

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Our parsha begins with an apparently simple proposition: When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the land of the Philistines, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt prepared for battle. (Ex. 13:17-18)

God did not lead the people to the Promised Land by the coastal route, which would have been more direct. The reason given is that it was such an important highway, it constituted the main path from which Egypt might be attacked by forces from the north-west such as the Hittite army. The Egyptians established a series of forts along the way, which the Israelites would have found impregnable.

However, if we delve deeper, this decision raises a number of questions. First: we see that the alternative route they took was potentially even more traumatic. God led them around by the desert road towards the Red Sea. The result, as we soon discover, is that the Israelites, when they saw the Egyptian chariots pursuing them in the distance, had nowhere to go. They were terrified. They were not spared the fear of war. Hence the first question: why the Red Sea? On the face of it, it was the worst of all possible routes.

Secondly, if God did not want the Israelites to face war, and if He believed it would lead the people to want to return to Egypt, why did the Israelites leave chamushim, "armed" or "ready for battle"?

Third: if God did not want the Israelites to face war, why did He provoke Pharaoh into pursuing them? The text says so explicitly. "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for Myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 14:4). Three times in this one chapter we are told that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 14:4, 8, 17).

The Torah explains this motivation of "I will gain glory for Myself." The defeat of the Egyptian army at the Sea would become an eternal reminder of God's power. "The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." Egypt may come to realise that there is a force more powerful than chariots, armies and military might. But the opening of our parsha suggested that God was

primarily concerned with the Israelites' feelings -- not with His glory or the Egyptians' belief. If God wanted the Israelites not to see war, as the opening verse states, why did He orchestrate that they witnessed this attack at the Sea?

Fourth: God did not want the Israelites to have reason to say, "Let us return to Egypt." However, at the Red Sea, they did tell Moses something very close to this: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (Ex. 14:11-12)

Fifth: God clearly wanted the Israelites to develop the self-confidence that would give them the strength to fight the battles they would have to fight in order to conquer the Holy Land. Why then did He bring about a state of affairs at the Sea where they had to do exactly the opposite, leaving everything to God: Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." (Ex. 14:13-14)

The miracle that followed has so engraved itself on Jewish minds that we recite the Song at the Sea in our daily Morning Service. The division of the Sea was, in its way, the greatest of all the miracles. But it did not contribute to Jewish self-confidence and self-reliance. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still. The Egyptians were defeated not by the Israelites but by God, and not by conventional warfare but by a miracle. How then did the encounter teach the Israelites courage?

Sixth: The parsha ends with another battle, against the Amalekites. But this time, there is no complaint on the part of the people, no fear, no trauma, no despair. Joshua leads the people in battle. Moses, supported by Aaron and Hur, stands on a hilltop, his arms upraised, and as the people look up to Heaven, they are inspired, strengthened, and they prevail.

Where then was the fear spoken of in the opening verse of the parsha? Faced by the Amalekites, in some ways more fearsome than the Egyptians, the Israelites did not say they wanted to return to Egypt. The sheer silence on the part of the people stands in the strongest possible contrast to their previous

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
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complaints about water and food. The Israelites turn out to be good warriors.

So why the sudden change between the opening of our parsha and its close? In the opening, God is protective and miracle-working. At the close, God is more concealed. He does not fight the battle against the Amalekites; He gives the Israelites the strength to do so themselves. In the opening, the Israelites, faced by the Egyptians, panic and say that they should never have left Egypt. By the close, faced by the Amalekites, they fight and win.

What had changed?

The answer, it seems to me, is that we have perhaps the first recorded instance of what later became a key military strategy. In one of the more famous examples, Julius Caesar ordered his army to cross the Rubicon in the course of his attempt to seize power. Such an act was strictly forbidden in Roman law. He and the army had to win, or they would be executed. Hence the phrase, "to cross the Rubicon."

In 1519, Cortes (the Spanish commander engaged in the conquest of Mexico) burned the ships that had carried his men. His soldiers now had no possibility of escape. They had to win or die. Hence the phrase, "burning your boats."

What these tactics have in common is the idea that sometimes you have to arrange that there is no way back, no line of retreat, no possibility of fear-induced escape. It is a radical strategy, undertaken when the stakes are high and when exceptional reserves of courage are necessary. That is the logic of the events in this week's parsha that are otherwise hard to understand.

Before they crossed the Red Sea, the Israelites were fearful. But once they had crossed the Sea, there was no way back. (This explanation does not work for the Midrashic view that the Israelites emerged from the sea on the same bank as they had entered. But this is, as far as I can tell, a minority view.)

To be sure, they still complained about water and food. But their ability to fight and defeat the Amalekites showed how profoundly they had changed. They had crossed the Rubicon. Their boats and bridges were burned. They looked only forwards, for there was no return.

Rashbam makes a remarkable comment,

connecting Jacob's wrestling match with the angel to the episode in which Moses, returning to Egypt, is attacked by God (Ex. 4:24) and also linking this to Jonah on the stormy ship. Commentary to Gen. 32:21-29) All three, he says, were overcome by fear at the danger or difficulty that confronted them, and each wanted to escape. Jacob's angel, Moses' encounter and the tempest that threatened to sink Jonah's ship, were all ways in which Heaven cut off the line of retreat.

Any great undertaking comes with fear. Often we fear failure. Sometimes we even fear success. Are we worthy of it? Can we sustain it? We long for the security of the familiar, the life we have known. We are afraid of the unknown, the uncharted territory. And the journey itself exposes our vulnerability. We have left home; we have not yet reached our destination. Rashbam was telling us that if we have these feelings we should not feel ashamed. Even the greatest people have felt fear. Courage is not fearlessness. It is, in the words of a well-known book title, feeling the fear but doing it anyway.

Sometimes the only way to do this is to know that there is no way back. Franz Kafka in one of his aphorisms wrote, "Beyond a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached." (Notebooks, 16) That is what crossing the Red Sea was for the Israelites, and why it was essential that they experienced it at an early stage in their journey. It marked the point of no return; the line of no retreat; the critical point at which they could only move forward.

I believe that some of the greatest positive changes in our lives come when, having undertaken a challenge, we cross our own Red Sea and know that there is no way back. There is only a way forward.

Then God gives us the strength to fight our battles and win. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out [in prayer] to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and let them move forward'" (Exodus 14:15) Chapters 14 and 15 of the Book of Exodus are among the most significant in the Bible from a theological perspective, defining for us the fundamental difference between monotheism and idolatry. The first opens with God's instructions that the Israelites: "Turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth [the gateway to the Temple of Horus] between Migdal and the sea, before the Baal [master] of the North....by the [Reed/Red] Sea." (Ex. 14:1).

How strange that the description of their resting place – which will become a sacred shrine marking the most wondrous miracle of the Exodus, the splitting of

the Sea – is associated with two major idols, Horus and Baal Zephon; to add insult to injury, the very same description is repeated only eight verses later! (Ex. 14:9).

I would argue that the Bible is here contrasting two different attitudes, one that is representative of idolatry and the other that refers to God's miracles. The Israelites have just left Egyptian enslavement, but the slave mentality has not yet left the Hebrew psyche. They are just at Pi-Hahiro, literally at the gateway to freedom (herut), but they are still engulfed in the paralysis engendered by the idolatrous Horus Temple and exceedingly close to the domain of the master-god of the North (Baal).

Idolatry, you see, enervates its adherents, renders them powerless before the gods whom they created in their own image; these gods are simply more powerful creatures, filled with foibles and failings of mortal beings – only on a grander scale. It is these gods who rule the world; the only thing that the human being can hope to do is to bribe or propitiate the gods to treat them kindly..

Moses is still at the beginning of his career; he has much more to learn about Jewish theology. Hence he tells the nation, frightened by the specter of pursuing Egyptians behind them and a raging sea in front of them, "Stand still and you shall see the salvation of the Lord... The Lord will do battle for you and you shall remain silent" (Ex. 14:13-14)

God then steps in, countermanding Moses's comforting words. "Why do you cry out in prayer at Me?" God asks, meaning: I, the omnipresent Lord of the Universe, empowered you by creating you in My image; I expect people to act, to journey forward, to take responsibility for human – Jewish – destiny. Now that they are at the cusp, or gateway to freedom, let the Israelites move ahead, either in fighting the Egyptians who came to force them back into Egyptian enslavement or by jumping into the Reed Sea.

God wants Moses and all of Israel to understand that He is not another idol, not even the greatest or most powerful of the idols, who renders humans powerless and awaits human gifts of propitiation and prayers. God is rather non-material Spirit, best described as Love (the four-letter name JHVH), Compassion, Freely-giving Grace, Long-suffering, Loving-Kindness and Truth (Ex. 34:6) who created human beings in His image, empowers them to act in history as His partners, expects them to develop His Divine traits of character and charges them to bring freedom and security to all the families of the earth.

The Israelites are learning this lesson as they stand at the gateway to freedom (pi-herut) and nationhood witnessing the splitting of the Re(e)d Sea. They dare not stand still and silent waiting for a *deus ex machina* to extricate them from a seemingly impossible situation. Remember herut derives from the Hebrew

aharayut, responsibility. Freedom demands taking responsibility!

They must initiate the action.

And so God commands them to "move forward," to jump into the waters, risking their lives for freedom; only then will they truly deserve to live as free human beings under God. Our Sages maintain that indeed they learned this lesson at the sea, when they sang out: "This is my God, ve'anvehu" (Ex. 15:2); even a maidservant at the sea saw what the later prophets did not see" (Rashi ad loc citing the Mekhilta.)

Apparently, their lesson is to be understood from the Hebrew word ve'anvehu. What does this word mean? Some commentaries suggest it means "I will glorify Him" either by building Him a Temple (Targum, naveh), or by singing His praises (Rashi) or by beautifying (na'eh) His commandments (a beautiful succa). But the Midrash Mekhilta renders the text as two words, Ani ve'hu, I will act together with Him, I will be Gods partner in achieving freedom for the Israelites. Rashi explained it best: When Moses told the Israelites to "stand still and watch the salvation of the Lord; God will do battle for you, you remain silent", and Moses prayed to God to "Bask him up", Rashi interprets (ex14:15, Rashi ad loc); "this is not time for a lengthy prayer, when the Israelites are in difficult straits. Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to get moving!" God is telling the Israelites: When you were still slaves. I did the plagues to win the first stage of your freedom. Now that you are free, take responsibility, and get moving". I am your God, and you must act together with me for your redemption! ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Miracles occur in all sizes and shapes. Some are major, completely aberrational and beyond natural or rational explanation. Other miracles that occur to us daily in our own lives take the form of being natural events and part of the rhythm of society and life. Major miracles command our attention, and as we see in this week's reading of the Torah, even cause us to sing eternal songs that extend through generations of Jewish life till our very day.

Certainly, the splitting of the waters of the sea before the Jewish people, escaping from the Army of the Pharaoh of Egypt, and then for those very waters receding and covering the drowning Egyptian enemy, is a miracle of major importance, and thus remains indelible in the collective memory of the Jewish people. So, Moshe and his sister Miriam lead the Jewish people in song to commemorate this event and to impress upon them the awesome quality of this major miracle.

We are reminded daily in our prayers of this miracle, and the song of Moshe forms an important part of our daily morning prayer service. This type of miracle

was repeated when the Jewish people crossed the river Jordan on their entry into the land of Israel after the death of Moshe and at the beginning of the reign of Joshua. This could be termed less of a miracle, than what took place with the Egyptian army, yet it represented the confirmation of the divine will to protect the Jewish people and to enable them to enter, inhabit and settle the land of Israel that would be its eternal homeland over all of the millennia of civilization.

However, the commemoration and memory of the major miracle should also remind us of the so-called minor miracles that occur to us in our daily lives. We are accustomed to everything going right as far as our bodies, social interactions and commercial enterprises are concerned. But it should be obvious that for things to go just right – simply what we call normal life – countless minor miracles must take place. We recite this in our daily prayers as well, and, in fact, we do so three times a day when we acknowledge and thank God for these so-called minor miracles that are with us constantly, evening, morning and afternoon.

This ability to recognize and give thanks for the minor miracles that constitute our daily existence stems from the fact that we experienced, in our collective memory, the great miracle that made us a people, and saved us from the destruction that Pharaoh wished to visit upon us. It is this memory of the great miracle that enables us to recognize the so-called minor miracles that we are living through, especially here in the land of Israel, with the return of Jewish sovereignty.

It is important to maintain the ability to recognize and be grateful for the wonders and miracles that the Lord grants us each and every day of our individual and national lives. ©2020 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

An examination of the first time Jews praised God after leaving Egypt offers an understanding of two distinct models of approaching God. In the song after the splitting of the sea, the Jews proclaimed: "This is my God (zeh Ei-li) and I will glorify Him (ve-anveihu); the God of my father (E-lohei avi) and I will exalt him (va-aromemen'hu)." (Exodus 15:2)

One approach to God is that of "E-lohei avi, the God of my father," to believe simply because of my inherited history, to believe because my parents believe.

Hence, the text states va-aromemenhu; from the root rum meaning "above." In other words, although God is above me and I have little understanding of Him, nonetheless, I accept God because my parents accepted Him; it's part of my

family DNA.

A second approach is found in the first part of the sentence. Here the Jews proclaimed, "This is my God, zeh E-li," the God with whom I have a very personal relationship.

Hence, the modifying term ve-anveihu (and I will glorify Him). Anveihu is a compound of ani-Hu, I and Him. This points to one who feels a deep connection to God and believes because he or she has been closely touched by the Almighty.

Which approach is more meaningful and more critical? Since both are mentioned, each has truth. Indeed, when reciting the Amidah, we state that, "God is our God (E-loheinu)" and, "the God of our patriarchs (E-lohei avoteinu)." Note the inclusion of both personal relationships and a belief in God because He was the God of our ancestors.

The sequence of these terms in both the biblical text and in the Amidah shows us which approach has the most significance. In both instances, God is first described as being a personal God.

An important educational lesson: It is not enough for parents to expect their children to believe simply because they believe. Transmission of belief in God is not automatic. What is most necessary is an atmosphere wherein a child comes to experience belief through personal strivings and actions.

Such children are in the best position to maintain their belief and to transmit it to their children and they to their children until the end of time. ©2020 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 DAVID S. LEVIN

Why Manna

The B'nai Yisrael left Egypt in such a hurry that they did not have time to take any provisions with them.

They soon pleaded with Moshe for food and water. Two miracles gave water to the people but they would need a third miracle for enough food to feed such a large number of people. Hashem provided this miracle with the man, the manna from Heaven.

Hashem tells Moshe, "Behold! I shall rain down food from heaven for you, let the people go out and collect each day's amount on its day so that I may test (them) whether (they) will follow my Torah or not. And it will be that on the sixth day when they prepare what they will bring, and it will be double what they pick every day." After a short passage in which Hashem castigates the people for their complaints, the Torah continues, "It was toward the evening that the pheasant ascended and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. The layer of dew ascended and behold, it was over the surface of the wilderness, something thin, exposed, thin as frost

on the earth. And the B'nei Yisrael saw and said to one another, 'it is manna' because they did not know what it was and Moshe said to them this is the bread (food) that Hashem has given to you to eat. This is the thing that Hashem has commanded, 'gather from it, for every man according to what he eats, an omer per person according to the number of your souls, everyone according to whomever is in his tent shall you take.' And the B'nei Yisrael did so and they gathered, he who took much and he who took too little. They measured in an omer and whoever took more had nothing extra and whoever took less was not lacking, everyone according to what he eats had they gathered. Moshe said to them, 'no man may leave over any of it until the morning.' And they did not listen to Moshe and (some) people left over from it until the morning and it became infested with worms and it stunk, and Moshe became angry with them. And they gathered it morning by morning, every man according to what he eats and when the sun grew hot it would melt." The Torah continues with a section of gathering a double-portion on the sixth day and saving that extra portion for the next day, Shabbat, on which no manna fell. They were also told that the manna could be cooked or baked as they wished.

Hashem described the manna as a test for the B'nei Yisrael. What was being tested? Why was it necessary to give the B'nei Yisrael only an amount each day which covered the needs of that day alone? Why was any manna left over until the morning, spoiled and unusable? Why was the manna tied to the law of Shabbat? Finally, why did the manna cease falling when the B'nei Yisrael entered the Land of Israel? Each question is important but all of the questions together help us to understand the necessity of asking each of the other questions.

Rashi explains that a set of laws were provided with the manna, and performing these laws properly would be a warm-up to following all the laws of the Torah. The Ramban strongly disagrees, as he feels that the test was the manna itself. This was an unusual food, one not known to their fathers and one which left them no recourse for other sustenance. Hashem could have provided them with other food if He led them by



way of cities from which they could have purchased food. Instead Hashem made them totally dependent on the manna which He provided. The Or HaChaim understood that the manna was perfect and did not need preparation except for those who desired to boil it or bake it. The Children of Israel would have much more free time in which to see if they would follow Hashem's Torah. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch believes that the test was designed to create people who would have enough faith in Hashem that they would "cheerfully and happily enjoy today, carry out their duties for today and leave the worry for tomorrow to Him Who has provided for today and could be trusted for tomorrow. Only such unreserved confidence in Hashem could ensure the fulfillment of His Laws."

The Kli Yakar explains why the manna fell each day and would spoil by the next morning. The B'nei Yisrael needed to grow in their faith in Hashem. A person who does not leave over any food until the next day has faith that new food will be available. A person who has a stockpile of food worries what he will eat tomorrow. The Kli Yakar explains that one might think that a person who receives a double portion on Friday would not be worried, since he has already received his Shabbat portion, yet he might still be concerned that the amount that he had taken on Friday would not last throughout Shabbat.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains the importance of the double portion on Friday and the lack of a portion on Shabbat. By causing the B'nei Yisrael to gather a double portion on the eve of Shabbat (Friday) and not gather on Shabbat itself, Hashem was able to demonstrate the Holiness of Shabbat to the people. The B'nei Yisrael had already seen (at Mara) that the Shabbat was a day of rest. Here, the B'nei Yisrael learned of the Holiness of Shabbat. Here was born the concept of mazon l'guf, food for the body, and mazon lanefesh, food for the soul. This was a precursor to the sixth day of Sivan, the day on which the B'nei Yisrael would receive the ultimate in mazon lanefesh, the commandments of the Torah.

This brings us to our final question, namely, why did the manna cease falling when the B'nei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael? When the B'nei Yisrael arrived in Eretz Yisrael, several things happened at once. The men of Israel were all circumcised since the danger of travel had postponed their circumcision. The B'nei Yisrael also prepared for the first celebration of Pesach since the celebration of Pesach at the end of the first year after leaving Egypt. Also, the manna, which had provided sustenance for the people, was replaced by the produce of Eretz Yisrael. The Land of Israel now provided for both the physical and spiritual needs of the people. Eretz Yisrael was called "a land flowing with milk and honey". Milk is a source of life and is referred to as a symbol of Torah. Honey is a source of sustenance and can be considered the physical

sustenance of the people. When the B'nei Yisrael entered the land, they also became subject to the laws of Sh'mittah. A double portion of growth was provided on the sixth year which sustained the people for two years. This is a replication of the manna for Shabbat. Thus, we can see that the Land of Israel itself continued to provide the tests of faith for the people.

Today we lack a conscious sign of the goodness of Hashem like the manna. When we develop our faith in Hashem as the Provider, we understand that as we fulfill our responsibilities, by working or learning, that Hashem fulfills his His promise to provide us with our needs. When we know that Hashem will provide, our faith brings us to a new level of calmness and acceptance. May our own experience bring us to this same level of faith. ©2020 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Moshe was eighty years old and Aharon was eighty-three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh..." (Shmos 7:7) It's extremely unusual for the Torah to tell us the age of a prophet but here it does it twice in the same sentence. Further, we know that when it comes to prophecy, only things that have meaning for future generations are recorded. What lesson are we to learn from this and how does it impact our lives?

Even in those days, when some people lived a very long time, seventy was considered an age of longevity, and eighty was quite a feat. Despite this, Moshe and Aharon, as octogenarians, were quick to arise and do Hashem's bidding. But how did they manage it?

The Ibn Ezra who points out that no other prophets were mentioned as having been prophets at this age explains that the nevuah of Moshe and Aharon was different than that of other prophets. Whereas other prophets were instructed to predict the future or to issue warnings or moral instruction, Moshe and Aharon's prophecies were part of teaching Torah to Klal Yisrael and through them all the righteous people would gain a portion in the Next World. This put their prophecy on a much higher level.

It would seem, then, that the Torah is teaching us how to find the mythical "fountain of youth." It is in learning and teaching Torah. Moshe and Aharon were able to respond with alacrity to Hashem's call because Torah energizes us. Yehoshua, Moshe's disciple, was called a "youth." At the time, he was 53 years old! However, because he was studying Torah from Moshe, and would later teach others, he was young and fresh and energetic.

One more thing: at eighty years old, Moshe had lived a full life. According to the Midrash, he had grown up in the palace, fought and won wars, been a king for

40 years, and more. He could rest on his laurels having lived a productive life. Aharon had spent his whole life as a devoted cleric, caring for his spiritual flock in Egypt. He lived a full life of focused purpose, with no need for regret.

And yet, when the opportunity came for them to do more, they jumped at it. This is the lesson. Age is just a number but attitude can override it. When your purpose is lofty, and your passion is holiness, you cannot wait to take on the next mission and achieve even more greatness in your life.

The Jewish Community of Metz in the Rhine Valley was looking for a new Rabbi. They sent a letter to R' Aryeh Leib Epstein, author of the Sefer HaPardes, offering him the position. He was the Rav in Koenigsburg and at that time he had a very special guest in his city: R' Aryeh Leib Gunzberg, better known by the name of his sefer, "Shaagas Aryeh."

R' Epstein said to him, "You are so great in wisdom and fear of Heaven that you are the appropriate candidate for the Rabbinic seat that once belonged to the great R' Eliezer of Metz, student of Rabbeinu Tam and author of the Sefer Yereim."

When the Shaagas Aryeh arrived in Metz the city joyfully accepted him as their spiritual leader. However, his seventy years of age gave some of them pause. "I know what you are thinking," he said, "that I am too old to be your Rav. But just as Yaakov assured Pharaoh that he looked older than he was, I assure you that I am not too old. I guarantee that I will serve this community for twenty years!"

Twenty years later, when he was 90, a bookshelf toppled onto the Shaagas Aryeh. When he was found the next morning he said, "All the seforim I argued with attacked me last night. I made peace with all the authors but one, and for that I must soon leave this world." He passed away shortly after that - having served his kehila for the twenty promised years. ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

A few weeks ago, a good friend relayed the following story to me: His son was playing basketball in their driveway with a couple of friends. At one point, his son took an inadvertent blow to his mouth and a tooth crown popped out. After a fruitless search, he went inside and told his mother.

My friend's wife went outside, took up the cause, and found the crown in no time. Their son said in astonishment, "Mom, I looked for 15 minutes but couldn't find it -- how did you find it so quickly?" She explained, "You were looking for a small piece of enamel, I was looking for \$1,300 dollars!"

Understanding the true value of things and appreciating what you have is one of the keys to lifelong happiness. Unfortunately, the human condition

makes this difficult to achieve. Our sages teach, "A person who has one hundred wants two hundred and person with two hundred wants four hundred" (Koheles Rabbah 1:13).

Empirically, it would seem that it doesn't make a difference what sums we are discussing. Meaning, even if a person has one hundred million dollars he wants two hundred million; if he has two hundred million he wants four hundred million.

Honestly, is there a significant difference in one's quality of life between having one hundred million dollars to having two hundred million?

Yet there is clearly an insatiable desire to accumulate ever more and more. This would probably explain why the world has about 2,500 billionaires (not surprisingly, New York City has the most billionaires of any city in the world with over a hundred). Unless one has acquired wealth the old-fashioned way -- by inheriting it -- there seems to be a powerful force driving one to continue spending energy, effort, and time working to gain more.

This week's Torah reading teaches us a powerful lesson regarding wealth and also instructs us on how a person can know when they are satisfied with what they have. Seemingly, the goal is to know when you have enough, but this is obviously quite difficult to achieve. (Similarly, many people have the same issue when it comes to eating, how does one incorporate a habit that will enable them not to overeat?)

God decreed that Abraham's descendants were to go to a land that was not their own and become slaves for four hundred years (Genesis 15:13). In the next verse, God promises Abraham that when his descendants leave the land of their bondage they will do so bearing great wealth. How did God fulfill this promise?

God pleaded with Moses that the Jewish people should ask their Egyptian neighbors for fine jewelry and clothes so that when they left Egypt they would have wealth (see Exodus 11:2). They did so and managed to accumulate significant going away presents (ibid 12:35-36). Yet according to our sages, all that they managed to get from the Egyptians as they were leaving paled in comparison to the booty they seized from the Egyptian soldiers who came to slaughter them but instead were drowned by God in the Red Sea.

Before we go on, I want to digress for a moment. In reading the above two paragraphs (or the original story in the Torah for that matter), one might walk away with the feeling that the Jewish people wrongly plundered the Egyptian populace. In fact, according to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 91a), this very accusation was raised before the court of Alexander the Great once he had conquered all of Eurasia.

The Jewish people were subpoenaed to answer the claim of the Egyptians that they stole their

gold and silver upon leaving Egypt and never returned it. After all, the Egyptians had proof; the Jewish nation's own bible corroborated their accusation!

Gaviah Ben Pesisiah, a sage who appears just this one time in the entire Talmud, gave the following answer: "You have a legitimate claim, for the Torah records that we left Egypt with much of your gold and silver."

"But the very same Torah says that we were slaves for four hundred and thirty years (Exodus 12:40) -- so in fact, we have a counterclaim! Pay us the wages for 600,000 slaves who labored day and night for four hundred and thirty years; for those wages surely exceed anything we might have taken when we left Egypt!" Alexander the Great turned to the Egyptian plaintiffs and demanded that they answer the counterclaim. "Give us three days to answer" the Egyptians pleaded. He granted them the time and they promptly disappeared and never returned.

Returning to our discussion, the Torah records in this week's parsha that there was so much wealth on the banks of the Red Sea that Moses literally had to pull them away from the seashore. This was because all the precious gold, silver, and fine jewelry that the Egyptian soldiers had worn (they even adorned their horses with jewels!) had sunk to the bottom of the Red Sea when they and their horses drowned. However, God delivered a miracle and all the gold, silver, and jewels were brought up by the sea and deposited onto the shore from which the Jewish people were able to collect them.

Moses wanted the Jewish people to leave the seashore but struggled to get to them to comply because of all the wealth that was still lying on the sand in front of them. Even after they had collected a large amount, there was still more to be had and they didn't want to leave.

But this story begs the following question: Since the entire episode was a miracle, why didn't God just bring forth the exact amount that He wanted the Jewish people to take? Once they had collected everything, they would have surely left on their own without Moses having to admonish them to leave. Why should the sea deposit onto the banks more than they should take? Moreover, why would Moses even care if they stayed and collected more?

There is a very deep message here. God promised our forefather Abraham that the Jewish people would leave Egypt wealthy. But at what point can you consider yourself wealthy? At what point are you satisfied with what you have?

The answer is when you leave gold, silver, and precious jewels laying on the ground in front of you and you just walk away. That is what Moses was trying to teach them: You are wealthy now and you do not need any more. When they realized that they had so much that they could simply walk away from more they finally

understood that they were in fact wealthy and left the seashore. Thus, God fulfilled his promise to Abraham.

In a similar (but much more mundane) vein, I recall hearing many years ago that Weight Watchers recommended, as a lifestyle change, a habit of leaving food on your plate during meals. In other words, instead of blindly consuming everything on your plate, consider how you feel, and when you feel satisfied stop eating and leave what is left on your plate. (I'll bet you didn't think you were going to get dieting tips from me today!)

When a person can honestly look at everything he has and say, "I have enough," then he can finally walk away from the pressures, the time, and the mind space required to stay in the "rat race." More importantly, he can begin to focus on other life enriching endeavors (family, travel, acquiring knowledge, etc.) and can truly begin to enjoy all the blessings that he has been given. ©2020 Rabbi Y. Zweig & torah.org

RABBI ARI WEISS

The Proverbial Point

This shabbat, besides being Shabbat Shirah, is also Tu B'shevat, the Jewish new year for trees [ed note - Tu B'shevat is on Monday this year]. The importance of trees in Jewish life is expressed in many areas, not the least of which is in this week's parsha, B'Shalach. In it we read how Moshe used a tree to sweeten the waters at Marah, and how the Jews found seventy date palms waiting for them in the oasis of Elim.

Interestingly, the Talmud makes the statement that one who is studying Torah and stops to admire a tree, is worthy of death (although not literally punishable by death). Additionally, we read that no trees were allowed to be planted or cultivated anywhere on the Temple mount in Jerusalem. From these sources, one might question the perspective the sages had regarding trees and their importance, but in truth these statements relate the depth of their understanding regarding the specialness of trees.

Throughout the Torah and Talmud, trees have profound mystical symbolism. The Torah itself is referred to as the "Etz Chaim" - the tree of life. The righteous are likened to the date palm and the mighty cedar, while the book of Shir HaShirim is replete with metaphoric representations of the nation of Israel as trees. Indeed, the connection that a tree has with the ground, while constantly reaching skyward with its limbs is symbolic of the human condition: grounded in the physical, yet striving for the spiritual. In trees we see not only a model of our own spiritual growth, but in fact a representation of our connectedness to our history and G-d Himself.

The meaning, therefore, of the previously mentioned sources, is not, G-d forbid, that our sages didn't appreciate the importance and necessity of the

trees. Rather, they understood that our appreciation of plant life needs to be utilized as a method of connecting with the Divine, not as an end in itself. One who loses that connection between G-d's creations and G-d Himself, Heaven forbid, is referred to as a "kotzet B'nityot" - one who severs a tree from that which sustains it. In a similar way, the idolatrous religion of Asheira, involving the worship of trees, evolved when people began to disassociate the trees with G-d, and worshipped the trees as an end in itself. Therefore, on the temple mount, the location of the ultimate connection with G-d, it is not appropriate for there to be representations and symbols. Why notice a tree as a symbol of the connection with the Divine, when you can partake in the real thing? The same is true with Torah study; one who is connecting with G-d through Torah, but then stops to focus instead on a metaphor of that connection, is missing the proverbial point.

So this Shabbat, on Tu B'Shevat, please take the time to appreciate the beautiful and vital role trees play in our world, but then be sure to thank Hashem for creating them. Indulge in the delicious and nutritious fruits and vegetables with which we've been blessed, but be sure to begin and end with the appropriate blessings, giving praise and thanks to the Creator who saw fit to grace us with His abundance. Use the wonderful creations of this world as stepping stones to bring us even closer to our loving and caring G-d, and our appreciation of those creations will be that much more profound. ©2013 Rabbi A. Weiss

