

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd, at exactly midnight, G-d smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sits on his throne to the first-born of the captive that is in prison, and the first-born of every animal" (Shemos 12:29). "[G-d] killed the first born of the captive because they (the Egyptians) would say to the captive locked up in prison, 'would you prefer to go out (be freed) and that Israel (also) be redeemed?' And he would respond, 'I will not go out from here forever so that Israel will not go out.' Therefore, they (the captives) were judged with [the Egyptians]" (Shemos Rabbah 18:10, see also Yalkut Shimoni 186). What does letting Israel free have to do with the captives going free? Why did they go together, as an all-or-nothing package? Even more puzzling is the fact that the Egyptians consulted with their prisoners before deciding what to do! They're experiencing plagues of (literally) biblical proportions, and before deciding whether or not to give in and let the Children of Israel go free they ask those at the lowest level of the social structure what they would prefer? Why would the Egyptians ask their captives what they wanted before deciding? And why were the captives willing to stay in prison rather than being freed along with the Children of Israel?

Previously

(www.aishdas.org/ta/5766/beshalach.pdf), I suggested that Pharaoh was convinced that letting any segment of the population serve a deity other than an Egyptian deity meant that the Pharaoh no longer represented everybody that lived in Egypt (to the Egyptian deity or deities). Captives from other countries would have to worship the deity of the locale they came from, be represented by that country's ruler, and would therefore have to be allowed to return there. Before deciding whether to commit to such a drastic theological change, those that would be most affected were consulted. And either because they wanted to remain in the Egyptian culture, and/or because of their hatred towards the Jewish people, they chose to stay in Egypt as captives as long as it meant that the Jews remained in Egypt as slaves. I would like to suggest another possibility (which might work hand-in-hand with this approach).

The Netziv, explaining why G-d "throwing the horse and its rider into the sea" (15:1) was so

praiseworthy, says that these words represent all of Egyptian society, from the top to the bottom. Each level is the "horse" of the level above it and the "rider" of the level below it. Drowning both "the horse and the rider" meant that every class of Egyptian died. If Egypt was divided into different classes (as most societies were until democracy came along), then the lowest rung of the ladder had to have been the Jewish slaves. This large pool of slave labor drove the Egyptian economy, as they did most of the work for everybody (including housework, such as sweeping floors, which was why the dirt turned into lice, see Shemos Rabbah 10:7).

Freeing the slaves meant that all of those tasks that had been thrust upon them would be left to others instead. However, the next level up, the captives, could never handle the amount of work that had been done by the Jewish slaves, which meant that everybody (at just about every level) would have to do things for themselves. Rather than a class system, with each class depending on the class below it to get by day-to-day, society would have to become interdependent, with everybody pulling their own weight. This would make for a very tough transition, getting tougher and tougher the higher the class the person was (or used to be). Should the Egyptians make such a radical change to their society and culture? Everyone would be affected; not just because they would now have to take care of things themselves and couldn't order someone from a (now non-existent) lower class to do it for them, but because you no longer out-ranked anybody. True, you weren't out-ranked either, but you couldn't artificially prop yourself up by taking solace in the fact that there was someone of a lower stature than you were.

Before deciding whether or not to give in to the G-d of the Hebrews and be forced to institute such an upheaval, they consulted with the group that would suffer the least if the change were made - the captives. They were near the bottom of the totem pole, with only the Jewish slaves below them. They wouldn't be dumped on by native Egyptians anymore, but they couldn't dump on the Jews anymore either. Would they prefer to stay near the bottom of the current class system but at least have the Jews below them, or would they prefer to have the class system removed, meaning that they would be no longer be a part of a "lower caste." If even the captives didn't want this change to be made, the rest of Egyptian society would

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surely be much less willing to. Therefore, the captives were consulted. And when they chose to remain captives as long as the Jews remained slaves, Pharaoh decided not to let the Jews go, and the captives were punished with the rest of Egypt. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI TZVI KLUGERMAN

Don't Forget the Kids

When Moshe approaches Pharaoh to receive permission for the Children of Israel to go and worship The Almighty in the wilderness, he says "with our children and our elders we will go." The Baal Haturim relates that Pharaoh inquired of Moshe, "why are you so anxious to go? Your generations will only die in the wilderness and you will not enter the land that you seek." Pharaoh then grants permission for only the adults to leave and celebrate this "holiday to God." This answer is not acceptable and God strikes Egypt with the plague of locusts.

Why was it so important that the children and grandparents be permitted to attend this celebration of God's Holiday? Would it not have sufficed to let the adults pray today and bring the children later? How often do we leave our children home when we go to pray? Why was it crucial that not only the children but the elders, the grandparents should participate in the holiday celebration?

The midrashic dialogue suggested by the Baal Haturim hints at an even deeper question. When the Baal Haturim relates Pharaoh's inquiry as to Bnei Yisrael's eagerness to leave, he is implying a more compelling question. Why were Bnei Yisrael so anxious to leave if they were destined for failure?

We can argue that Bnei Yisrael, at this point in time, had every intention of succeeding. However, we know that the generation of the Exodus did not make it into Eretz Yisrael. We must understand that the question implicit in the comments of the Baal Haturim is asked from historical hindsight. If we are destined to fail in our generation why should we bother trying?

Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher, the medieval exegete, explains that the "holiday to God" is the festival of Shavuot. It could not have been Pesach, since, explains Rabbeinu Bachya, the first Pesach, Pesach Mitzrayim, was observed in Egypt. This holiday

to God was going to be celebrated on "that mountain" in the wilderness, i.e., Mount Sinai.

The opening verses of this week's reading relate the underlying reason for Pharaoh's Divinely inspired obstinance. Pharaoh must act obdurately to create the opportunity for us to inform our children and our children's children, our grandchildren, of the redemption that God brought to Israel.

We now may understand why it was essential that not only the adults be present at the "holiday to God" but the grandchildren as well. The redemption that was to come to Israel from the Almighty was to culminate in the Revelation at Sinai and the subsequent entrance into the Holy Land. This redemption, explains the Baal Haturim, needed to be told to the children and grandchildren.

The essence of Judaism is the Torah SheBeal Peh, the oral law. In relating Moshe's subsequent answer to Pharaoh, the Baal Haturim teaches that maintenance of the Oral tradition is from the grandparents to grandchildren. This is the reason for Moshe's demand that the children and elders attend the holiday to God. This is also the answer to the implied question posed by the Baal Haturim in the guise of Pharaoh. It didn't matter if the adults would not live to inherit the land, the grandchildren would. The grandchildren are the continuance of the Oral Tradition, which is received from the elders, the grandparents. It didn't matter if the generation of the Exodus would not succeed, their children and grandchildren would and that is the true measure of success. © 1998 Rabbi T. Klugerman

RABBI EFRAIM MIRVIS

Daf HaShavua

by Rabbi Adam Hill, Central Synagogue, Birmingham

Our Sidra opens with both a logistic and a logical challenge. G-d said to Moses "Come to Pharaoh. I have made him and his advisors stubborn, so that I will be able to demonstrate these miraculous signs among them."

In Hebrew there are two separate verbs *Lalechet* which means "to go" and *Lavo* meaning "to come". *Bo el Paro* literally means come to Pharaoh. However at the end of last week's episode, Moses was outside the city. From the usage of the term "come" to Pharaoh we would have to assume that G-d was in the city and was saying "come back here". Otherwise, we should have had the term *Lech-*

"Go to Pharaoh" with G-d speaking to Moses also outside of the city.

Previously (last week Sidra on 6:11) Chizkuni (Rabbi Chizkiya ben Manoach, France, mid-thirteenth century) noted this usage and indicated that the intention was that HaShem would be there with Moses. Any fear that Moses might have had due to going into the mighty, deluded and paranoid Pharaoh should be

vanquished because Moses was not being sent out on a mission alone- effectively G-d said "Come with me". Chizkuni also makes a comment about "coming" to a city and "going" within a city (similar to "going up" to a capital city or university town if they are north of the starting place).

This is a great lesson that we are taught. Where we have challenges in front of us we are assured that we should confront them as G-d is with us on that journey-"You'll never walk alone".

Surely, though, we would have expected Moses to be aware of that. From the time of his infancy Moses had walked a lonely path imbued with his G-dliness. At the time of the Burning Bush (3:11) Moses was assured by G-d "I will be with you". Why should we now suspect Moses of doubting?

From the continuation of our verse at the commencement of the Sidra, we learn that the reason for Moses's audience with Pharaoh was that G-d had hardened his heart. Until then, Moses could hold on to the belief that Pharaoh would "see the light" and acknowledge G-d's Majesty, albeit out of fear. But then He realized that Pharaoh would not do so, as there was the necessity for the King of Egypt to positively recognise that there is One True G-d. Hence, Moses realised that there was a futility to his mission- he would visit Pharaoh in the sure knowledge of being rebuffed. However, he was then assured by G-d that there was a great need for his action and that G-d would be there with him and for him.

As we struggle through the darkness of winter and the shade of exile we must keep this message firmly in mind-G-d says: Each and every step you take, I'll be watching you. When the going gets tough, remember-you'll never walk alone! © 2003 Rabbi E. Mirvis and United Synagogue Publications Ltd.- BriJNet

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

A great military leader is reputed to have once said that the only thing more dangerous than defeat is victory. By that he meant a military or even political victory rarely settles the matter. It only provides an opportunity to the victor to come up with a plan how to best exploit that victory and convert it to a more permanent accomplishment. This point is well made in the entire story of the Exodus that reaches its climax in this week's Torah reading. The fact of the Exodus itself would be sufficient cause for celebration for the generation that experienced deliverance. But, by itself, it would mean little if nothing to later descendants and generations.

The Jewish people, exiled and physically defeated many times over in its long history, would hardly commemorate a victory as temporary as the Exodus if it did not lead to a more permanent and lasting triumph. It would be comparable to the

Confederate States of America-the South-continuing today to celebrate its victory at First Bull Run! And yet it is the Exodus as the centerpiece of all Jewish history, and the Pesach Seder, which commemorates it, that remains the most observed ritual in Jewish life. So, it is obvious that the Exodus must be about more than just the departure from Egyptian bondage.

When Moshe, at the beginning of his mission, encounters the God of destiny at the burning bush at Sinai, the Lord informs him that his purpose is to bring the people of Israel to Mount Sinai to serve God and to accept the Torah. The Exodus is the necessary preparation for the acceptance of Torah at Sinai. But the Exodus is the means to the end, not the end in itself. The Exodus without Sinai is the First Bull Run. It would have been a temporary and unexploited victory, an even that would dim and disappear in time, losing its relevance and meaning to later generations. For only the spirit lasts and gives permanent meaning to physical and temporal occurrences. And for Jews, spirit and spirituality are permanently meaningful only if they are based in Torah and Jewish tradition. Thus, the Lord's message to Moshe, that when Israel is redeemed they will "worship me at this mountain" is the essence of the entire meaning of the story of the Exodus.

The Jewish people have experienced abysmal defeat and destruction in this, the bloodiest of all human centuries. We have also been witness to great and unpredictable triumphs and successes. We have somehow been able to survive and rebuild ourselves, personally and nationally, after the defeats and destruction. But we have as yet been unable to truly exploit the triumphs and successes of this century. The State of Israel, the crowning Jewish physical achievement of our time, is still embroiled in a conflict for its soul and direction and purpose. This struggle is as important as is the physical struggle to survive and prosper, for without meaning (spiritual, Torah meaning) the Israeli War of Independence and all of the subsequent victories can, God forbid, become as First Bull Run.

The test of wills, the search for national meaning, the unexpressed but omnipresent inner disappointment and emptiness, are all underlying causes for the divisiveness and political turmoil that characterize current Israeli life. As of yet, there is no Sinai to give meaning to our modern Exodus. The wondrous Exodus of our time has not as yet been translated into terms- ritual, spiritual, and traditional terms-that are truly transmittable to later generations. Only when this goal is finally accomplished will a sense of "normalcy" be achieved in Israeli and Jewish life. And it is this task and goal that is the order of the day for all segments of the Jewish People. By creating Sinai to accompany the Israeli "Exodus" we will be

guaranteeing the permanent blessing of the Land of Israel in the lives and hearts of the people of Israel.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Why does G-d declare in the opening of this week's portion of Bo that He has "hardened Pharaoh's heart" so that the despot will not change his mind and free the Israelites? [Ex. 10:1]

Doesn't this collide head-on with our notion of free will? Is the Torah telling us that G-d 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? And 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?

According to Rav Shlomo Goren, z'l, former chief rabbi of the Israeli Defense Forces and then of the State of Israel, there are times when G-d must introduce His will into the hearts of people, but this is limited to monarchs, emperors, and Pharaohs. Rav 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," [21:1] which he suggests 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 G-d 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.

A second way of looking at the issue is provided by the Midrash. True, G-d hardens Pharaoh's heart as He declared He would, but 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' (second plague 8:11), 'Pharaoh remained obstinate' (third plague 8:15), 'Pharaoh made himself obstinate' (fourth plague, 8:28), and 'Pharaoh remained obstinate' (fifth plague, 9:8). Only when we reach the sixth plague do we arrive at a new formulation: 'Now it was G-d who made Pharaoh obstinate' (9:12). The contrast is so sharp and the division so perfect, five on one side and five on the

other, that it's 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 G-d's initial declaration regarding 'hardening his heart.' In the language of the Midrash Rabbah (Exodus, Bo, Ch. 13,3) 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 hasn't repented, G-d locks the person's heart altogether, cutting off the possibility of repentance in the future."

The Midrash goes on to explain how in the case of Pharaoh, since he had already been given five opportunities to repent, five opportunities to hear the voice of G-d demanding that His people shall be released from slavery— each of the plagues a direct "fax" from G-d—and still refused, G-d is now effectively saying to Pharaoh: "You stiffened your neck, you hardened your heart; now I shall harden your heart, now I'm going to add impurity to your own impurity."

A similar idea is expressed in Maimonides' Laws of Repentance. The great twelfth-century sage and philosopher, known as the Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon), 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 G-d (6:3). 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, Ch. 6. Hal. 3]

In addition to Pharaoh, Maimonides' discussion includes several other figures in the Bible who, because of their iniquities, were prevented from repenting.

This basic idea of both Maimonides and the Midrash as to how G-d sometimes cuts off repentance from a certain class of sinner can also be understood in psychological terms. As each of these classical sources pointed 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 his mind.

Pharaoh may have been trumpeted as a god, but he also was surrounded by advisors, ministers and a corps of press people and publicizers. 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? 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 Tractate 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 [zchuyot]." The apparent contradiction is dismissed 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 from his own new-found convictions about the true G-d 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.

But 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 every thing 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 G-d to atone for his previous sins. Hence, since Pharaoh is not truly repenting in any shape or form, G-d "hardens his heart" to the suffering of the plagues and allows him to continue to do what he really believes in doing—the enslavement of the Hebrews, until the Almighty deems it the proper time for redemption. © 1998 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOVID GREEN

Dvar Torah

In Exodus, Chapter 12, the Torah elaborates on the observance of Passover and the Passover Sacrifice.

There are many laws regarding Passover in general, as well as how its sacrifice should be brought, and how it should be eaten. There are at least 11 laws

mentioned. One should not own or eat chametz (leavened bread); one should eat matzah; one should not break the bones of the sacrifice; the sacrifice must be roasted whole on an open fire, and others. All of these are in order to remember the miracles which G-d performed on our behalf in Egypt.

The Sefer HaChinuch (a medieval work enumerating the 613 commandments of the Torah) asks the following question about the laws of Passover. Couldn't we just observe one law which would remind us of the miracles of Egypt, and that would be enough? The answer he gives really underlies much more than the laws of Passover. It applies to our lives on a daily basis. "People are influenced by their actions, and one's heart and thoughts always follow after the deeds one involves oneself in whether they are positive or negative." This means to say that our character traits are strongly influenced by the things we do. Bad people can change for the good, and good people can become evil, depending on what they regularly involve themselves in. This is a far-reaching statement for our day and age.

One of the aforementioned laws of the Passover Sacrifice is that it should be roasted whole on an open fire. One reason for this is that the sheep was the god of the Egyptians. The Jews may have chosen to cook the sacrifice in a pot of water to avoid flaunting it in the faces of the Egyptians. To this the Torah states that it should be roasted whole on an open fire. Make it obvious. Perhaps this is to teach us an important lesson at the time of our initiation as a nation of servants of G-d. Don't be embarrassed to be Jewish. Don't hide the fact. Serve G-d proudly and openly. We should let our children and coreligionists see what really matters to us.

Our actions speak louder than our words. They make an impression on us as well as those around us. The Torah teaches us that they require discretion and care. They have the potential to be an effective tool for personal growth. Let us always remember. "People are influenced by their actions." © 1998 *Rabbi D. Green & Project Genesis, Inc.*

YESHIVA TORAS CHAIM – MIAMI BEACH

Yeshiva Online

by *Rachael Ocken*

In Parshas Bo, if we look at the various commands issued by Hashem to Bnei Yisrael, an interesting question arises. Most of the commands were of a similar nature, relating some way to Yetzias Mitzrayim. For example—the mitzvot of matzah, korban pesach, issur chametz, and pidyon haben (to commemorate makas bechoros) all had to do with some aspect of the actual exodus from Egypt. The mitzvah of "Hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chodoshim" seems out of place. Why did Hashem deem it necessary to tell the Jews about this mitzvah BEFORE Yetzias Mitzrayim?? In

answering this question, we must first look at the mitzvah of "hachodesh hazeh lachem" and then understand how it is in fact very much relevant to the exodus from Egypt.

The mitzvah of "Hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chadashim" is the commandment to sanctify the new moon; which, during the time that there was an active Sanhedrin, designated the start of a new month. Hashem explained to Moshe and Aharon that the beis din would determine exactly when the new month began based upon the accounts of eyewitnesses who had seen the new moon. If the beis din accepted the testimony of the witnesses and confirmed its veracity by cross-examination, then the new month was declared. B'zman hazeh, when we have no ordained beis din to declare the new month, we say kiddush levana every month when the new moon appears, to commemorate the kiddush hachodesh that the beis din did, and will do with the future restoration of the Sanhedrin. What is it about this mitzvah that made it essential to tell it to Bnei Yisrael before they left Mitzrayim?

The essence of the mitzvah of "hachodesh hazeh lachem" is the word "lachem" - "for you". With this mitzva, the Bnei Yisrael now have control over their own time. They, through their beis din, determine the time of Rosh Chodesh and consequently the time of the yomim tovim and all of the associated mitzvos. For this reason, it was so important for Hakadosh Baruch Hu to give them this mitzvah before the exodus. This mitzvah would mark their national transition from slavery to freedom. As slaves, they were under the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dominion of the Egyptians. With the slave mentality that they possessed after centuries of bondage they could not possibly become a free nation. Even if they would be freed from Egypt, they could not become the Am haTorah. The study and observance of Torah is the ultimate freedom. Torah frees us from the myopic, self serving attitude associated with the pursuit of worldly desires. As our sages have said in Pirkei Avos, "There is no free person except for one who toils in Torah study". The mitzva of kiddush hachodesh helped the B'nei Yisrael make the transition from slavery to freedom both externally and internally.

How many times do we hear the following or similar claims? "I can't be a religious Jew because that would impose restrictions on my personal freedom." or even "I've been frum all my life and I don't think that it's fair!

I'm not free to do whatever I want! What happened to free choice?" These questions come up in every generation; and we see a beautiful answer from "hachodesh hazeh lachem." We said previously that this mitzvah helped to introduce B'nei Yisrael to the true essence of freedom. But what is freedom really all about? According to contemporary secular society, freedom means doing whatever you want, whenever

you want, and however you want. In this mindset, freedom is defined by the ability to act on ones impulses without restriction. Is that true freedom? That is the freedom of an animal! A gorilla roaming about the jungle can do as it pleases without restriction; and it answers to no one. For a person to act in such a manner would not be freedom at all. A human being is a tzelem Elokim - a parallel of the Creator. He has the unique ability to transcend his physical aspect through the service of Hashem. If a person is constantly involved in the pursuit of physical gratification he becomes a slave to his desires. Such a person is prevented from making use of those abilities that make him truly human.

True freedom begins inside. It means that you have the ability to say no to your physical desires and to focus on more elevated matters. With that attitude, one is no longer a slave to the prevailing circumstances, cultures, and attitudes. That is why an "eved Hashem", a servant of Hashem, is truly the freest person there can be.

With the mitzva of kiddush hachodesh, the B'nei Yisrael were given more than just the freedom to control their own time. They received the understanding that time has a higher purpose, the service of haKadosh Baruch Hu; and they were granted the true freedom that comes only with that realization. © 1996 Yeshiva Online, a project of the students of Yeshiva Toras Chaim of Miami Beach.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion records the first commandment given by God to the Jewish people. "This month shall be to you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you." (Exodus 12:2) What makes this mitzvah important enough to be the first legislated?

Perhaps it teaches the importance of time. As we became a people, we were reminded that life is fleeting, and that we all have just so long to live. No wonder this commandment is given soon after we leave Egypt. Slaves have no control over time; free people do. It is our choice either to squander time or to control and sanctify it.

A second possibility: Bearing in mind that it was during the month of Nisan that the Jews were freed, God instructs us that "this month" would be "the first month" of the Jewish calendar year. All months would be counted from Nissan as a way of constantly recalling the seminal event—the exodus from Egypt—whereby we became a nation. Indeed, Ramban points out that in the Bible the months have no names. They're called the first, second or third month and so on, with the number referring to how many months from the moment when we were established as a people.

Hence, the mitzvah anchors us to our past, reminding us always of our roots.

There is yet another possibility. God is commanding that every month the new moon be dedicated and that Rosh Chodesh (the new month) be celebrated. Rosh Chodesh is nothing less than a day in which we reevaluate and renew ourselves. It is a monthly, quasi-Rosh Hashana experience. An important enough idea to become the first commandment. In fact, the Zohar teaches that just as the moon diminishes in size and ultimately disappears, so too do we often face obstacles and insurmountable challenges. But the message of the moon is that from the waning comes the waxing—teaching that one should never be overcome by despair, but, always, like the moon, be alive to the message of hope and rebirth.

A story is told of a skeptical young girl who challenged her believing friend to prove that God exists. "My doll's hand is broken," the believing child said. "I'll place it beneath my pillow and pray to God. No doubt he'll listen to my prayers and repair the doll." Upon rising and seeing the doll's hand still broken, the skeptic said, "I told you God wouldn't listen to your prayers." "On the contrary," responded the believer. "God did listen, but his answer was 'no.'"

But for every 'no' there are countless 'yeses.' For like the moon, there are moments of struggle followed by moments of renewal. © 1998 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 MORDECHAI WOLLENBERG

Weekly Thoughts

This week's Parsha speaks about Pesach (Passover) the festival on which we spend about a week eating unleavened, cracker-like matzos commemorating the bread of the Children of Israel before they left Egypt, which did not have time to rise.

What is the difference between Matzo and Chometz (leavened bread)? With Chometz the dough rises, whereas with matzo the dough remains where it is. Chometz occupies a lot of space-puffed wheat aptly demonstrates this. Matzo, on the other hand, is thin and unassuming. Chometz symbolizes conceit-self-elevation, an over-inflated ego-while matzo signifies bittul-self-nullification, self-effacement and humility.

When a person has bittul, they will not attempt self-justification. Lacking self-importance, they will instead focus on taking stock and making an honest account of their actions and intentions. They will relate sincerely and honestly to others, willingly taking on board their suggestions.

However, with Chometz, with self-importance, come the excuses and attempted justifications for one's actions. The self-love covers up all shortcomings and

we are uninterested in what anyone else has to say—after all 'Who do they think they are—I'm much better than they are...'

A student once complained to his Rabbi that "people step all over me whenever I walk into the room." The Rabbi replied that "if you didn't spread yourself out all over the room, it wouldn't happen." Due to his egotism, his self-importance, the student was quite happy to take up the whole 'space' yet when someone else encroached on his territory, he felt crushed.

G-d tells us in the Torah that when it comes to a conceited individual, "he and I are unable to dwell in the same place". In other words, this town ain't big enough for the two of us. How can we make space for G-d in our lives? By developing our bittul-humility and sincere modesty, awareness of our smaller part in the larger picture.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this leads to a greater feeling of empowerment. As we mentioned last week, once we realise that on the one hand we are subjugated to a greater power (G-d) but on the other hand, through fulfilling His Will with an appropriate sense of who we are, we are connecting with the Infinite and the accompanying unlimited power, we realise how great our potential is to affect ourselves and those around us.

This week's Parsha also speaks about the plague of darkness which fell upon Egypt for seven days. We are told that during the first three days, "a man saw not his fellow." There is no greater darkness than one in which "a man saw not his fellow," in which a person becomes oblivious to the needs of his fellow man. By getting rid of our 'Chometz' from ourselves-by deflating our egos and allowing room for others and their needs, we remove that darkness and make room for G-d Himself in our lives. © 2002 Project Genesis & R

RABBI LIPMAN PODOLSKY

Yeshivat HaKotel

Darkness—a plague aimed not only at the Egyptians, but at the Jews as well. "Why did He bring upon them darkness? Because there were wicked Jews in that generation who did not wish to leave [Egypt]. They died during the three days of Darkness so that the Egyptians would not witness their downfall and say, 'They are suffering just like us!' (Rashi 10:22)."

How many Jews died? " 'And the children of Israel went up from the land of Egypt Chamushim'-Only one out of five actually went out, but four fifths died during the three days of darkness (Rashi 13:18)." Eighty percent of the Jewish people were wiped out for their reluctance to leave Egypt!

When armed with hindsight, we always think we are smarter. Looking back, we simply don't understand those Jews at all. Why didn't they want to leave? They had waited two hundred and ten years for

emancipation! They were slaves, subjected to constant degradation and humiliation! Who wouldn't want to leave?

My rebbe, Rav Nison Alpert zt"l, unraveled our mystery. Hashem has imbued the Jewish people with a unique characteristic: Jews have the ability to adjust. On the one hand, it is this trait that has facilitated our survival throughout the millennia of exile and dispersal. No matter how many times we were expelled from a land (no less than eighty-two times in history!), we somehow managed to rebuild our lives and adjust to our new circumstances. Indeed, observe the many different faces of the Jew. It seems that wherever the Jew landed he eventually came to resemble his hosts.

On the other hand, this quality carries with it potential peril: It can easily lead to assimilation. There is a constant danger that we will become too comfortable in these foreign surroundings and will never want to leave. We are liable to lose our identity.

Thus, Hashem told Avraham, "Ki ger yehiyeh zaracha b'erezt lo lahem (Breishis 15:13)." Not only will Avraham's offspring be strangers in foreign lands; they should strive to remain strangers. Never should we feel so comfortable that we forget who we are.

Tragically, time and again the Jewish people have forgotten this vital message. When Pharaoh plotted to enslave the Jews, he did not do so suddenly. Rather, he asked for volunteers to come to the assistance of the "Fatherland." The first to volunteer were, not surprisingly, the Jews. As soon as they were lured into the trap, Pharaoh gradually increased the workload until they had become veritable slaves.

Pharaoh, though, did not desire only their physical labor; he demanded their souls as well. Slowly but surely, their spirit became bound up with the rhythm and lifestyle of Egypt. So utterly were they enslaved that when the time came to leave they could not imagine parting from a way of life that was so much a part of their essence. Thus eighty percent of our aunts and uncles were found unworthy of meriting redemption.

The same happened later in history during the time of Ezra. When the Jews were finally granted permission to return to Eretz Yisrael after only seventy years of Babylonian exile, a scant forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty Jews took advantage of the opportunity (Ezra 2:64). We look back in disbelief. "Had we been there," we confidently think, "we most certainly would have been among the returnees!" What could they have possibly been thinking?

And yet, unbelievably, history inevitably repeats itself. For the first time in thousands of years, we have a carte blanche to return to our Land. Nothing is really stopping us. Yet how many of us return? And perhaps more importantly, how many of us want to return? True, there are those who have legitimate and justifiable reasons not to move up to Eretz Yisrael. But they

should at least feel anguish over their inability to fulfill and achieve that for which we have been tearfully praying for so many years—"Gather us together from the four corners of the earth to our Land." Will future generations look back at us in disbelief? "Had we been there, we surely would have returned!"

And this reminds me of a story. A Jewish family was celebrating the Pesach Seder in their comfortable home in the Diaspora. As the Seder came to a close, the family broke into a spontaneous rendition of "L'shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim-Next year in Jerusalem!" The singing grew in intensity and fervor, and the men arose from their seats and danced enthusiastically around the table. Round and round they danced and sang, the energy reaching a climactic crescendo, when all of a sudden, the mother broke down in tears. In an instant, the singing ceased.

"Dear, what's the matter?" asked the worried father. "Is everything all right? Why are you crying?"

"I don't want to go to Yerushalayim," sobbed the mother. "I like it here where we live. We have everything here! All our friends live here! I don't want to move to Yerushalayim!"

The husband gently calmed his wife. "Don't worry, my dear... It's just a song!"

abbi M. Wollenberg

RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

We read in the Pesach Haggadah: "The more that one tells about the Exodus, the more praiseworthy he is." Why? R' Yaakov Yisrael Berger z"l wrote in 1944: Bnei Yisrael were supposed to be in Egypt for 400 years, but Hashem took them out 190 years early. Yet we have now been in exile for thousands of years. The Jews probably suffer more in Europe now than our ancestors did in Egypt. In the western nations, where our brethren have found rest for their bodies, there is no rest for the soul. The foundations of the Torah in these countries are collapsing. Shabbat and family purity laws are almost forgotten. Why then does Hashem not redeem us?

He adds: This is the meaning of the Haggadah's statement, "The more that one tells about the Exodus, the more praiseworthy he is." The more that one explores the reasons that brought about the early redemption from Egypt, the more praiseworthy he is, for such a person hastens our own redemption. This is also the meaning of Rabban Gamliel's statement: "Whoever does not explain the following three things at the Pesach festival has not fulfilled his obligation—the Korban Pesach, matzah and maror." It is not enough to eat these three things. One must learn their lessons; for example, one must feel the bitterness of our own exile, and do what we can to be redeemed as our ancestors were. (Kol Yisrael Chaveirim p. 87) © 2000 Rabbi S. Katz & torah.org