

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The parasha of Va'era begins with some fateful words. It would not be too much to say that they changed the course of history because they changed the way people thought about history. In fact, they gave birth to the very idea of history. Listen to the words: God said to Moses, "I am Hashem. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as E-I Shaddai, but by my name Hashem I did not make myself fully known to them. (ex. 6: 1-2)

What exactly does this mean? As Rashi points out, it does not mean that Abraham Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah did not know God by the name Hashem.

To the contrary, God's first words to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house," were said using the name Hashem. It even says, just a few verses later (Gen. 12: 7), Vayera Hashem el Avram: "Hashem appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So God had appeared to Avram as Hashem. And in the very next verse it says that Avram built an altar and "He called on the name of Hashem" (12: 8). So Avram himself knew the name and had used it. Yet it is clear from what God says to Moses, that something new is about to happen, a Divine revelation of a kind that had never happened before, something that no one, not even the people closest to God, has yet seen. What was it?

The answer is that through Bereishit, God is the god of creation, the god of nature, the aspect of God we call, with different nuances but the same overall sense, Elokim, or E-I Shaddai, or even Koneh shamayim varetz, Creator of heaven and earth.

Now in a sense, that aspect of God was known to everyone in the ancient world. It's just that they did not see nature as the work of one God but of many: the god of the sun, the god of the rain, the goddesses of the sea and the earth, the vast pantheon of forces responsible for harvests, fertility, storms, droughts and so on.

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
to my new cousin!

I'm excited to finally meet
you and find out your name!

With lots of love, from your cousin
(who doesn't know his name yet either!)

There were profound differences between the gods of polytheism and myth and the One God of Abraham, but they operated, as it were, in the same territory, the same ball park. The aspect of God that appears in the days of Moses and the Israelites is radically different, and it's only because we are so used to the story that we find it hard to see how radical it was.

For the first time in history God was about to get involved in history, not through natural disasters like the Flood, but by direct interaction with the people who shape history. God was about to appear as the force that shapes the destiny of nations. He was about to do something no one had ever heard of before: bring an entire nation from slavery and servitude, persuade them to follow him into the desert, and eventually to the promised land, and there build a new kind of society, based not on power but on justice, welfare, respect for the dignity of the human person and on collective responsibility for the rule of law.

God was about to initiate a new kind of drama and a new concept of time. According to many of the world's greatest historians, Arnaldo Momigliano, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, J. H. Plumb, Eric Voegelin and the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, this was the moment history was born.

Until then, the basic human drama was struggling to maintain order against the ever present threats of chaos, whether through natural disasters, foreign conquest, or internal power struggles. Success meant maintaining the status quo. In fact religion in the ancient world was intensely conservative. It was about teaching people the inevitability of the status quo. Time was an arena in which nothing fundamentally changed.

And now God appears to Moses and tells him that something utterly new is about to occur, something the patriarchs knew about in theory but had never lived to see in practise. A new nation. A new kind of faith. A new kind of political order. A new type of society. God was about to enter history and set the West on a trajectory that no human beings had ever contemplated before.

Time was no longer going simply to be what Plato beautifully described as the moving image of eternity. It was going to become the stage on which God and humanity would journey together toward the day when all human beings, regardless of class, colour, creed or culture, would achieve their full dignity as the

image and likeness of God. Religion was about to become, not a conservative force but an evolutionary and even revolutionary one.

Think about this. Long before the West, the Chinese had invented ink, paper, printing, porcelain manufacture, the compass, gunpowder, and many other technologies.

But they failed to develop a scientific revolution, an industrial revolution, a market economy and a free society. Why did they get so far and then stop?

The historian Christopher Dawson argued that it was the religion of the West that made the difference. Alone among the civilizations of the world, Europe "has been continually shaken and transformed by an energy of spiritual unrest." He attributed this to the fact that "its religious ideal has not been the worship of timeless and changeless perfection but a spirit that strives to incorporate itself in humanity and to change the world." [1]

To change the world. That is the key phrase. The idea that together with God we can change the world, make history, not just be made by it: that was born when God told Moses that he and his contemporaries were about to see an aspect of God no one had ever seen before.

I still find that a spine-tingling moment when, each year we read Va-era, and recall the moment history was born, the moment God entered history and taught us for all time that slavery, oppression, injustice, are not written into the fabric of the cosmos, engraved into the human condition. Things can be different because we can be different, because God has shown us how. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Lord, so to speak, bemoans to Moshe the lack of faith exhibited by him and the Jewish people during the moments of crisis in their encounter with Pharaoh and their Egyptian taskmasters. God points out that the previous generations of the founders of the Jewish people never wavered in their faith and belief that God's covenant would be fulfilled, no matter how harsh the circumstances of their lives were.

And now when the process of redemption from Egyptian slavery is already underway, whenever there is a hitch or a delay or an apparent reversal, the complaint immediately arises against God and against Moshe as well. Now the Torah itself clearly makes allowances for this behavior due to the bone-crushing physical work imposed on the Jewish slaves by their Egyptian taskmasters.

It is difficult to be optimistic when one's back is being whipped. Nevertheless, the Lord's reproof of

Moshe and of Israel is recorded for us in strong terms in the opening verses of this week's Torah reading. God, so to speak, is pointing out to Moshe the existence of a generational disconnect. The previous generations were strong in belief and faith and possessed patience and fortitude in the face of all difficulties.

Moshe's generation, in fact many Jewish generations throughout history, demand action and that action must be immediate. Their faith is conditioned upon seeing and experiencing immediate results and the changed society and world that they desire. Otherwise they are prepared to abandon ship. That is what the prophet means when he chides Israel by saying that "your goodness and faith resemble the clouds of the morning that soon burn off when the sun rises."

Faith, to be effective, has to be long-lasting. Since mortality limits our vision and naturally makes us impatient, it is often difficult for us to see the big picture and witness the unfolding of a long-range historical process. Our generation, unlike those of our predecessors – even our immediate predecessors – has rightly been dubbed the "now generation." Instant gratification is not only demanded but is expected and when it does not happen our faith is sorely tested, if not even diminished.

Patience and faith is the essence of God's message to Moshe. Part of Moshe's leadership task will now be to instill this sense of patience and long lasting faith within the psyche and soul of the Jewish people. This daunting task will take forty years of constant challenges and withering experiences before it will see results and accomplishments. At the end of the forty year period - forty years after the Exodus from Egypt - Moshe will proclaim that the Jewish people have finally attained an understanding heart and an appreciation of the historical journey upon which the Lord has sent them.

Both patience and faith are difficult traits to acquire and they remain very fragile even after they have been acquired. But in all areas of human life – marriage, children, professional occupations, business and commerce, government and politics, diplomacy and conflict – patience and faith are the necessary tools to achieve success. That is the message that God communicates to Moshe and to Israel in all of its generations and circumstances in this week's parsha.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“And God spoke to Moses and said unto him, I am the Lord, and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, as Almighty God [El Shaddai], but My name YHVH [Four-letter Name of

God] I have not made known to them.” [Exodus 6:2–3] What is the secret of Jewish eternity?

If medical opinion is beginning to maintain that one of the most important variables in achieving longevity is an optimistic outlook on life, one of the most unique and important messages that Judaism gave to the world is the optimistic notion of world redemption.

Our Western culture is formed by the Greco-Roman civilization and by what is generally known as the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. The Greeks saw the world and life in a cyclical pattern of endless repetition without purpose or end-game: the myth of Sisyphus who is doomed to take the boulder up and down the mountain endlessly; the tragedy of Oedipus who suffers the sins of his parents and whose children are doomed to repeat the very crimes committed by their forbears; Shakespeare’s “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow beats on this petty pace to the last syllable of recorded time” and “life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Judaism, on the other hand, teaches that world and history are linear rather than cyclical, progressing towards repair and redemption, the prophetic notion of eventual human perfection at a time when “nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war any more” (Is. 2:4). I would maintain that what has kept us going despite exile, persecution and pogrom is this fundamental belief that what we do counts and that eventually we will succeed in perfecting the world in the Kingship of God.

This revolutionary optimistic concept is built around the name of God revealed at the beginning of this Torah portion: “And God spoke to Moses, and said to him I am the Lord [YHVH]” (Ex. 6:2). The Bible goes on to say that our patriarchs only knew of the name “Almighty God” (El Shaddai), but this generation of Moses will be privileged to know the new name of God, the Lord (YHVH). And it is specifically within the context of this new revelation of the name that God confirms the establishment of the covenant, the entry of Israel the people into Israel the land, and the exodus from slavery and oppression to freedom and redemption.

What does this new revealed name have to do with redemption? In the previous Torah portion, we read of the dialogue between God and Moses that is the beginning of the explanation. The Almighty reveals Himself to Moses in a burning bush, and bestows upon him the mission of taking the Jews out of Egypt (Ex. 3:10). Moses asks for God’s name, which is another way of asking for a working definition of God which he could communicate to the Israelites. God said to Moses, “Ehyeh asher ehyeh” (Ex. 3:14), which is best translated, “I will be what I will be.” What kind of name is this? It seems to be vague, not at all defined, and very much open-ended. Moreover, the verb form around which this phrase is built is identical to the verb form of the newly revealed name of God, both of them coming from the

verb to be (H Y H).

In order to complete the elements of our puzzle, we must invoke the very first commandment which God will give the newly formed Jewish people: “This renewal of the moon shall be for you the beginning of the months...” [Exodus 12:1]

The Israelites are commanded to search the darkened sky for the new moon, the light which emerges each month from the blackened heavens devoid of light. The Zohar, in explaining the importance of the moon and our celebration of its renewal each month with Psalms of praise (Hallel), explains: The Jewish nation is compared to the moon. Just as the moon wanes and seems to have completely disappeared into darkness only to be renewed and reborn, so will the Jewish people often appear to have been overwhelmed by the forces of darkness and evil only to reemerge as a nation reborn in a march towards redemption.

Thus did the Babylonian Talmud emerge from the destruction of the Second Temple and the reborn State of Israel emerge from the tragedy of the Holocaust. From this perspective, the message of the moon is a message of ultimate optimism. The Almighty God Himself guarantees not only survival but also salvation. The paradigm for the optimistic and life-affirming pattern of exile and redemption is our experience of slavery in and exodus out of Egypt – and the fundamental change in Egyptian society and world mentality wrought by that exodus.

And let us pay special attention to the words of this first commandment: “This renewal of the moon shall be for you the beginning of the months...” The Hebrew phrase “for you” seems superfluous. Its meaning, however, as explained by the sages of the Talmud, makes it central and pivotal to the world as the Bible sees it. Our God is not only the God of creation, El Shaddai, the God who set limits on each element as He set boundaries on the heavens and the earth, the sands and the seas, mineral, vegetable, animal and human life and activity; He is also the God of history, “who will be what He will be,” and who has a built-in plan for the world which includes its ultimate betterment and even perfection. And if creation was an act of One, events in history are the result of partnership between the divine and human beings, God, Israel and world. Hence in the marking of the renewal of the month, which is really the marking of historical time, the Lord clearly tells His people that time is in their hands to do with what they will. If indeed how many months we may have depends on many factors aside from ourselves, what we do with the time at our disposal depends mostly on us.

Hence, when God asks Moses to be His agent, the first divine name He reveals to him is “I will be what I will be”; since I am the God of history, and I am asking you to be My partner in history, My ultimate design for the world will depend not only on Me but also on you. Yes, it will be within the context of the promises of

redemption made to the patriarchs (Ex. 3:15). But when that will happen depends on you as well as on Me. No wonder this name of God is indecisive.

And this is the meaning of the newly revealed name which God gives to the generation of the Exodus: YHVH, literally, "He will bring about." This name reflects optimism because the redemption is after all guaranteed by God. The light will definitely someday emerge from the darkness, but exactly when cannot be revealed. That depends upon us. And although the uncertainty contains an element of frustration and even despair, as evidenced in the question that we Jews so often ask each other, "So what will be?", it also contains the seed of our salvation. After all, if God didn't think that we were capable, He would never have made us His partner in the first place!



It was a few summers before my aliya, when my family and I were spending time at Kibbutz Ein Tzurim. The father of one of the kibbutzniks had died and his funeral was to take place in Kfar Hassidim near Haifa. A group from the kibbutz made the trip there and a large congregation assembled in front of the large yeshiva of Kfar Hassidim, from where the funeral was to begin.

In actuality, two distinct communities had formed, the men from the kibbutz in shorts and sandals, and the men from the yeshiva in white shirts and long black pants, shoes and socks. Then, the rosh yeshiva appeared, Reb Elya, a tall, bearded patriarchal figure in black hat and long black gabardine capote. He seemed to tower over the assemblage, and suddenly rested his eyes on Yehudah Neumann, my close friend from Kibbutz Ein Tzurim. "Yudke, Yudke, ilui [Talmudic prodigy], can that be you?" he cried out in Yiddish. "Yes, that was the name by which I was called at the yeshiva, Reb Elya," responded my friend, turning red as a beet.

Apparently, my friend and Reb Elya had studied together many decades before at the yeshiva in Petah Tikvah, which had then been under the tutelage of Rav Shach, who later went on to head the Ponovez Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. "But you left the yeshiva, Yudke," cried out Reb Elya, "and it must have been against the wishes of Rav Shach," he continued in Yiddish. "Yes, I have many of Rav Shach's letters urging me to stay," responded my friend in Hebrew. "And these letters will comprise a wall of prosecution against you when you stand before God's heavenly throne after one hundred and twenty years," thundered Reb Elya in Yiddish. Everyone was silent; all eyes were on my embarrassed and humble friend, who surprisingly cried out in Hebrew, "And the wars which I fought and the kibbutz which I helped build for the State of Israel will act as my defense attorney, and I will win my case!" The kibbutzniks all smiled, and even the yeshiva students seemed impressed with my friend's ardent comeback.

Reb Elya relaxed, and smiled. "You remained the same Yudke prodigy," he said. "Kol hakavod [all honor to you]." "No, Reb Elya, I didn't remain the same.

I looked around at the changes in the world with the Holocaust and the emerging State of Israel, and attempted to respond to these changes. It is you who remained the same..."

The dialogue concluded, and the funeral began... *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. © 2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

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. ©2024 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

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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And how will Pharaoh listen to me, when I am impeded of lips? And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon and commanded them to the Children of Israel..." (Shmos 6:12-13) When Hashem told Moshe to come speak to Pharaoh, Moshe reasoned

that if the Jews wouldn't listen to them, and it was for their benefit, then certainly Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him, as it was to his detriment, and besides, Moshe spoke funny, and would not be able to impress Pharaoh with his words.

In response, Hashem commanded both Moshe and Aharon to go to Pharaoh. As Rashi explains, since Moshe's issue was with his speech, Hashem sent Aharon, who was able to speak well, to accompany Moshe to Pharaoh. However, there is something curious here.

If you look at these two verses in the Torah, they are not adjacent to each other. There is a 'stop,' between them. The question ends a line, and there is a space afterwards. The command to Aharon and Moshe to both go, which seems to be the response to Moshe's concern, only begins on the next line. What is the significance of this?

The Ohr HaChaim asks on the syntax of our first *posuk*. It begins, "And Moshe spoke before Hashem, saying:" Normally, the word 'laimor, saying' conveys something that is to be told to someone else. Here, Moshe was saying to Hashem that he felt incapable. Hashem wasn't going to be telling that to anyone else, so what does this word tell us?

The Ohr HaChaim suggests that Moshe wasn't declining the assignment. He wasn't telling Hashem he couldn't do it. Rather, he was bemoaning his own ineffectiveness, as one who who feels he can't succeed. There is no purpose in his speech; no intention to effect anything other than to express the cynical expectation that his words would have no effect.

Perhaps, this is why before Hashem commanded Aharon to accompany Moshe, He insisted on the 'STOP' in the Torah. Before He offered a solution to the problem Moshe raised, Hashem wanted to put an end to the negativity. Stop bemoaning your fate, Moshe. Stop crying over milk that hasn't yet spilled.

The negative thoughts themselves are the things which can stand in the way of a person's success. Feeling you will fail is the number one contributing factor to failure. Therefore, Hashem directed the section to end with Moshe's question. Only once that was no longer a discussion point, was Hashem ready to step forward and address the concern. It was never an issue for Hashem, but Moshe's own uncertainty would have been the biggest problem.

The takeaway for us is to recognize that with Hashem's help, we can do anything we put our minds to, and that belief and positivity will go a long way towards making the potential a reality, in an easy and pleasant way.

Towards the end of the Chofetz Chaim's life, a decree was passed in Poland that all rabbis had to speak Polish. The Chofetz Chaim felt this was terrible, and summoned all the Rabbanim to accompany him to Warsaw. There, he had an audience with the Polish

President, and an interpreter was set up for him to speak.

The Chofetz Chaim said, in Yiddish, "As directed by our Torah, I pray each day for the welfare of the government. This decree that all Rabbis must know Polish will be devastating to our Yiddishkeit. If you leave us alone, we will be good citizens and pay our taxes. But if you insist on interfering with our observance, you will experience an abrupt downfall like Pharaoh himself."

The interpreter was stunned. How could he repeat this? The President said, "There are many languages in the world. Some speak Polish, some English, but this rabbi spoke from the heart, and I understood. I don't need a direct translation, just tell me what he's asking for."

The interpreter explained that they were upset about the Polish language requirement, and the President immediately sat down and reversed the decision. © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

When the new Pharaoh came onto the scene (Shemos 1:8), his expressed fear was that if a war breaks out, "the nation of the Children of Israel" would "join our enemies and go up from the land" (1:9-10). Rashi provides two explanations for who will "go up" and what the implications of each are. First he says it means that the Children of Israel will go up, i.e. they will leave Egypt, even though Pharaoh (and Egypt) didn't want them to. Then, quoting Chazal, he says it means the Egyptians will be forced to leave Egypt, and their enemies will take over the country. Both approaches have shortcomings, but if we apply a geographical aspect, we can suggest a hybrid approach.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, because the Nile flows from south to north – emptying into the Mediterranean Sea – the northern part of ancient Egypt, being downstream, was referred to as "Lower Egypt," while the southern part, being upstream, was known as "Upper Egypt." Goshen, where the Children of Israel lived, was in the Nile Delta, close to the Mediterranean, so Pharaoh was likely south of Goshen. Since going south meant going "up," if the Children of Israel joined Egypt's enemies when they attacked the Egyptian rulers, they would be "going up" from Goshen (which would be "the land" Pharaoh was referring to). In other words, Pharaoh was afraid that his enemies from the north (e.g. Canaan, Seir and the lands to the east) would attack, and the Children of Israel, who lived in Goshen, would join them in the war.



Goshen is mentioned again in our Parasha (8:18) regarding the fourth plague, when the mixture of wildlife that attacked Egypt did not enter Goshen. Seeing that Goshen was different from the rest of Egypt, Pharaoh suggested that rather than travelling three days

outside of Egypt to worship G-d, the Children of Israel could worship G-d in Goshen itself (8:21, see Alshich). From Moshe's response (8:22) – that the Egyptians would stone anyone they saw slaughtering their deities (see Rashi) – it is apparent that there were Egyptians living in Goshen. After all, if there weren't any Egyptians in Goshen, they wouldn't see their deities being slaughtered there! However, since Goshen had been given to Sara when an earlier Pharaoh wanted to marry her (see Pirkay d'Rebbi Eliezer 26 and Yalkut Reuveini on Bereishis 47:27), and it was designated for Yosef's family (Bereishis 47:6) – who took possession of it (47:11 and 47:27) – it would seem to have been inhabited exclusively by the Children of Israel (as Tiferes Tzion says explicitly). Why were there Egyptians in Goshen who would see their deities being slaughtered if only the Children of Israel lived there?

When Pharaoh's decree to kill all male infants failed because the midwives feared G-d (Shemos 1:21), the Torah says "ויעש להם בתים." Who made houses for whom? Rashi, quoting Chazal, says G-d made "houses" for the midwives, referring to the priestly class and royalty – which are described as houses – descending from Yocheved and Miriam (the midwives). But there is another, more straightforward, way to understand these words – one that is espoused by other Midrashim (e.g. Midrash Seichel Tov and Midrash Lekach Tov): Pharaoh built houses for Egyptians so that they would live amongst the Children of Israel (in Goshen) and thereby know when a child is born, so they could kill it. Paaneyach Raza adds that this is why, during the tenth plague, G-d had to "jump" over the houses of the Children of Israel when killing the Egyptian firstborn – Pharaoh had forced Goshen to become integrated by building houses for Egyptians right next door to the houses of the Children of Israel. [These two ways to understand "ויעש להם בתים" are not mutually exclusive, and is one of several instances where the Torah layers multiple ideas within the same words. In this case, the first word means both "and He (G-d) made" as well as "and he (Pharaoh) made," the second word refers to both the midwives and the Egyptians, and the third word refers to figurative houses and physical houses.]

While this would be enough to explain how the Egyptians would see the Children of Israel slaughtering Egyptian deities in Goshen, Netziv (Shemos 8:19) adds another layer: since the mixture of wildlife didn't enter Goshen, the Egyptians vacated the rest of Egypt and took refuge there. Although he explains that this caused the Children of Israel to have many appreciative Egyptian neighbors who would lend them their precious items after the tenth plague, it also explains how the Egyptians would have seen the Children of Israel serving G-d in a way that would greatly upset them – even if it was done in Goshen, an area that had previously been inhabited only by the Children of Israel. *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. © 2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Why a Snake?

Moshe and Aharon had spoken to Par'oh, only to have the situation for the B'nei Yisrael suffer a setback. Par'oh decreed that the B'nei Yisrael would need to seek straw to make bricks instead of having it supplied to them. They would still be responsible for the same number of bricks each day even though their time would also be spent on this additional task. Moshe complained to Hashem but was told that, "Now you will see what I shall do to Par'oh, for with a strong hand will he send them out, and through a strong hand will he drive them from his land."

Moshe and Aharon needed to approach Par'oh, so Hashem instructed them: "When Par'oh speaks to you, saying, 'Provide a wonder for yourselves,' you shall say to Aharon, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Par'oh – it will become a serpent.' Moshe came with Aharon to Par'oh and they did so, as Hashem had commanded; Aharon cast down his staff before Par'oh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Par'oh, too, summoned his wise men and sorcerers, and they, too – the necromancers of Egypt – did so with their charms. Each one cast down his staff and they became serpents; and the staff of Aharon swallowed their staffs. And Par'oh's heart became hardened and he did not heed them, as Hashem had spoken."

Abarbanel asks several important questions about this section. When Moshe was first given signs to show the B'nei Yisrael, one of those signs was throwing his staff on the ground and it became a "nachash, snake." This time, when Moshe was told by Par'oh to produce a wonder, Hashem told Moshe and Aharon to cast Aharon's staff to the ground and it would become a "tanin, a sea serpent, (some say a crocodile)." Abarbanel asks: (1) why the miracle was changed before Par'oh to become a sea serpent rather than a land snake, (2) why this was the only time in Egypt that Hashem spoke to both Moshe and Aharon, (3) why Aharon's staff was used instead of Hashem's staff that was in Moshe's hands, (4) and why Par'oh asked for a mofeit, a wonder, when he did not appear to be interested in heeding that sign.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Par'oh did not "require or wish for any miracles, had no desire to be convinced, 'but if you want to stand forth, well and good, you must of course justify yourself by some sign, legitimize the position you take, by performing some magic.'" Abarbanel explains that little was expected from this "magic" as no warning accompanied this miracle. The usual demand from Hashem that Par'oh free the B'nei Yisrael is totally

absent. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin points out that Par'oh would hardly be impressed with this "miracle" since his sorcerers also were capable of producing sea serpents. What miracle would it be if sea serpents swallowed sea serpents, something which was natural for them? What made this into a miracle was that Aharon's sea serpent did not swallow the sorcerers' sea serpents, but instead, according to ibn Ezra, the miracle took place after all serpents had returned to be staffs. Then Aharon's staff swallowed their staffs, an unnatural act.

Abarbanel explains that Par'oh's real desire in asking for a "wonder" was not a test of Hashem. Par'oh believed that Hashem had power, even though he stated, "Who is Hashem that I should listen to His voice?" He knew that Hashem was capable of sending great miracles and wonders onto Egypt. What Par'oh deemed to be uncertain, was whether Moshe and Aharon were his prophets. This was a test of their credentials, and not a test of Hashem. Ohr HaChaim explains that this test would enable Moshe and Aharon later to say that they were bringing the various plagues in the name of Hashem.

One of Abarbanel's questions involved Hashem's speaking directly to Aharon and Moshe. When Hashem spoke to Moshe prior to each plague, the instructions were given to him and not to Aharon. HaAmek Davar explains that when Hashem spoke to Moshe on other occasions in Egypt, Aharon stood next to Moshe and heard their conversation. He explains that even this closeness during Hashem's conversations with Moshe only happened in Egypt, but when they were in the desert, even when the Torah says that Hashem spoke to both Moshe and Aharon or even to Aharon alone, Hashem spoke only with Moshe and Moshe then spoke to Aharon. Tied to this question is whether the staff which Aharon threw down before Par'oh was his staff or Moshe's staff. Unlike Abarbanel, Ibn Ezra says that this was Moshe's staff which he gave to Aharon. This was similar to the use of Moshe's staff by Aharon to perform the first plague, Blood, because Moshe could not strike the river which had saved his life as a baby. Moshe's staff was created by Hashem with the initials of the plagues carved into it. Abarbanel indicates that Aharon's staff was also special, which is evident much later when his leadership was tested by Korach and his followers.

Mei'am Lo'eiz explains why the image of a serpent was used as a sign to Par'oh. A "snake" was symbolic of Par'oh. "A snake may shed its skin, but underneath it is still the same snake." Par'oh may appear to change, but he will remain the same. A snake is also deadly; Par'oh as a snake was dangerous and powerful. When Aharon grabbed hold of the snake, it returned to being a stick. When Par'oh was grasped, he would also lose his power and become as unthreatening as a simple stick. Moshe and Aharon understood that they could not voice this directly to Par'oh, but that the

symbolism of their mofeit would be clear to Par'oh.

The Mei'am Lo'eiz gives a further explanation for the miracle of the staff turning into a snake: "When a person bows before Hashem, he must bow deeply, so that all his vertebrae bend. When he bows down, he must bow straight, with his back straight like a stick, but when he rises, he must do so little by little, like a snake rising. As we have seen, this is how one must bow in the Amidah (the major prayer of each service)." This was a message to Par'oh that he would bow to Hashem's Will and let Hashem's people leave their servitude in Egypt.

Like Moshe and Aharon, we are also, at times, given tests that may appear to have little to do with our daily lives. Yet, often this test is only a foreshadowing of greater tests which we will be called upon to pass in the future. Each test that we endure gives us an understanding of our own strength and ability. Moshe and Aharon's ability to stand before Par'oh and challenge him with this kind of message, taught them that they were capable of standing before Par'oh and threatening him with the plagues. We do not know why we are being tested, but we should try to learn from every test. May we grow with each test, and may we be able to understand ourselves better. ©2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

It's intriguing that when Moshe and Aharon are sent to present themselves to Par'oh and to demonstrate the miracle of a staff turning into a snake, Moshe is commanded by Hashem to tell Aharon to throw his staff to the ground to effect the transformation.

Elsewhere, of course, with two exceptions (hitting the Nile and the ground, because Moshe had been saved by water and earth) it is Moshe's staff that is used to fulfill divine commandments, as in the splitting of the sea and, in the desert, the hitting of the rock to bring forth water. But here, why isn't Moshe the one charged to cause the miracle?

A lesson may lie in the oddity. Moshe, we remember, was earlier, at the burning bush, told to throw his staff to the ground, where it turned into a snake (Shemos 4:2,3). There, the command was issued after Moshe expressed doubts about whether the Jews would listen to him.

And, as Rashi explains there, the transformation of the staff was not meant as some demonstration of miraculousness but rather as a rebuke to Moshe, for having doubted the Jewish people's willingness to hear His message.

So perhaps the reason Hashem wanted Aharon and not Moshe to perform the demonstration before Par'oh was to spare Moshe embarrassment over the memory of the rebuke he had earlier received. The reminder, of course, was still there, in a staff turning into a snake. But at least Moshe himself was not asked to perform the very action that had telegraphed the rebuke.

The Mishna (Bava Metzia 58b) says that one may not remind a repentant sinner of his prior deeds, nor a convert's son of those of his ancestors. Perhaps the lesson here of Aharon being given the order to throw the staff down is that even a subtle reminder can be a source of embarrassment to another, and thus, something to carefully avoid. ©2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

In speaking with Moshe, the Almighty says: "Also, I have heard the outcry of the Children of Israel." What do we learn from the seemingly superfluous word "also"?

Rabbi Moshe Sofer, author of Chasam Sofer explained that "also" indicates that not only G-d, but the people also hear one another's cries. Even though the entire Jewish people were enslaved and afflicted, they did not forget the plight of their fellow man.

Never say to someone, "I have my own problems. I don't want to hear about yours." If two people are in a hospital, each should take an interest in the other's condition.

When Rabbi Dov Bairish Wiedenfield, the Rabbi of Tshabin, heard that his wife died, he felt deep anguish. Immediately afterwards, however, he asked about the welfare of the other woman who was hospitalized in the same room. He expressed his hope that the death of her neighbor would not aggravate her illness.

The mother of Rabbi Simcha Zisel Ziv had a custom to collect money for the poor at funerals. At the funeral of her only daughter, she also collected charity. When asked how she was able to compose herself in the summit of her grief, she replied, "Just because I am suffering does not mean that the poor have to suffer also." Based on *Love Your Neighbor* by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2013 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com

