course, was replying to Par’oh’s suggestion that, if the nation’s Jews needed to have a festive gathering, they could hold it within Egypt’s

borders. Moshe responded that, since animal sacrifices would be part of the celebration, and Egyptians worshiped sheep, the suggestion was a non-starter.

The Targum renders "will they not stone us?" as "will they will not say to stone us?"

Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, zt"l, in Mei Marom, observes that Par'oh could certainly have posted soldiers to protect the Jews celebrating in Egypt. And so Moshe couldn't really have expressed a fear of being attacked. He was expressing instead a refusal to get people upset.

How much there is to learn from this about middos, Rav Charlop muses. "Even when it comes to the greatest mitzvah, one should not do it in a way that causes others pain, even if there are no real repercussions."

Obviously, there are mitzvos that might in themselves upset others; they must be performed all the same. But when a mitzvah or minhag might cause pain or outrage to some -- kapparos in some public places is an example that comes to my mind -- concern for the feelings of others are not something to be ignored. © 2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN

Parashat Vaera opens with a solemn revelation, introduced by a verse that seems a bit obscure:

"And God spoke to Moshe, and said to him: I am the Lord; and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, as God Almighty [Sha-da i], but by My name the Lord [the Tetragrammaton = Y-H-V-H] I made Me not known to them. And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, wherein they sojourned. And moreover, I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the Lord. And Moshe spoke so to the children of Israel; but they hearkened not to Moshe for impatience of spirit, and for cruel bondage." (Shemot 6:2-9)

The declaration, "but by My name the Lord [the Tetragrammaton] I made Me not known to them," aroused great bewilderment among the commentators. Is it true that the patriarchs did not know the name of the Lord? But surely God revealed Himself to them by that name on many occasions. If so, what is the big innovation now?

In response to this difficulty, the commentators -- including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and the Ramban -- explained, each in his own way, that the reference here is to a type of governance that was now introduced for the people of Israel, which had not been known to the patriarchs.

What exactly was new? Some of the commentators turned to metaphysical analyses, but we will try to understand the novelty in a slightly different way, by first considering the point at which we stand in the story of leaving Egypt.

The beginning of Parashat Vaera is the lowest point in the story. Parashat Shemot ends with the (apparently) complete failure of Moshe's mission to Pharaoh: not only did Pharaoh not listen to his words, but he increased the burden on the Hebrews. In response, the people turned to Moshe with complaints, and Moshe in turn appealed to God: "And they met Moshe and Aharon, who stood on the way, as they came forth from Pharaoh; and they said to them: The Lord look upon you, and judge; because you have made our savor to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us. And Moshe returned to the Lord, and said: Lord, why have You dealt ill with this people? why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt ill with this people; neither have You delivered Your people at all." (Shemot 5:20-23)

The Midrash puts extremely difficult words into Moshe's mouth in two different formulations: "What is meant by 'You have not delivered your people at all'? Rabbi Yishmael said: 'You have not delivered your people at all' -- certainly. Rabbi Akiva said: I know that you will eventually deliver them. But what do you care about those poor people crushed meanwhile under those buildings?" (Shemot Rabba 5:22)

(The Midrash continues with a long discussion of the question of what types of arguments can be cast up to God, and when, but that is not our present concern.)

It is difficult to decide which statement is harsher: is it Rabbi Yishmael's statement, "Certainly You [cannot] deliver them," or is it Rabbi Akiva's statement, which essentially claims, "You can deliver, but You do not care about us." Either way, we are dealing here with acute distress that is reflected in a correspondingly sharp argument.

In order to better understand the distress behind Moshe's words, we must understand what actually happened in the Egyptian bondage.

The Torah tells us very little about the difficult years of slavery. The motives for the enslavement are also unclear: was it a security concern regarding the Hebrews, or was it economic exploitation, or was it perhaps antisemitism for its own sake? At the beginning of chapter 1, there seems to be a certain logic in the actions of the king of Egypt, who fears a future rebellion, but as the story continues, he seems to be overcome by an antisemitic frenzy for its own sake, so much so that Chazal interpret the verse: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river" (Shemot 1:22) as a command that all male infants -- both Egyptian

and Israelite -- be killed, to ensure that none of the Israelite children would escape.

This change is also expressed in the name by which the Egyptian ruler is called. Initially, he is "the king of Egypt" (Shemot 1:15, 17, 18) -- a reasonable ruler, acting for the benefit of his people. Later, however, he is "Pharaoh" (Shemot 1:22), the dictatorial monster whose hatred for the Hebrews wreaks havoc on his own people.

The story of Israel's slavery in Egypt can thus be seen as paralleling the suffering that our people underwent in Europe during the years of the Holocaust, or our suffering in the U.S.S.R. in the early 1960s: a great empire harnesses its forces in order to crush the people of Israel to the ground. This is a terrible and hopeless reality, because it is not clear how the servitude can end. It is not for nothing that the people are in total despair.

Their desperation was so great that it expressed itself in reluctance to have children. The text of the Haggada expounds the verses that describe the bondage, among them the verse: "And we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression" (Devarim 26:7). Each phrase in this verse is interpreted, including: "And our toil [amaleinu] -- these are the children." The term "amal" in the Bible denotes not just any work, but rather futile work, as in the verse: "But man is born to toil" (Iyov 5:7). This is a striking description of the experience of the people of Israel in Egypt. Amram's decision to separate from his wife Yocheved (Sota 12a) seems to be a most natural and necessary step; why bring children into such a wretched and hopeless world?

In light of this, the interpretations of Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva are also very understandable. In such a terrible situation, it is impossible not to think, God forbid, that God is unable to save us from slavery, or even worse, God forbid, that He is able, but simply does not care.

The religious solution required in such situations does not lie in philosophical-theological answers and proofs, concerning the understanding of the problem of evil in the world, or similar questions. The difficulty experienced by the people of Israel in Egypt was not intellectual, but emotional: How can one believe that God cares about us and is capable of saving us, when the situation is so gloomy and hopeless?

Matching this difficulty, the innovation Moshe is to announce is also not philosophical, but experiential. Without going into metaphysics, it may be argued that among all the various designations for God, the Tetragrammaton is unique in that it is not an adjective, but, so to speak, a "proper noun," which expresses personal closeness and connection. We are dealing here with a different -- and new -- experience of

closeness to God, which did not exist earlier.

In the days of the patriarchs, the relationship with God was somewhat distant: God is in the sky, and they worship Him in on earth. Avraham recognized his Creator by discerning His greatness in His governance of nature, not by recognizing His personal relationship with human beings. But now God's mode of governance is changing: God is, literally, with us wherever we go, or as the Gemara says: "When they went down to Egypt, the Shekhina was with them" (Megilla 29a). There is a sense of connection and belonging that was not there before, one that will strengthen the ability of the people of Israel not to give in.

In addition to the sense of connection and belonging, God's new mode of governance includes another facet. At the burning bush, God says to Moshe:

"Thus shall you say to the children of Israel: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov, has sent me to you; this is My name for ever, and this is My memorial to all generations. (Shemot 3:15)

The emphasis here is on the tradition of the patriarchs; the relationship between the people and God is not merely a matter of the present, but is based on a long shared past and will continue in the future. This is another point that allows the people to maintain their commitment and hope in God, as we saw among Holocaust survivors. People often decided not to assimilate, but to continue fighting for their Judaism, out of commitment to the great chain of generations -- what was, and what will continue to be.

In conclusion, the revelation to Moshe specifically through the Tetragrammaton comes precisely at the peak of Israel's suffering, when even Moshe himself reached a point of desperation and cast harsh words up to God. At that moment of need, God promises that from now on, He will lead the people of Israel in a new way, through a direct and intimate connection with them, while at the same time emphasizing the tradition of the patriarchs. In this way, hope was planted in the hearts of the people. [This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Vaera 5781.]

