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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The opening chapters of Exodus plunge us into the midst of epic events. Almost at a stroke the Israelites are transformed from protected minority to slaves. Moses passes from prince of Egypt to Midianite shepherd to leader of the Israelites through a history-changing encounter at the burning bush. Yet it is one small episode that deserves to be seen as a turning point in the history of humanity. Its heroines are two remarkable women, Shifra and Puah.

We do not know who they were. The Torah gives us no further information about them than that they were midwives, instructed by Pharaoh: 'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live' (Ex. 1: 16). The Hebrew description of the two women as ha-meyaldot ha-ivriyot, is ambiguous. It could mean "the Hebrew midwives." So most translations and commentaries read it. But it could equally mean, "the midwives to the Hebrews," in which case they may have been Egyptian. That is how Josephus,[1] Abrabanel and Samuel David Luzzatto understand it, arguing that it is simply implausible to suppose that Hebrew women would have been party to an act of genocide against their own people.

What we do know, however, is that they refused to carry out the order: "The midwives, however, feared G-d and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (1: 17). This is the first recorded instance in history of civil disobedience: refusing to obey an order, given by the most powerful man in the most powerful empire of the ancient world, simply because it was immoral, unethical, inhuman.

The Torah suggests that they did so without fuss or drama. Summoned by Pharaoh to explain their behaviour, they simply replied: "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive" (1: 19). To this, Pharaoh had no reply. The matter-of-factness of the entire incident reminds us of one of the most salient findings about the courage of those who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust. They had little in common except for the fact that they saw nothing remarkable in what they did.[2] Often the mark of real moral heroes is that they do not see themselves as moral heroes. They do what they do because that is what a human being is supposed to do. That is probably the meaning of the statement that they "feared G-d." It is the Torah's generic description of those who have a moral sense.[3]

It took more than three thousand years for what the midwives did to become enshrined in international law. In 1946 the Nazi war criminals on trial at Nuremberg all offered the defence that they were merely obeying orders, given by a duly constituted and democratically elected government. Under the doctrine of national sovereignty every government has the right to issue its own laws and order its own affairs. It took a new legal concept, namely a crime against humanity, to establish the guilt of the architects and administrators of genocide.

The Nuremberg principle gave legal substance to what the midwives instinctively understood: that there are orders that should not be obeyed, because they are immoral. Moral law transcends and may override the law of the state. As the Talmud puts it: "If there is a conflict between the words of the master (G-d) and the words of a disciple (a human being), the words of the master must prevail."[4]

The Nuremberg trials were not the first occasion on which the story of the midwives had a significant impact on history. Throughout the Middle Ages the Church, knowing that knowledge is power and therefore best kept in the hands of the priesthood, had forbidden vernacular translations of the Bible. In the course of the sixteenth century, three developments changed this irrevocably. First was the Reformation, with its maxim Sola scriptura, "By Scripture alone," placing the Bible centre-stage in the religious life. Second was the invention, in the mid-fifteenth century, of printing. Lutherans were convinced that this was Divine providence. G-d had sent the printing press so that the doctrines of the Reformed church could be spread worldwide.

Third was the fact that some people, regardless of the ban, had translated the Bible anyway. John Wycliffe and his followers had done so in the fourteenth century, but the most influential was William Tyndale,

[1] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, II. 9.2.

[2] See James Q. Wilson, The Moral Sense, New York, Free Press, 1993, 35-39, and the literature cited there.

[3] See, for example, Gen. 20: 11.

[4] Kiddushin 42b.

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whose translation of the New Testament, begun in 1525 became the first printed Bible in English. He paid for this with his life.

When Mary I took the Church of England back to Catholicism, many English Protestants fled to Calvin's Geneva, where they produced a new translation, based on Tyndale, called the Geneva Bible. Produced in a small, affordable edition, it was smuggled into England in large numbers.

Able to read the Bible by themselves for the first time, people soon discovered that it was, as far as monarchy is concerned, a highly seditious document. It tells of how G-d told Samuel that in seeking to appoint a king, the Israelites were rejecting Him as their only sovereign. It describes graphically how the prophets were unafraid to challenge kings, which they did with the authority of G-d Himself. And it told the story of the midwives who refused to carry out pharaoh's order. On this, in a marginal note, the Geneva Bible endorsed their refusal, criticising only the fact that, explaining their behaviour, they told a lie. The note said, "Their disobedience herein was lawful, but their dissembling evil." King James understood clearly the dire implication of that one sentence. It meant that a king could be disobeyed on the authority of G-d Himself: a clear and categorical refutation of the idea of the Divine right of kings.[5]

Eventually, unable to stop the spread of Bibles in translation, King James decided to commission his own version which appeared in 1611. But by then the damage had been done and the seeds of what became the English revolution had been planted. Throughout the seventeenth century by far the most influential force in English politics was the Hebrew Bible as understood by the Puritans, and it was the Pilgrim Fathers who took this faith with them in their journey to what would eventually become the United States of America.

A century and a half later, it was the work of another English radical, Thomas Paine, that made a decisive impact on the American revolution. His pamphlet Common Sense was published in America in January 1776, and became an immediate best seller, selling 100,000 copies. Its impact was huge, and because of it he became known as "the father of the American Revolution." Despite the fact that Paine was an atheist, the opening pages of Common Sense, justifying rebellion against a tyrannical king, are entirely based on citations from the Hebrew Bible. In the same spirit, that summer Benjamin Franklin drew as his design for the Great Seal of America, a picture of the Egyptians (i.e. the English) drowning in the Red Sea (i.e. the Atlantic), with the caption, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to G-d." Thomas Jefferson was so struck by the sentence that he recommended it to be used on the Great Seal of Virginia and later incorporated it in his personal seal.

The story of the midwives belongs to a larger vision implicit throughout the Torah and Tanakh as a whole: that right is sovereign over might, and that even G-d Himself can be called to account in the name of justice, as He expressly mandates Abraham to do. Sovereignty ultimately belongs to G-d, so any human act or order that transgresses the will of G-d is by that fact alone ultra vires. These revolutionary ideas are intrinsic to the biblical vision of politics and the use of power.

In the end, though, it was the courage of two remarkable women that created the precedent later taken up by the American writer Thoreau[6] in his classic essay Civil Disobedience (1849) that in turn inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King in the twentieth century. Their story also ends with a lovely touch. The text says: "So G-d was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared G-d, he gave them houses" (1: 20-21).

Luzzatto interpreted this last phrase to mean that He gave them families of their own. Often, he wrote, midwives are women who are unable to have children. In this case, G-d blessed Shifra and Puah by giving them children, as he had done for Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

This too is a not unimportant point. The closest Greek literature comes to the idea of civil disobedience is the story of Antigone who insisted on giving her brother Polynices a burial despite the fact that king Creon had refused to permit it, regarding him as a traitor to Thebes. Sophocles' Antigone is a tragedy: the heroine must die because of her loyalty to her brother and her disobedience to the king. The Hebrew Bible is not a tragedy. In fact biblical Hebrew has no word meaning "tragedy" in the Greek sense. Good is rewarded, not punished, because the universe, G-d's work of art, is a world in which moral behaviour is blessed and evil, briefly in the ascendant, is ultimately defeated.

Shifra and Puah are two of the great heroines

[5] See Christopher Hill, The English Bible and the Seventeenth-century Revolution. London: Allen Lane, 1993.

[6] Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience. Boston: David R. G-dine, 1969.

of world literature, the first to teach humanity the moral limits of power. *© 2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they allowed the male babies to remain alive." (Exodus 1:17) The King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives [or to the Egyptian midwives of the Hebrew women] ... When you deliver the Hebrew women and you see them on the birth stool, if it is a son, you are to kill him, and if it is a daughter, she shall live. But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they allowed the male babies to remain alive" (ibid. 15-17).

When Pharaoh decided to perpetrate genocide against the Jews, he ordered the midwives to kill every male baby born to a Hebrew mother. But Shiphrah and Puah, the Egyptian midwives of the Hebrew women (or Jochebed and Miriam, who actually were Moses' mother and sister, and given nicknames relating to their midwifery) refused to follow Pharaoh's orders - because they "feared" G-d, and preferred G-d's law of "thou shalt not murder" to Pharaoh's decree of genocide against the Hebrews.

Indeed, the entire story of our Egyptian experience is fraught with instances of courageous individuals - Egyptians and Hebrews alike - whose fealty to a higher moral authority gave them the fortitude to risk their own lives by refusing to carry out Pharaoh's orders so as to prevent genocide of the Hebrews.

Even if the national identity of Shiphrah and Puah is open to interpretation, Pharaoh's daughter is certainly a classic example of the gentile who puts her life on the line "refusing to follow orders" to save a Hebrew baby.

To understand this outstanding instance of a righteous gentile whose rebellion against tyranny enabled not only the Hebrews but also the Torah to develop and flourish, let us examine a few verses of our reading in accordance with the interpretation of the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, dean of Volozhin Yeshiva, 19th-century Lithuania.)

Hoping to save her baby brother Moses from the Egyptians who were under orders to cast any Hebrew baby boy they saw in the Nile (ibid. 22), Miriam places him in a basket hidden along the banks of the river.

Pharaoh's own daughter, Bitya, comes down to bathe in the river; her retinue of women departs to the river's edge to allow their mistress a measure of privacy.

When Bitya spies the wicker basket hidden among the reeds, she even sends away her trustiest maidservant, who generally never left her side. She retrieves the basket, and as she suspected, finds a Hebrew baby. Miriam, waiting nearby, offers to find a Hebrew wet nurse for him.

According to the Netziv, the text then states that the child grew up, and was brought to Bitya; she called him Moses, and Bitya justified her right to adopt him since she had drawn him out from the river where his parents had left him and brought him up as her own, risking her life by refusing to follow her father's orders.

From Bitya's perspective, this act of courage was tantamount to a biological mother shedding blood and risking her life to bring her baby into the world.

It is not by accident that it is Moses, brought up by Bitya in Pharaoh's court, who rebelled against Pharaoh and killed an Egyptian task-master. His model for his refusal to follow orders was none other than his Egyptian mother, Bitya.

During the Nuremberg Trials against Nazi war criminals (1945-46), the major line of defense used by the Nazi defendants was that a soldier cannot be held accountable for actions which were ordered by a superior officer. Even if this argument was not always sufficient for exoneration, it was certainly deemed sufficient for lessening the punishment. Ultimately, Nuremberg Principle IV concluded that "the fact that a person acted pursuant to the order of his government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him." In other words, if he would be severely punished or murdered for refusing to obey an order to commit genocide, he would not be culpable.

How different is the Talmudic position of 2,000 years ago! "If a gentile tells you to kill X or he will kill you, you must allow yourself to be killed, for who says that your blood is redder than his?" (B.T. Sanhedrin 74a). For Jewish law, Bitya the daughter of Pharaoh and Moses the Master Prophet led the way.

Israeli law was established by the Kafr Kassem Massacre Judgment (1957), which ruled that a soldier is not obligated to examine the legality of each military order but must refuse a specific order that is "blatantly illegal, so illegal that it is as if above it flies a black flag declaring 'prohibited,'" in the words of Judge Benjamin Halevy.

I believe that every soldier must give priority to G-d's law over human law, even the law of the IDF.

However, refusing to carry out a command of the IDF must only apply when the individual believes that by carrying out the order an innocent Jewish or gentile life is being taken, or that fundamental human rights are being removed. In the instance of giving land for peace, however, Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik ruled that the elected government of Israel has the right to decide whether sacrificing land for peace is operable and under which conditions. Such a decision must be

governmental and not individual. *© 2014 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The status of the Jewish people in Egypt changed rather abruptly. For well over a century after the death of Yosef and the original family of Yaakov, the Jewish people resided in Egypt under favorable if not even idyllic conditions. They multiplied in terms of population, wealth and influence. Their success, to a certain extent, also became their undoing for the Torah tells us that they eventually became abhorrent in the eyes of the native Egyptian population.

Even though, as certain midrashim teach us (there are naturally other midrashim that are of an opposite opinion) the Jewish people, in the main, attempted to assimilate into Egyptian life, the Egyptians themselves always saw the Jews as being an alien and foreign element in their midst. The Egyptians suspected that the Jews were disloyal in their hearts to the Egyptian Empire, no matter what their public proclamations were.

This abiding suspicion and unreasonable abhorrence of the Jews, even though the Jews were the vehicle for Egyptian survival and success from the time of Yosef onwards, provided the necessary background for the fact that the new Pharaoh could almost overnight enslave the Jews. Without the built-in resentment of Jews, that apparently was second nature to Egyptian society, Pharaoh alone would have been unable to place millions of people into slavery and oppression in his own country.

The Torah makes mention of the fact that Moshe was saved from the waters of the Nile by the daughter of the Pharaoh himself. In Jewish tradition this extraordinary act of kindness enabled her to achieve immortality. The inference is that there were not many like her who would somehow pluck Jewish infants from the jaws of the crocodiles in the waters of the Nile. The population of Egypt with its long-standing enmity towards Jews was what allowed the Pharaoh to implement slavery and genocide against the Jewish inhabitants of the then Egyptian Empire.

There are certainly parallels to this condition regarding the Holocaust and the current atmosphere of anti-Semitism that pervades democratic Europe. The general population of Egypt suffered greatly from the plagues that the Lord visited upon them because of the intransigence of Pharaoh and his refusal to free the Jews. The commentators to the Chumash all raise this question of collective punishment, which on the surface may appear to be unfair and extreme.

But the core of the matter and the answer to this question lies in the previous mindset of the Egyptian population which, long before this Pharaoh rose to power, already abhorred the Jewish people and resented its presence in their midst. There is an idiom in Jewish life that states: “There is no king without a people.”

The Holocaust, though planned and perpetrated by the Nazi hierarchy, could never have reached the proportions that it did without the active and passive participation of the native populations of Europe. Of course, the Jewish slavery in Egypt was predicted and preordained by G-d and revealed to Abraham centuries before it occurred. Nevertheless, as Jewish thought continually emphasizes to us, this in no way absolves the perpetrators of evil from receiving just punishment for their behavior. Only time will tell what the bill for the Holocaust will amount to. But I have no doubt that this bill, like all matters of history, eventually will be paid and redressed. *© 2014 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Who were the midwives that were asked by Pharaoh to kill the newborn Jewish males? (Exodus 1:15, 16) Their identity is critical because they deserve a tremendous amount of credit. In the end, at great personal risk, they "did not do as the King of Egypt commanded them, but saved the boys." (Exodus 1:17)

Rashi insists that the midwives were Jewish women. They were Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moshe respectively. For Rashi, the term meyaldot ha-ivriyot (Exodus 1:15) is to be understood literally, as the Hebrew midwives.

Sforno disagrees. He insists that the midwives were actually non-Jews. For Sforno, meyaldot ha-ivriyot is to be understood as the midwives of the Hebrews.

What stands out as almost shocking in Rashi's interpretation is the actual request. Pharaoh asks Jews to murder other Jews, believing they would commit heinous crimes against their own people. Tragically, this phenomenon has occurred at certain times in history-tyrants successfully convinced Jews to turn against their own people.

On the other hand, what stands out in Sforno's interpretation is the response. In the end, the non-Jewish midwives, at great personal risk, were prepared to save Jews. This has also occurred in history-the preparedness of non-Jews to stand up to authority and intervene on behalf of Jews.

Sforno mirrors the time in which he lived. As part of renaissance Italy in the 15th century, he was a universalist par excellence. He believed that non-Jews would stand up and risk their lives to help Jews. Rashi,

hundreds of years before, lived in a different world. Living before the Crusades, he could never imagine that non-Jews would stand up against the Pharaoh and save Jews.

Without this watershed moment in our history of standing up in the face of evil, there may have been no nation of Israel. Yet, there is no consensus as to the identity of these heroines. Only G-d knows for sure.

In this world where heroism sadly is defined by who sinks the winning shot or has the most money or sings the greatest music, we must remember this important lesson. Most of the time, we don't know who the true heroes are. Many who are given honor are undeserving. Others, who deserve honor, remain forever unknown.

It is G-d alone, who really knows.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And these are the names of the children of Israel, those coming to Egypt, with Yaakov, each man came with his household" (Sh'mos 1:1). The Baal HaTurim points out that the first and last Hebrew letters of the words "Israel, those coming" spell out the Hebrew word for "circumcision," and that the last letters of the words "with Yaakov, each man" spell out the word "Shabbos," explaining the significance to be that because they kept these two commandments in Egypt, they were worthy of (eventually) being redeemed. However, the Baal HaTurim also tells us (12:13) that the Torah uses the word "for you" when it quotes G-d's instructions to put blood from the Passover offering on the doorposts because it has the same numerical value (90) as the word "the (mitzvah of) circumcision" to teach us that they fulfilled the mitzvah of circumcision on that very night, alluding to the Midrash (Sh'mos Rabbah 19:5) that tells us that the nation didn't fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision in Egypt; they only did so the night before they left so that they could eat the Passover offering (which is off-limits to the uncircumcised). How could the Baal HaTurim tell us that they were worthy of being redeemed because they fulfilled the mitzvah of circumcision in Egypt if they didn't fulfill it until the very last minute, when they were already in the process of being redeemed?

Rashi (12:6), quoting the Mechilta, tells us that even though the time had come for G-d to fulfill His promise to Avraham to redeem his descendants, they had no mitzvos to be involved in to be worthy of being redeemed. Therefore, G-d gave them two mitzvos, the Passover offering and circumcision, so that they could be redeemed. It could be suggested that the redemption and the fulfillment of the mitzvos that made them worthy of being redeemed occurred simultaneously, with the process of redemption starting because of the promise made to Avraham, and the mitzvos being commanded towards the end of the process so that this generation could be worthy of having the promise fulfilled through them. However, the Baal HaTurim mentions two mitzvos, circumcision and Shabbos, and there is no indication that the nation first started keeping Shabbos as the redemption was occurring. [Even though Moshe was able to convince Pharaoh to give the Children of Israel one day off every week, with that day being Shabbos (see Sh'mos Rabbah 1:28), that doesn't mean they kept it as a "mitzvah," just that they were able to rest from working. If anything, the need to give them two mitzvos (the Passover offering and circumcision) to get them to be worthy of redemption indicates that they hadn't been keeping any other mitzvos, including Shabbos.] Since there were two mitzvos (Shabbos and circumcision) whose fulfillment in Egypt the Baal HaTurim says allowed them to be redeemed, and Shabbos wasn't commanded right before the redemption, it is difficult to say that he meant that this was when they fulfilled the mitzvah of circumcision either. Besides, why would the reference to these mitzvos occur when reintroducing the initial move to Egypt from Canaan if they weren't fulfilled until a couple of hundred years later, right before they left? Which brings us back to our original question; how could the Baal HaTurim say that they were redeemed because they kept Shabbos and circumcision in Egypt, if, except for the Tribe of Levi (see Sh'mos Rabbah 19:5) they didn't keep these mitzvos throughout their stay in Egypt?

Previously (aishdas.org/ta/5765/eikev.pdf), I discussed why we only receive the blessings promised to our forefathers if we fulfill the Torah's mitzvos (see D'varim 7:12-16). The promise was made to the forefathers because of their special and unique accomplishments, but we need to be part of the mission they started in order to be the recipients of that promise. By keeping the mitzvos, we become connected to the nation the promise was made about, and by extension to our forefathers themselves, thereby becoming worthy of benefiting from that promise. But how did we become a nation? Egypt is referred to as an "iron crucible" (D'varim 4:20, M'lachim I 8:51 and Yirmiyahu11:4) because it is where we were forged into a nation. What was it about the Egyptian experience that transformed the family of 70 "children of Israel/Yaakov" into the nation of "The Children of Israel"?

For decades people have tried to define what being "Jewish" means. Is it being part of a (specific) religious group? A shared culture? An extended family? There are strong arguments against each of these. Since one can be Jewish without being religious, being "Jewish" can't just mean being connected to our

religion. Since there are people who share much of our culture who are not Jewish, and some who share little, if any, of our culture who are Jewish, culture alone can't be the defining aspect. And since we accept converts, and do not consider some relatives (such as cousins whose mother is not Jewish) as being "Jewish", being part of the same family can't be it either. Rather, it was a family, which shared a unique religious perspective, whose experiences based on their uniqueness became a shared culture. Much of our culture has developed based on the religion called "Judaism," some of it developed based on the shared experiences of this family (such as "losing" a brother and then rediscovering him as the Egyptian Viceroy), and some has developed based on the shared experiences that resulted from how others have reacted to us (such as our slavery in Egypt and the extreme amount of anti-Semitism we have suffered throughout history, including the Crusades, pogroms, the holocaust, and extreme anti-Israel sentiment).

Egypt was our "iron crucible" because it was where the shared experience of slavery transformed us from being the "children of Israel" (with a small "c") into "The Children of Israel." There may have been other experiences that added to our culture, such as the public revelation at Sinai, the 40 years of wandering in the desert, the conquering and then settling of the Land of Israel (although this also brought about a more pronounced Tribalism), exile and anti-Semitism, but the transformation from a family into a nation occurred through our shared experiences in Egypt.

Nevertheless, acquiring a national identity alone did not guarantee that the promises made to our forefathers would come to fruition through this nation; several times (e.g. Sh'mos 32:10) G-d threatened to wipe us out and start again, with this new entity becoming the nation through which G-d's promises would be fulfilled. Just as we, as individuals, need to be connected to our forefathers by keeping the Torah in order to be worthy of receiving the blessings our forefathers were promised, so too must the nation that qualifies as the one G-d's promises will be fulfilled through be built upon the foundation the forefathers set up.

"These are the names of the children (small "c") of Israel who came to Egypt." It is specifically in the words "Israel who came" that the Torah hints to us that they kept the mitzvah of circumcision, because the shared experience that would transform us into a nation had to be based on our relationship with the Creator. Similarly, it is specifically in the words "with Yaakov, every man," that their Shabbos observance was hinted to, as the founding members of this nascent nation had to be committed to continuing the mission started by our forefathers, testifying that G-d created the world (by keeping Shabbos) and committing to our relationship with Him (through the covenant of circumcision).

It was only because the founding members, those who "came to Egypt," kept these mitzvos when they moved to Egypt, that the nation they became was worthy of being redeemed. Even though the nation (as a whole) no longer kept those mitzvos, once it qualified as being able to have the promises fulfilled through them (having at least one Tribe, Levi, keep the mitzvos throughout the years, so that the rest of the nation could eventually become reacquainted with them, was necessary as well), and the time for the promise to be fulfilled arrived, G-d started the redemption process. The members of the nation who were being redeemed had to be worthy too, which is why G-d gave them two mitzvos to fulfill before the redemption could take place, but the nation itself had to have been built on its shared commitment to G-d for the process to start in the first place.

RABBI MAYER TWERSKY

TorahWeb

Ramban famously defines Sefer Shemos as the Book of Exile and Redemption. Ma'amad Har Sinai and the construction of the mishkan are included in the Sefer because "...the exile did not end until the day [the people] returned to their place and returned to the stature of their forefathers... when they arrived at Mount Sinai and built the Tabernacle, and the Holy One, Blessed is He, once again caused His Shechinah to dwell among them at that point they returned to the eminence of their forefathers of whom, 'the Counsel of G-d was over their tents' and, they themselves were the Divine chariot. Then [the people] were considered redeemed." [Introduction to Shemos, Artscroll Translation]

Redemption is a spiritual category; it is measured by connection and spiritual proximity to HKB"H. Thus Bnei Yisroel were first considered redeemed when HKB"H caused His Shechinah to dwell amongst them.

This is clearly Ramban's point. So why does he twice emphasize that redemption entails returning to the stature / eminence of their ancestors?

Ramban is preemptively addressing the following issue. Granted redemption is to be defined spiritually, not politically or geographically. [Political redemption is instrumentally -- not ultimately -- significant because subjugation interferes with avodas Hashem. (See Berachos 17a; Rambam Hilchos Teshuva 9:2.) Eretz Yisroel is of paramount spiritual significance because it is "the land of Hashem." (See Ramban Vayikra 18:25)] But the definition of hashro'as haShechinah seems unrealistically high. Ramban's response: what was achieved once can be achieved again. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov were titans whom we revere; but they are also our forefathers. Our genetic material and spiritual capacities derive from them and thus while their example inspires reverence, it

also obligates and inspires us. "A person is obligated to say, 'when will my actions match those of my forefathers'" (Tana D'vei Eliyahu.)

A word of reflection and introspection. Spiritual achievement depends on spiritual aspiration. If we shortchange ourselves in our aspirations, willy nilly we will come up short in realizing our potential. The mediocrity of our spiritual aspirations is one of the Achilles' heels of our generation. To transcend the numbing materialism of our times and attain kirvas Elokim we must first aspire to such transcendence. To focus on olam haboh values and eschew olam hazeh values we must first aspire to attaining and maintaining such focus.

Redemption awaits, but inspired aspiration must precede.

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

"Moshe was shepherding the sheep of his father-in-law Yisro, a priest of Midian...and he arrived at the Mountain of G-d." Be'er Yosef: "A midrash points out that sheep keep turning up in the lives of great figures in Tanach. 'HKBH does not bestow greatness upon a person without first testing him regarding small things.' It offers two examples. Both Moshe and Dovid began their training by tending to sheep, only graduating to become shepherds of Hashem's holy flock after successfully proving themselves as capable and responsible in regard to the four-footed kind."

This may sound pretty, but it is entirely counterintuitive. Does it not make more sense to subject a candidate for a leadership position to some difficult tests, rather than measuring him in regard to a "small thing?"

Moreover, in the case of Moshe, he had already passed such tests. He displayed courage, loyalty and determination in Egypt, where he endangered himself by intervening against the Egyptian who was beating the Jew. He paid a stiff penalty for that episode, having to flee for his life. Nonetheless, when he came upon the shepherd women who were being harassed by the local men, he thought nothing of his own safety, and once again intervened to correct an injustice. Wasn't this behavior stronger evidence of his greatness and worthiness to lead?

In fact, there was no greater evidence of the suitability of Moshe and Dovid than their very selection by HKBH! Surely Hashem chose people who were suitable to lead -- great in wisdom, righteousness, and of sterling character. Moshe is called the "man of G-d;" Dovid is called "one mighty in courage, a warrior, understanding in all matters...and Hashem was with him." Chazal2 apply all of those descriptions to Dovid's abilities in Torah study.

Indeed, Hashem knew well whom He chose and why He chose them. Moshe and Dovid did not have to prove themselves. The test/ nisayon each was subjected to was intended to demonstrate to others who they were, to make manifest the wonderful traits each possessed.

Why sheep? Because what Hashem wanted them to show was that they were capable of enormous concern for small, trivial things. An effective leader must be able to address the needs of his people, which often are quite pedestrian and commonplace. People of exalted spirit and intellectual accomplishment often have a difficult time relating to matters that are not exclusively lofty, intellectually stimulating, and infused with spirituality. Moshe's head and spirit were in the heavens -- but he could still trudge a distance to care for a single, lost sheep, and then trudge back with the exhausted sheep flung across his back.

Similarly, Dovid was able to provide compassionate care to each animal in his flock -- the young, the old, the weak, the strong -- each according to its needs. He provided this care even after honing his spiritual skills, after developing that deveikus to Hashem we see in Tehilim. Dovid did not grow aloof and remote from trivial concerns, but maintained his spiritual elevation even as he threw himself into work that was far from elevated.

This, then, is the meaning of the midrash that Hashem chooses His leaders through "small things:" He determines that, despite their greatness, the candidates are able to effectively deal with small, everyday matters, and relate to the petty needs of all people, those who are great and those far from great.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

When Yocheved and Miriam, the two midwives responsible for delivering the Jewish babies, were ordered by Paroh to kill all the newborn boys, they disobeyed a direct order, thereby risking their lives. In explaining this to us, the Torah says that G-d rewarded them, the nation prospered and multiplied, and G-d "built them houses" (1:20-21) -- not literal houses, but rather that their descendants would become great pillars of Jewish leadership and religion (Rashi). From the way the Passuk (verse) elucidates it, though, it seems that they were rewarded AND there were houses built for them. Were they rewarded twice? If so, why?

Rabbi Rubman points out that the Passuk says that it wasn't because they risked their lives that they were rewarded with great descendants, but because they feared G-d that they deserved it. The reason for the double-language is because they were 1) rewarded for risking their lives, and 2) houses were built based on their fear and respect of G-d. What's unique about

these rewards is that their fear/respect of G-d is what warranted eternal reward, and NOT their life-risking actions. The Torah's message is that the motives behind our actions are sometimes more important than the acts themselves, even if the act is life threatening. The Torah's message is that it truly is the thought that counts.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Midrash Rabbah records that, while Moshe lived in Pharaoh's palace as a young man, he convinced Pharaoh that slaves work more efficiently when they are given one day of rest each week. Pharaoh instructed Moshe to implement this idea, and Moshe arranged for Bnei Yisrael to have Shabbat as a day off.

At the end of the parashah we read that Pharaoh decreed (5:9), "Let the work be heavier upon the men and let them engage in it; and let them not pay attention to false words." Midrash Rabbah explains that Bnei Yisrael used to gather on Shabbat to read scrolls that had been passed down from their ancestors, in which it was written that they would be redeemed in the merit of Shabbat observance. Therefore Pharaoh proclaimed: Take away their day of rest so that they will not have time to dream of freedom.

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato z"l (Ramchal; 1707-1747) observes that the yetzer hara uses the same strategy to distract a person from focusing on his task in this world. Man's task is to reflect upon every step he wishes to take and every action he wishes to perform and to ask himself: Will this step or action bring me closer to G-d or will it distance me from G-d? The yetzer hara knows that if man would merely think about his actions, he would certainly begin to regret his deeds, Ramchal writes. To prevent this, the yetzer hara makes sure that we are always busy with all types of activities and tasks that appear to be very pressing. (Mesilat Yesharim ch.2)

In this light, perhaps we can understand why Shabbat observance, in particular, brings the redemption closer, for it gives us the opportunity and the peace of mind to reflect on our purpose in the world and the need to become a nation that merits redemption.

D'VORAH WEISS

It's All About Yosef

"A new king arose over Egypt who knew not Yosef." Thus begins Parshat Shemot and the story of the descent of the Jewish People into centuries of horrific slavery. On this opening pasuk, Rashi comments it was the same king; only his ideas were new.

Pharoh's lack of hakarat hatov to Yosef who saved Egypt from ruinous famine and enriched Pharoh's treasury will not go unpunished. In fact, each of the ten plagues that will befall Egypt seem to be lessons to an ungrateful Pharoh; reminders really, to show him what Egypt would have been without Yosef's intervention. Let's consider what happens when there is a famine:

The first thing that characterizes a famine is a lack of water. How fitting, then, that the first plague is DAM (BLOOD).

When the riverbeds dry up, typically the water-dwelling amphibians leave the dry waterbeds and climb onto dry land. (TZEFARDAYA/FROGS)

No water to drink means there is no water to bathe. (KINIM/LICE)

Usually,(in Africa, for example), when there is no water readily available, the wild animals leave their usual habitat and enter towns where people dwell, in search of water. (AROV/WILD BEASTS)

Eventually the (domestic) cattle get sick and die. (DEVER/CATTLE DISEASE)

Skin irritations become infected and human suffering increases. (SHECHEEN/BOILS)

The crops of the field are destroyed (BARAD/HAIL),

And whatever meager stalks might remain, is also destroyed. (ARBEH/LOCUST)

And now, with Egypt looking like it had gone through a famine (The Torah tells us, "Not one green thing was left in Egypt"), comes the ninth plague (CHOSHECH/DARKNESS). [Remember now, Paroh, who was shut away in the darkness of the dungeon and came out to interpret your dream and save Egypt?] Not yet?

Comes now the tenth and final plague, perhaps alluding to the most tragic consequence of famine: human death. (MAKAT BECHOROT/SLAYING OF THE FIRSTBORN)

That night, Paroh goes searching for Moshe and he finds him by the Nile, retrieving Yosef's body!

The saga of the Jewish People in Mitzraim began with the brothers' selling of Yosef; they killed a goat and dipped his coat of many colors into its blood.

Yetzirat Mitzraim, the final night of their stay, the Jewish People have killed a sheep and dipped its blood onto their doorposts.

Indeed, our Pesach seder begins with dipping! We dip a vegetable into salt water (KARPAS). The Rabbis teach, the word Karpas stands for "Ketonet-Pasim" (Yosef's Coat of Many Colors.)

The avdut in Egypt began with the brothers dipping the "karpas." With our dipping of Karpas on z'man chayrutaynu, may we be zocheh to usher in the geulah shelayma and binyan bayit shelishi bim'haira biyamainu.