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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

There is a fascinating moment in the unfolding story of the plagues that should make us stop and take notice. At the opening of this week's parsha, seven plagues have now struck Egypt. The people are suffering. Several times Pharaoh seems to soften, only to harden his heart again. During the seventh plague, hail, he even seems to admit his mistake.

"Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. 'This time I have sinned,' he said to them. 'The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.'" (Ex. 9:27)

But as soon as the plague is over, he changes his mind: "'He and his officials' says the Torah, 'hardened their hearts.'" (Ex. 9:34)

And now Moses and Aaron have come to warn of a further plague, potentially devastating, a plague of locusts that, they say, will devour all the grain left after the hail as well as the fruit of the trees. And for the first time we hear something we have not heard before.

Pharaoh's own advisors tell him he is making a mistake: "Pharaoh's officials said to him, 'How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?'" (Ex. 10:7)

These words immediately transform the situation. How so?

Back in 1984 the historian Barbara Tuchman published a famous book called The March of Folly. In it, she asked the great question: How is it that throughout history intelligent people have made foolish decisions that were damaging both to their own position and to that of the people they led?

By this she did not mean, decisions that in retrospect proved to be the wrong ones. Anyone can make that kind of mistake. That is the nature of leadership and of life itself. We are called on to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. With the wisdom of hindsight we can see where we went wrong, because of factors we did not know about at the time.

What she was talking about were decisions that people could see at the time were the wrong ones. There were warnings and they were ignored. One example she gives is of the legend of the wooden horse of Troy. The Greeks had laid siege to Troy unsuccessfully for ten years. Eventually they appeared to give up and sail away, leaving behind them a giant wooden horse. The Trojans enthusiastically hauled the horse inside the city as a symbol of their victory. As we know, inside the horse were thirty Greek soldiers who, that night, came out of hiding and opened the city gates for the Greek army that had sailed back under cover of night.

It was a brilliant ploy. Laocoצn, the Trojan priest, had guessed that it was a plot and warned his people, in the famous words, "I fear the Greeks even when they come bearing gifts." His warning was ignored, and Troy fell.

Another of Tuchman's examples is the papacy in the sixteenth century which had become corrupt, financially and in other ways. There were many calls for reform, but they were all ignored. The Vatican regarded itself, like some financial institutions today, as too big to fail. The result was the reformation and more than a century of religious war throughout Europe.

That is the context in which we should read the story of Pharaoh and his advisers. This is one of the first recorded instances of the march of folly. How does it happen?

Some years ago, DreamWorks studio made an animated film about Moses and the Exodus story, called The Prince of Egypt. The producer, Jeffrey Katzenberg, invited me to see the film when it was about half complete, to see whether I felt that it was a responsible and sensitive way of telling the story, which I thought it was.

What fascinated me, and perhaps I should have understood this earlier, was that it portrayed Pharaoh not as an evil man but as a deeply conservative one, charged with maintaining what was already the longest-lived empire of the ancient world, and not allowing it, as it were, to be undermined by change.

Let slaves go free, and who knows what will happen next? Royal authority will seem to have been defeated. A fracture would appear in the political structure. The seemingly unshakeable edifice of power will be seen to have been shaken. And that, for those who fear change, is the beginning of the end.

Under those circumstances it is possible to see why Pharaoh would refuse to listen to his advisors. In his eyes, they were weak, defeatist, giving in to pressure, and any sign of weakness in leadership only leads to more pressure and more capitulation. Better be strong, and continue to say "No," and simply endure one more plague.

We see Pharaoh as both wicked and foolish,

because we have read the book. His advisors could see clearly that he was leading his people to disaster, but he may well have felt that he was being strong while they were merely fearful. Leadership is only easy, and its errors only clearly visible, in retrospect.

Yet Pharaoh remains an enduring symbol of a failure to listen to his own advisors. He could not see that the world had changed, that he was facing something new, that his enslavement of a people was no longer tolerable, that the old magic no longer worked, that the empire over which he presided was growing old, and that the more obstinate he became the closer he was bringing his people to tragedy.

Knowing how to listen to advice, how to respond to change and when to admit you've got it wrong, remain three of the most difficult tasks of leadership. Rejecting advice, refusing to change, and refusing to admit you're wrong, may look like strength to some. But, usually, they are the beginning of yet another march of folly. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

"And God said unto Moses: 'Go in unto Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might show these My signs in the midst of them.'" [Exodus 10:1] Why does God declare that He has "hardened Pharaoh's heart" so that the despot will not change his mind and free the Israelites? Doesn't this collide head-on with our notion of free will? Is the Torah telling us that God interrupts the ordinary course of human events to introduce His will into the hearts of people, sometimes even preventing them from making the right decision? What about the idea that absolutely nothing must stand in the way of repentance, that no one, not even a righteous person, can stand where a penitent stands?

Rabbi Shlomo Goren gives a novel explanation which was apparently inspired by the miraculous events he experienced with the rise of the State of Israel. There are times, he maintains, when God must introduce His will into the hearts of people, but this is limited to monarchs, emperors, and Pharaohs. Rabbi Goren cites a verse from Proverbs: "Like water courses is the king's heart in the hand of the Lord: He directs it wherever He wishes." [Proverbs 21:1]

Rabbi Goren suggests that this verse comes to teach that in regard to freedom of choice, we have to distinguish between an individual and the leader of a nation.

Individuals always have free choice. However, since God has a master plan with Israel as the catalyst, the Almighty may sometimes be moved to control the choices of leaders of key nations during critical and fateful historical periods. Such a situation occurred at the very dawn of history with the confrontation between Pharaoh and the Hebrew slaves, and the Almighty had to step in.

Another way of looking at the issue is provided by the Midrash. True, God hardens Pharaoh's heart, as He declared He would, but we must note that the divine intervention only emerges with the sixth plague. Examining the first five plagues, we find that Pharaoh himself is the one who exercises obstinacy. This formulation is repeated again and again. "Pharaoh became obstinate" (the first plague [Ex. 7:22]); "He [Pharaoh] hardened his heart" (the second plague [Ex. 8:11]); "Pharaoh remained obstinate" (the third plague [Ex. 8:15]); "Pharaoh made himself obstinate" (the fourth plague [Ex. 8:28]); and "Pharaoh remained obstinate" (the fifth plague [Ex. 9:8]). Only when we reach the sixth plague do we arrive at a new formulation: "Now it was God who made Pharaoh obstinate" [Ex. 9:12]. The contrast is so sharp and the division so perfect – five on one side and five on the other – that it is clear that the Torah wants to tell us something.

The obstinacy on the part of Pharaoh provides the Midrash with a means for solving the tension between the notion of free will and God's initial declaration regarding "hardening his heart." In the Midrash Raba we read: "The Holy One, blessed be He, gives someone a chance to repent, and not only one opportunity but several chances: once, twice, three times. But then, if the person still has not repented, God locks the person's heart altogether, cutting off the possibility of repentance in the future." [Shemot Raba 13:3]

The Midrash goes on to explain that Pharaoh had already been given five opportunities to repent, five opportunities to hear the voice of God demanding that His people shall be released from slavery – each of the plagues a direct "SMS" from God – and still refused. God is now effectively saying to Pharaoh: "You stiffened your neck, you hardened your heart, now I am going to add stubbornness to your own inner stubbornness."

A similar idea is expressed in Maimonides' "Laws of Repentance." The great twelfth-century sage and philosopher attacks our problem frontally, dedicating parts of chapter 5 to the question of free will and then coming to the apparent contradiction between the general idea of free will and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God. Maimonides writes: "Since Pharaoh sinned on his own impulse and mistreated the Israelites who sojourned in his land…justice required that repentance should be withheld from him until retribution had been visited upon him… When the Almighty withholds repentance from the sinner, he cannot return, but will die in his wickedness – wickedness which he had originally committed of his own will." [Laws of

Repentance 5:3]

I would like to take this basic idea of both Maimonides and the Midrash as to how God sometimes cuts off repentance as a punishment for a certain class of sinner, and attempt to understand it in human psychological terms. As both of these classical sources point out, external influence began only after Pharaoh's own refusal the first five times despite the first five plagues. The result of such obstinacy is that Pharaoh himself became frozen, locked into a conception of how to behave; once that happens, it becomes exceedingly difficult for anyone to change their mind.

We must also remember that Pharaoh was not alone. He was surrounded by advisers, ministers and a corps of publicists. After a clear policy of continued enslavement despite the suffering endured by the Egyptian populace as a result of the first five plagues, how could Pharaoh suddenly change his policy and still save face? Had he been wrong the other times, had his citizenry suffered needlessly? How could a despot who called himself a god admit that his earlier policy had been a mis- taken one? It is almost as if Pharaoh no longer had the real possibility of change; his earlier decisions locked him in.

I would like to suggest a third approach, based on a discussion of repentance near the end of Yoma 86b. The sages alert us to a seeming contradiction in the words of Resh Lakish regarding repentance. The first quote attributed to the master is: "Great is repentance because it results in prior premeditated sins being accounted as errors [shgagot]."

Then the Talmud points out that Resh Lakish also said: "Great is repentance because it results in prior premeditated sins being accounted as merits [zekhuyot]."

The apparent contradiction is resolved by the Talmud by pointing out that the first citation – former sins accounted as errors – is the result of repentance based on fear, the latter citation – penitents' former sins accounted as merits – is the result of repentance from love.

It seems to me that had Pharaoh come to the conclusion that it was wrong to enslave the Hebrews based on his own new-found convictions about the true God of the universe who guarantees freedom to all, his repentance would have emanated "from love," and would have been accepted. Since, ironically enough, it would have been his former sinful acts and obstinacy which had led him to such a conclusion, even his prior transgressions could now be seen as merits, according to Resh Lakish. After all, had it not been for them, he would never have switched positions and arrived at his new awareness and religio-ethical consciousness.

This is clearly not the position in which we find Pharaoh. Were he to release the Jews after the fifth plague, it would have nothing to do with a transformed and ennobled moral sensitivity and everything to do with his having been bludgeoned over the head by the power of the plagues. Such repentance out of fear is hardly true repentance, and cannot be accepted by God to atone for previous sins. Since Pharaoh is not truly repenting in any shape or form, God "hardens his heart" to the suffering of the plagues and allows him to continue to do what he really believes in doing: enslaving the Hebrews, who must wait until the Almighty deems it the proper time for redemption. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid.*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In this week's parsha the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt reaches one of its most climactic moments. Pharaoh finally succumbs to the pressures of the plagues and to the demands of Moshe and of the God of Israel. The last three plagues that are discussed in detail in this week's parsha are those of the locusts, darkness and the slaying of the firstborn.

These plagues represent not only physical damages inflicted on the Egyptians but also, just as importantly, different psychological pressures that were exerted on Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The plague of locusts destroyed the Egyptian economy, or whatever was left of it after the previous seven plagues. Economic disaster always has far-reaching consequences. Sometimes those results can be very positive, such as the recovery of the United States from the Great Depression. Sometimes they are very negative, as the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s could not have occurred if it were not for the economic crisis that enveloped the Weimar Republic.

Here the economic crisis engendered by the plague of locusts brings Egypt to its knees, so that it is only the unreasoning stubbornness of Pharaoh that keeps the drama going. The next plague of darkness is one that affects the individual. Cooped up in one's home, unable to move about, blinded by darkness unmatched in human experience, the individual Egyptian is forced to come to terms with his or her participation in the enslavement of the Jewish people.

For many people, being alone with one's self is itself a type of plague. It causes one to realize one's mortality and to reassess one's behavior in life. This is not always a pleasant experience. Most of the time it is a very wrenching and painful one.

The final plague of the death of the firstborn Egyptians, aside from the personal pain and tragedy involved, spoke to the future of Egyptian society. Without children no society can endure - and especially children such as the firstborn, who are always meant to replace and carry on the work of their elders and previous

generations. We all want to live in eternity and since we cannot do so physically we at least wish it to happen spiritually, emotionally and psychologically.

The plague that destroyed the Egyptian firstborn destroyed the hopes of eternity that were so central to Egyptian society. The tombs of the leaders of Egypt were always equipped with food and material goods to help these dead survive to the future. Even though this was a primitive expression of the hope for eternity it nevertheless powerfully represents to us the Egyptian mindset regarding such eternity.

By destroying the firstborn Egyptians, the Lord sounded the death knell for all of Egyptian society for the foreseeable future. It was this psychological pressure – which is one of the interpretations of the phrase that there was no house in Egypt that did not suffer from this terrible plague – that forced Pharaoh and his people to come to terms with their unjust enslavement of Israel and to finally succumb to the demands of Moshe and the God of Israel.

We should remember that all of these psychological pressures, even though they do not appear in our society as physical plagues, are still present and influential. The trauma of life is never ending.

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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.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The literal approach to the Passover Haggadah's four sons, or more broadly, four children, is straightforward. On four different occasions, the Torah describes questions asked by children about Passover. Based on the language of the question, the author of the Haggadah labels each of them:

· One questioner is described as a wise person (chacham), as his query is presented in a sophisticated, knowledgeable manner (Deuteronomy 6:20).

· The second is a rebellious person (rasha), as he does not ask a question as a question but rather as a statement of defiance: "he will say" (yomru; Exodus 12:26).

· The third is a simple person (tam), asking naively, "What is this?" (Mah zot? Exodus 13:14).

· The fourth is a person who does not even know how to ask (eino yode'a lishol). And so, we are mandated to proactively explain to him the Exodus story (v'higadeta; Exodus 13:8).

Basing itself on the Torah text, the Haggadah offers answers to suit the specific educational needs of each child. But if we explore beyond the literal approach, hidden messages emerge.

While this section of the Haggadah is associated with youngsters, might the children referred to here include people of all ages? After all, no matter how old we are, we are all children – children of our parents and children of God. From this perspective, the message of the four children is that every Jew has a place within Judaism, even the rasha, with all the difficulties that entails.

The challenge is to have different types of Jews seated around the Seder table in open, respectful dialogue, each contributing to the Seder discussion, each exhibiting love for the other. It also reminds us that we have much to learn from everyone – this realization

is what truly makes us wise. In the words of Ben Zoma, who is mentioned just before this section in the Haggadah, "Who is wise? One who learns from each person" (Ethics of the Sages 4:1).

Another approach to the four children is that perhaps they are not four separate individuals. After all, no one is completely wise, totally rebellious, perfectly simple, nor absolutely unable to ask. Rather, the four children are really one individual in whom there are each of these elements: wisdom, rebelliousness, simplicity, and silence.

Alternatively, the "children" represent different stages in life. As infants, we don't know how to ask questions (eino yode'a lishol). As young children, we ask questions simply (tam). As we grow into our teen years and beyond, we are sometimes mischievous and rebellious in the questions we ask (rasha). As seniors, we are blessed with the wisdom of life experiences (chacham). Whatever our stage in life, we are welcomed around the Seder table.

Many have suggested that the most important child may be none of the four named in the Haggadah but the fifth child, the one who is not mentioned, the one who is not even at the Seder table. Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits is purported to have quipped: "Who is a Jew? One whose grandchildren are Jewish." The sad reality is that, outside Israel, many times this is not the case.

As we reach out for the missing child, we ought to recall the words of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, of blessed memory: "Do you know the way you walk back from the Holy Wall? You don't turn around and walk away. When you meet the czar of Russia, you don't turn around and walk away; you walk backwards. And I want to bless you, when your children grow up and they walk out of your house, and they build their own houses…[that they] walk away backwards."

Looking at the place one is leaving demonstrates a loving connection; a connection that gives hope that even the missing child will return. *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

"So you will say to your children and grandchildren how I toyed with the Egyptians, and the signs I placed in their midst, and you will know I am Hashem." (Shmos 10:2) This statement is quite unsettling. Does Hashem take pleasure in toying with human beings, and enjoy their suffering? Are we to tell our children that this is the kind of G-d we serve? And further, the name of Hashem is usually considered to be a name of mercy. How will we know that He is "Hashem" by recalling how He tormented the Egyptians?

What the Egyptians went through was highly unusual. Each plague they endured was actually four or five plagues in one. One could certainly feel at the time, and many likely did, that "the Jewish G-d is playing with me!" Indeed, the fact that two people, one Egyptian and one Jew, could drink from two straws in the same glass, and the Jew would have refreshing water while the Egyptian had blood, seems almost comical. But that's the point.

Hashem wanted this to be memorable. He wanted us to have ridiculous stories to speak about to our children. He also wanted us to see that when the Egyptians were suffering the Jews were NOT suffering. They were spared and separated from all the evil, not by distance, but by Hashem's word alone. Thus, they should not only remember that the Egyptian drank blood, but that the Jew was given water to drink.

The message to take from these events is one of Emunah in Hashem, a firm belief in the Al-mighty Who controls every moment of our lives with precision. The Jews were to recognize Hashem as, in the words of the Haamek Davar – "the power behind all powers, and the doer of all."

For the nations of the world, it's enough to understand that Hashem is in control, insofar as it will keep them from serving other gods. For the Jews, however, it's much more personal. We are to believe and feel that Hashem is involved in every aspect of our lives, and that He cares about us. The name of Hashem which is considered a name of mercy, encompasses past, present, and future (haya, hoveh, yihiyeh are implied in the four-letter name we don't pronounce as written) and conveys that when Hashem is guiding us with hashgacha pratis, individualized Divine guidance, it takes into account everything from all times.

When the Egyptians suffered, it was a message to them about all the nuanced wrongs they perpetrated against the Jews. It was an opportunity to reflect and regret their actions. Was Hashem playing with them? Yes. Was it because He didn't care about them? No.

He gives each of us what we need to become the best version of ourselves, and everything that happens to us is part of that Divine interaction which takes place because Hashem loves us and wants us to be all that we can be.

R' Elchanan Wasserman HY"D spent much time in America in the early 1930's, and was asked about the Great Depression. He explained that all difficulties that come to the world are on account of Klal Yisrael, intended to teach us something.

"The problem is not a lack of money," he explained. "There is money in the hands of the rich, but they are distrustful of other people. Without the smooth flow of money, the economy stalls.

This is mida k'neged mida, measure for measure. The Yetzer Hara for idolatry is gone, but it was replaced with one of kefira/heresy. When we don't believe and trust in Hashem, He says, "I will extend your

lack of trust in Me so that people don't trust each other either."

Then you will find out the hard way that just as the world cannot exist without Emunah in Hashem, it similarly cannot exist without Emunah between people."

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

Although the Children of Israel lived in ארץ גשן, when they left Egypt, they left from רעמסס (Shemos 12:37). The land they lived in when they first moved to Egypt was also referred to as רעמסס (Bereishis 47:11; actually ארץ רעמסס). Why is גשן called רעמסס in these two instances?

Before trying to understand why, even though it's almost always called ארץ גשן, it's sometimes called רעמסס, we first have to determine if they are in fact the same location. [Whether the city of רעמסס that the Children of Israel built (Shemos 1:11) is the same רעמסס mentioned elsewhere is a separate issue (the two are not vocalized the same way); although Ibn Ezra (Bereishis 47:1 and Shemos 1:11) says they are different places, Rav Saadya Gaon and Targum Yonasan (ibid and Shemos 12:37), as well as Chizkuni (Shemos 12:37), say they are one and the same.] I have come across three opinions regarding the relationship between גשן and רעמסס (not including Mizrachi's mischaracterization – in his commentary to Rashi on Bereishis 47:1 – of Ibn Ezra's opinion).

Radak (Bereishis 47:11) says רעמסס was near גשן. If they are not the same place, there is obviously no need to explain why they have different names. However, being that גשן was where Yosef wanted his family to live (Bereishis 45:10 and 46:34), which is why Yaakov sent Yehuda there to prepare for their arrival (46:28), and גשן was where Yosef reunited with his father (46:29), and the place his brothers specifically requested from Pharaoh to live in (47:4), a request that was granted (47:6), it seems very strange that rather than living in גשן, they lived in רעמסס.

Alshich (Bereishis 47:5/6) quotes how R' Shaul Ninterei reconciles Pharaoh describing גשן as the best part of Egypt (47:6), with רעמסס being its best part when the Children of Israel took possession of it (47:11): during the famine, when crops didn't grow, גשן was better, since cattle could graze there, but after Yaakov arrived and the famine ended, רעמסס surpassed it, since crops would grow again. Although this could explain why there was a change in plans, being that Yaakov and his family were shepherds (not farmers), I would think they'd still prefer גשן. Even if they couldn't turn down Pharaoh's offer, since גשן was where the Children of Israel lived during the plagues (Shemos 8:18 and 9:26), why did they gather in רעמסס before leaving Egypt?

The most common approach to the relationship between גשן and רעמסס (e.g. Rashi on Bereishis 47:11, Ibn Ezra on 47:1 and Ralbag on 47:6) is that רעמסס was located within גשן. When the Children of Israel first settled there, they only lived in the part of גשן that was called רעמסס, but as they multiplied, they spread out over all of גשן (and gathered back in רעמסס before they left). [Accordingly, גשן was the best part of Egypt, and רעמסס was the best part of גשן.]

Kanfay Yonah, quoted by Yalkut Reuveini (end of Vayigash) and the Chidah (Midbar Kedaimos, Ma'areches Reish #19; see also Mizrachi on Bereishis 47:11) says that גשן and רעמסס are one and the same; it was called גשן because it was a gift from Pharaoh to Sara when he tried to come close to her ("שנגש אליה"). It would therefore seem that גשן was its Hebrew name, and רעמסס was its Egyptian name. [This would be true even according to Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer (26), which says גשן was given to Sara before Pharaoh tried to marry her.] Based on this, it can be suggested that the Torah referred to it as רעמסס, its Egyptian name, when the Children of Israel first moved there in order to highlight the fact that the Egyptian exile was beginning – despite living by themselves, in the part of Egypt that belonged to them. Similarly, it was referred to as רעמסס when they left to signify that they were leaving Egypt, and the Egyptian exile was ending. *Rabbi Dov Kramer was raised in Kew Gardens Hills. Although no one from his family lives there anymore, there are currently Kramers in Lawrence, Kew Gardens, Far Rockaway, Columbus, Detroit, Passaic, Lakewood and Jerusalem.*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Mocking Par'oh

Parashat Bo begins with several interesting sentences which, upon careful scrutiny, bring up a number of questions. The Torah states, "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Come to Par'oh, for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn, so that I shall place these signs of Mine in his midst; and so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I have amused Myself with Egypt and My signs that I placed among them – that you may know that I am Hashem." Three questions that arise from the text include: (1) Why does the Torah use the word Bo, Come, instead of Lech, Go?, (2) Why did Hashem harden (make stubborn) the hearts of Par'oh's servants? They would surely not have any power against Par'oh, and (3) What does Hashem mean when He uses the word "hitalalti," which we have translated here as amused Myself?

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch offers an explanation for the change from "go" to "come". When the Torah stated most of the plagues, Moshe was told to "go" to Par'oh. In the plagues of Frogs and Cattle Disease, "bo, come" was used to indicate that Moshe was to enter Par'oh's palace to deliver this message. "For these plagues were to make Par'oh conscious of the fact that even if the river and the soil, the land with all its

luxurious riches of nature remained unchanged, yet the use and enjoyment of all the richness depended on the consent of Hashem. If he (Par'oh), proud of his possession of all this, considered aliens as being without rights, and thought he was justified in making them pay for the small amount of use that was granted them, by giving up their freedom and independence and enslaving them, then Hashem would know how to destroy all this richness, and to send quite other 'aliens' in his kingdom, strangers who would know how to devour all his riches before his very eyes, right down to the last shred." This was a message to Par'oh that everything he had and the use of everything he had was dependent on Hashem's Will.

We have seen in past years that Hashem strengthened, hardened, made stubborn the heart of Par'oh. This has been repeated many times in the section of plagues found in the Book of Shemot (Exodus). Why, then does the Torah repeat this now, and why does Hashem include hardening the heart of Par'oh's servants as if they had power? Hardening and strengthening the heart enabled Par'oh and his servants to continue their refusal of Hashem's request to free the B'nei Yisrael. The Kli Yakar explains that this refusal was weakening because of the plagues. At the plague of Dever, Cattle Disease, some of the servants had already lost the strength to fight against Hashem. With the plague of Barad, Hail, those servants, who had lost the will to fight, took their animals inside because they had been warned. These were the servants that Hashem now gave the strength to fight back. As for Par'oh, at the end of the plague of Barad, Hail, Par'oh called to Moshe and expressed regret: "This time I have sinned; Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked ones." The Ramban indicates that the Torah implied that the "servants" (referred to here as my people) also admitted that they had sinned. The Mei'am Lo'ez explains that Moshe, therefore, believed that the plagues were over, and that Par'oh and the people had actually accepted the Will of Hashem. But Hashem knew that Par'oh and the people were only speaking from defeat, not from their hearts. Hashem understood that Par'oh did not yet feel that he had lost his power, and that he would have wished to continue this battle. Moshe was told to warn Par'oh against this foolish idea.

One of the most difficult phrases in this section, quoting the words of Hashem, is, "so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I have amused Myself with Egypt and My signs that I placed among them – that you may know that I am Hashem." The word for "amused Myself" is "hitalalti," which is often translated as "I mocked" or "I made sport of." The Ramban understood this to mean, "'I have mocked,' for it is I Who hardened his heart and exacted punishments of him." He viewed Hashem as sitting in Heaven, laughing at Par'oh and his people as they voiced defeat and subjugation when their hearts were not really defeated. Hashem then played with them, giving them the strength to fight back if that was truly what they wished to do.

HaRav Hirsch, an expert linguist, and one who should be consulted for every nuance of a word, uses an entirely different basis for his translation. "'Alilah' (is) not an isolated deed, and 'olel' not an isolated action, but a developing series of deeds and actions, and 'olel,' to accomplish something by such a continuous series of actions. 'Hitalel,' to reveal oneself in a progressive series of actions." Hirsch continues by defining this word as used with Hashem: "How I revealed Myself, i.e., My Power, My Greatness in Egypt in a progressive series of deeds." These deeds would then reveal Hashem to the B'nei Yisrael, who would learn about Hashem through His deeds, even if the Egyptians might not be able to learn from them.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Par'oh also mocked Moshe and Aharon and the B'nei Yisrael after several plagues. He would dangle their exodus from Egypt before them and promise to let them go after he had suffered a plague. He begged Moshe to remove the plague and then reneged on his promise once the plague had ended. On other occasions, he would offer them an exit to worship Hashem, only to limit "who and who will leave." At times, Par'oh held back the women and children, while at other times, he said that their animals would remain. Even when it appeared that he was giving in, he still acted as if he were still in control. This was exactly why Hashem hardened his heart; to give him the strength to demand control of the situation if this was what Par'oh truly desired. Par'oh's method of "playing" with the B'nei Yisrael, mocking them, determined Hashem's actions. Our Rabbis are very clear that Hashem punishes "midah k'neged midah, a sin is punished, and the punishment fits the crime." Par'oh was treated the same way that he treated others.

As we have seen from HaRav Hirsch, Hashem's actions were intended to teach us about Hashem even if the Egyptians would fail to grasp that message. The B'nei Yisrael and we, ourselves, understand that our efforts are necessary to accomplish what we desire, but Hashem is still in control of the results. Our behavior towards Hashem and our fellowman, through observing His mitzvot, encourages Hashem to bless our results. Hashem will always do what is best for us. Sometimes, though, we are confused as to what that best is. What is best may involve a punishment or a disappointment to help us learn. May we seek to learn what Hashem desires of us.

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

That Yaakov's descendants are commanded by Hashem to place the blood of the korban Pesach on the doorposts and lintels of their homes' doors

(Shemos 12:7) is certainly intriguing.

Considering that the Gemara on the first amud of massechta Yoma teaches that "baiso zu ishto," that the word "his home" in the Torah implies "his wife," blood on the doors of homes would seem to embody the metaphor of niddah. What pertinence could that possibly have here?

That premise, though, is wrong. The Gemara refers to two types of blood, daam niddah and daam leidah. It's not niddah being metaphorized here, but, rather, leidah, birth.

Because something was indeed born out of the blood-adorned doors in Mitzrayim: a nation. A new collective entity called Klal Yisrael.

In Mitzrayim, the Jews were all related to one another but they could reject that connection. Indeed, many did, and did not merit to leave Mitzrayim, dying there instead.

On their last night in Mitzrayim, though, the rest of the Jews underwent a change. With blood on their doorways and matzoh in their packs, they followed Moshe into the daunting desert, knowing not what awaited them. And became an entity whose members, and descendants throughout history, are part of an organic whole, no matter what any of them may choose to do.

Which is why, in the words of the Gemara, "A Jew who sins is still a Jew," in every way. There is no longer any option of "opting out" of Klal Yisrael.

And so, blood in Judaism is a symbol not of death, but of birth.

The words of the navi Yechezkel (16:6) poignantly reflect that fact: Referring to "the day you were born," Hashem, through the navi, tells His people: "And I passed by you as you wallowed in your blood, and I said to you, `in your blood, live.' And I said to you, `in your blood, live'."

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

Transcribed by David Twersky
Edited by Dovid Hoffman

The pasuk introducing Makas Choshech (the Plague of Darkness) says, "Moshe stretched forth his hand toward the heavens and there was a thick darkness throughout the land of Egypt for a three-day period." (Shemos 10:22). Rashi explains the reason for Makas Choshech: There were wicked people amongst the Jewish nation who did not want to leave Mitzraim. These people died and were buried during these three days of darkness so that the Mitzrim would not witness their downfall, thus enabling them to claim that the Jews were suffering plagues as well.

Rashi's wording implies that the wickedness of these people was that they did not want to leave Mitzraim. Those who were not me'tzapeh l'geulah (anxiously looking forward to redemption) did not deserve to be redeemed. The Peirush HaRosh al haTorah says the same idea: He asks why did all these people die during the days of darkness, but Dasan and Aviram, who were totally wicked individuals, did not die during that period? The Rosh answers that even though Dasan and Aviram were wicked, they did not lose hope in the promised redemption.

The Medrash Rabbah is even more explicit. The Medrash says that there were Jewish slaves who had Egyptian patrons who gave them wealth and honor. They had it good in Mitzraim and did not want to leave! Hashem said, if He kills these Jews outright, the Mitzrim will say that the Jews are also dying, therefore Hashem brought Makas Choshech, during which these Jews could die without the knowledge of the Mitzrim.

This is something for us in the United States of America to bear in mind. Baruch Hashem, Jews have been able to have wonderful lives here. Torah is flourishing and many people are well off. But we always need to retain this aspiration of "tzeepeesa l'yeshua" (anxiously anticipating redemption). When the time comes, we should be anxious and excited to go to Eretz Yisrael. A person who says "What is so bad with staying in America?" is echoing the sentiments of the Jews who were wiped out during Makas Choshech.

This unfortunate phenomenon repeated itself all the way back at the time of Ezra. When Ezra told the Babylonian Jews after seventy years in exile "Okay, Yidden, it's time to go back to Eretz Yisrael" they said "Babylonia is great!" Similarly, the Jews at the time of the Crusades felt their homes in Christian Europe were more than adequate. Their towns were destroyed! We need to keep that in mind as well. Baruch HaShem, we have a great life here but it is still lacking. We need to anticipate the geula, speedily in our days!

Additional observation (in 2023): Perhaps this is a silver lining regarding the current situation of the significant increase in antisemitism in the United States and around the world in reaction to the war in Eretz Yisroel. Just maybe this is like a gift from Hashem to remind us not to be too comfortable in galus and to anxiously anticipate the geula.