

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Some measure of the radicalism that is introduced into the world by the story of the Exodus can be seen in the sustained mistranslation of the three keywords with which God identified Himself to Moses at the Burning Bush.

At first, He described Himself as follows: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." But then, after Moses heard the mission he was to be sent on, he said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' Then what shall I tell them?" That was when God replied, cryptically, Ehyeh asher ehyeh (Ex. 3:14).

This was translated into Greek as ego eimi ho on, and into Latin as ego sum qui sum, meaning 'I am who I am', or 'I am He who is'. The early and medieval Christian theologians all understood the phrase to be speaking about ontology, the metaphysical nature of God's existence as the ground of all being. It meant that He was 'Being-itself, timeless, immutable, incorporeal, understood as the subsisting act of all existing'. Augustine defines God as that which does not change and cannot change. Aquinas, continuing the same tradition, reads the Exodus formula as saying that God is 'true being, that is, being that is eternal, immutable, simple, self-sufficient, and the cause and principal of every creature'.¹

But this is the God of Aristotle and the philosophers, not the God of Abraham and the Prophets. Ehyeh asher ehyeh means none of these things. It means 'I will be what, where, or how I will be'. The essential element of the phrase is the dimension omitted by all the early Christian translations, namely the future tense. God is defining Himself as the Lord of history who is about to intervene in an unprecedented way, to liberate a group of slaves from the mightiest empire of the ancient world and lead them on a journey towards liberty. Already in the eleventh century, reacting against the neo-Aristotelianism that he saw

creeping into Judaism, Judah Halevi made the point that God introduces Himself at the beginning of the Ten Commandments not by saying, "I am the Lord your God who created heaven and earth," but rather, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."²

Far from being timeless and immutable, God in the Hebrew Bible is active, engaged, in constant dialogue with His people, calling, urging, warning, challenging and forgiving. When Malachi says in the name of God, 'I the Lord do not change' (Malachi 3:6), he is not speaking about His essence as pure being, the unmoved mover, but about His moral commitments. God keeps His promises even when His children break theirs. What does not change about God are the covenants He makes with Noah, Abraham and the Israelites at Sinai.

So remote is the God of pure being – the legacy of Plato and Aristotle – that the distance is bridged in Christianity by a figure that has no counterpart in Judaism, the son of God, one person who is both human and Divine. In Judaism we are all both human and Divine, dust of the earth yet breathing God's breath and bearing God's image. These are profoundly different theologies.

"I will be what I will be" means that I will enter history and transform it. God was telling Moses that there was no way he or anyone else could know in advance what God was about to do. He told him in general terms that He was about to rescue the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. But as for specifics, Moses and the people would know God not through His essence but through His acts. Therefore, the future tense is key here. They could not know Him until he acted.

He would be a God of surprises. He would do things never seen before, create signs and wonders that would be spoken about for thousands of years. They would set in motion wave after wave of repercussions. People would learn that slavery is not an inevitable condition, that might is not right, that empires are not impregnable, and that a tiny people like the Israelites could do great things if they attached their destiny to heaven. But none of this could be predicted

¹ See the insightful study by Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001, pp. 20–38, from which these references are drawn.

² Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari (Kitab Al Khazari): An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, New York, Schocken, 1964, Book I, p. 25.

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in advance. God was saying to Moses and to the people, You will have to trust Me. The destination to which I am calling you is just beyond the visible horizon.

It is very hard to understand how revolutionary this was. Ancient religions were deeply conservative, designed to show that the existing social hierarchy was inevitable, part of the deep structure of reality, timeless and unchangeable. Just as there was a hierarchy in the heavens, and another within the animal kingdom, so there was a hierarchy in human society. That was order. Anything that challenged it represented chaos. Until Israel appeared on the scene, religion was a way of consecrating the status quo.

That is what the story of Israel would overturn. The greatest empire on earth was about to be overthrown. The most powerless of people – foreigners, slaves – were going to go free. This was not simply a blow to Egypt. Although it would take thousands of years, it was a deadly blow to the very concept of a hierarchical society, or of time as what Plato called it, “a moving image of eternity,” a series of passing shadows on a wall of reality that never changes.

Instead, history became an arena of change. Time became something understood as a narrative, a journey or a quest. All this is hinted at in those three words, “I will be what I will be.” I am the God of the future tense.

So Judaism, in the concept of a Messianic age, became the only civilisation whose golden age is in the future. And throughout the Torah, the promised land lies in the future. Abraham does not acquire it. Nor does Isaac. Nor does Jacob. Even Moses, who spends forty years leading the people there, does not get to enter it. It is always just beyond. Soon but not yet.

I think this is one of the most important ideas of Judaism. I wrote a book about it, called Future Tense.³ I remember one evening when Elaine and I had the privilege of discussing this with the founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, in his home in Philadelphia. He was toying with a similar idea. After years of practising psychology he had come to the conclusion that the people with a positive psychology

tended to be future-oriented, whereas those with a negative mindset – he called this, in a brilliant phrase, “learned helplessness” – were often fixated on the past.

A few years later, he and three other scholars published a book on the subject called Homo Prospectus.⁴ What is it, he asked, that makes Homo sapiens different from other species? Answer, we have an unrivalled ability “to be guided by imagining alternatives stretching into the future – prospectation.” We are the future-oriented animal.

I wish this were more deeply understood, because it is fundamental. I have long argued that a fallacy dominates the scientific study of humankind. Science searches for causes; a cause always precedes its effect; therefore science will always seek to explain a phenomenon in the present by reference to something that happened in the past – anything from the genome to early childhood experiences to brain chemistry to recent stimuli. It will follow that science will inevitably deny the existence of human freewill. The denial may be soft or hard, gentle or brutal, but it will come. Freedom will be seen as an illusion. The best we can hope for is Karl Marx’s definition of freedom as “consciousness of necessity.”

But this is a fallacy. Human action is always oriented to the future. I put the kettle on because I want a cup of coffee. I work hard because I want to pass the exam. I act to bring about a future that is not yet. Science cannot account for the future because something that hasn’t happened yet cannot be a cause. Therefore there will always be something about intentional human action that science cannot fully explain.

When God said, “I will be what I will be,” He was telling us something not only about God but about us when we are open to God and have faith in His faith in us.

We can be what we will be if we choose the right and the good. And if we fail and fall, we can change because God lifts us and gives us strength.

And if we can change ourselves, then together we can change the world. We cannot end evil and suffering but we can diminish it. We cannot eliminate injustice, but we can fight it. We cannot abolish sickness but we can treat it and search for cures.

Whenever I visit Israel, I find myself awestruck by the way this ancient people in its history-saturated land is one of the most future-oriented nations on earth, constantly searching for new advances in medical, informational, and nano-technology. Israel writes its story in the future tense.

And the future is the sphere of human freedom, because I cannot change yesterday but I can change tomorrow by what I do today. Therefore, because Judaism is a religion of the future it is a religion of

³ Jonathan Sacks, Future Tense, Hodder and Stoughton, 2009, especially the last chapter, 231-52.

⁴ Martin Seligman, et al., Homo Prospectus, Oxford University Press, 2017.

human freedom, and because Israel is a future-oriented nation, it remains, in the Middle East, an oasis of freedom in a desert of oppression. Tragically, most of Israel's enemies are fixated on the past, and as long as they remain so, their people will never find freedom and Israel will never find peace.

I believe that we must honour the past but not live in it. Faith is a revolutionary force. God is calling to us as once He called to Moses, asking us to have faith in the future and then, with His help, to build it. *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

"But the midwives feared God 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 God 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" God, and preferred God'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 Kasim 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

God'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, since lives will be at stake with either decision! ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah, Jewish history and tradition indicate to us that Heaven oftentimes chooses unusual people for roles that are essential and pivotal in Jewish leadership. King David is a clear example of this historical phenomenon. But I think that we can agree that the choice of Moshe to be the redeemer and eternal teacher of the Jewish people, if not of all civilization, is, at first blush, a strange one.

Moshe has been separated from the Jewish people for decades. Egyptian law had previously slated him for the death penalty for striking an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish slave. Moshe is a shepherd in Midian, far removed from his brethren suffering in Egyptian bondage. And when presented by Heaven with the offer of Jewish leadership, Moshe declines it very forcefully. But the will of Heaven prevails, as is always the case.

Moshe must now embark on his new role of leadership, albeit seemingly reluctantly. He himself wonders why he is begin chosen, when, logically, his brother Aaron would seem to be a better fit for the mission. And, perhaps just as amazing as the choice of Moshe for this position of leadership, is the willingness of the Jewish people to instantly accept him as being entitled and fit for that role.

To most of the Jewish people he is a stranger, an outsider who has a speech impediment and is, at most, a Johnny-come-lately to their troubles and situation. Yet, again we see that it is the will of Heaven that prevails, and it is only through Moshe that the story of the Exodus from Egypt will unfold.

Moshe, however, has outstanding qualities and traits of character that make him the greatest leader in Jewish and world history. Foremost among these attributes is his trait of humility. All leaders must have an appreciation of their talents and possess strong self-worth. However, most leaders are eventually undone by the growth of their egos and the resulting arrogance. Not so Moshe. For even after forty years of leading his people, the Torah still describes Moshe as being the most humble of all human beings on the face

of the earth.

It is this trait that makes him the greatest of all past and future prophets. Moshe also has within himself an unquenchable love for his people. His love for them is sorely tested many times during his forty-year career as their leader, but in spite of all of their backsliding, sins, rebellions and mutterings, it is Moshe's love of the people that remains omnipresent and steadfast. As King Solomon wrote: "Love obliterates all transgressions."

Finally, Moshe's path to complete the mission that Heaven thrust upon him never wavers, no matter what the events and circumstances may be. These noble traits and characteristics are apparently what the Almighty searches for in assigning leaders to our people. Moshe is the model for future Jewish leaders in all generations that will follow him. ©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

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 meyardot 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, meyardot 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.

Rashi living during the Crusades, could never imagine that non-Jews would stand up against the Pharaoh and save Jews.

Sforno mirrors the time in which he lived. As

part of renaissance Italy in the 15th century, he was a universalist. He believed that gentiles would stand up and risk their lives to help 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 God 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 deserve honor remain forever unknown.

It is God alone, who really knows. ©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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Suspicion

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"A person who suspects an innocent man, will be punished physically ("Hachoshed bchsherm lokeh begufo"). This is one of the themes in this week's portion as Moshe loses faith in the Jewish people when he says "V'hem lo yaaminu li" (and they will not believe me). This would seem to be a good reason not to suspect another Jew of committing a sin. However two stories are told of Rabbi Yehoshua, which seem to indicate that he didn't care if people suspected him, nor whether he suspected others of wrong doing.

One story is found in tractate Derech Eretz. Rabbi Yehoshuah welcomed a guest to his home and gave him a place to sleep in the loft. Before retiring Rabbi Yehoshua removed the ladder which was used to gain access to the loft. In the middle of the night this guest gathered all of Rabbi Yehoshua's utensils and attempted to leave the house with them. In the morning the man was found at the bottom of the loft with a broken neck. Rabbi Yehoshua concluded "All people should be looked upon as robbers".

The question that is obvious is how could Rabbi Yehoshua suspect this person when we know that one is not permitted to suspect another person?

Various answers are offered. Some say that this law (not to suspect another person) only applies to someone you know, such as Moshe in relation to Israel or the Elders of the Sanhedrin in relation to the High Priest. Those regarding whom you do not know, one may suspect.

A second answer offered is that in the case of Rabbi Yehoshua the guest had already been suspected of wrongdoing and thus Rabbi Yehoshua had a right to suspect him.

A second story is found in Tractate Shabbat (127;2). One time Rabbi Yehoshua had to speak to a Roman noblewoman. He went with his students but before he entered the closed room with this woman he took off his Tefillin. When he completed his meeting he asked his students if they suspected him of wrongdoing. They responded that they judged him favorably as there could easily be a valid explanation. How did Rabbi Yehoshua place himself in a position that his students would be tempted to judge him unfavorably?

Perhaps we can answer that Rabbi Yehoshua knew his students well and he also knew the kind of education that they received from him and was confident that they would not judge him unfairly. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

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.

Pharaoh's lack of hakarat hatov to Yosef who saved Egypt from ruinous famine and enriched Pharaoh's treasury will not go unpunished. In fact, each of the ten plagues that will befall Egypt seem to be lessons to an ungrateful Pharaoh; 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. (TZEFRDAYA/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. © 2014 D. Weiss

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"I will go down to rescue [the nation] from the hand of Egypt and bring them up to a land flowing with milk and honey, the place of the Canaanites..." (Shmos 3:8) The Jews began their descent into Egypt and ultimately slavery when Yosef was sold as a slave to Egypt. Yaakov came down years later and the Jews established a presence there. Now, as Hashem tells Moshe that He is going to bring them to the land He promised their forefathers, where Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov lived, it seems strange that there is no mention of going back to their homeland, from whence their ancestors came.

The commentaries point out that the Torah does not call it "the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, etc." but rather "the place of the Canaanites." There are several reasons given that are similar with slight nuanced differences. The Ramban says it is called the place of the Canaanites because the Jews were intended to move in and replace those inhabitants, not remain living in their midst. Though our forefathers sojourned in the land, now their descendants would dwell there and be the sole heirs to it.

The Netziv sees another aspect of this. Though it was the place of these named nations, it was not intended, from the time of Creation, to be so. Rather, they, too merely lived in the land until Hashem would give the place to the people for whom the Land of Israel was created - the Jewish People upon their coming up from Egypt.

Finally, the Torah tells us elsewhere that it was

because of the wickedness of the nations that Hashem ejected them from the land. Since it was possible to lose the right to it, it was not called their land. As Rashi tells us at the beginning of the Torah, the reason for the Creation story was to teach us that Hashem created the world and He can give it to whomever He so desires. He can give it to the nations and then take it away and give it to another nation, namely the Jews.

With this we can answer our question. The reason the Jews leaving Egypt were not told they were going "back" to their homeland, is because this would imply that our previous habitation somehow gave us a right to it. This is not the case. Rather, the Land of Israel is a gift from Hashem as promised to Avraham and his children. When He gives it to us it is ours; if not, though we might have been cultivating it, we have no such claim.

We are to learn from here that since everything we have comes from Hashem, one should never feel that "I earned it so this is mine;" or "This is all the fruit of my labors." We know the dangers of saying that our own strength achieved great things. Instead, we would be wise to remember that all we have is ours because Hashem, in His kindness, bestowed it upon us to use and we must be worthy and appreciative of every bit.

At the age of 76, Rabbi Shimon Schwab, the late esteemed rabbi of the Washington Heights German-Jewish community became confined to a wheelchair. A grandson who would often wheel him around was amazed at Rabbi Schwab's ability to adapt. R' Schwab never complained about his predicament. He always wore a smile and was in a pleasant mood.

"Opa," asked his grandson, "How could it be that you function now in a wheelchair the same way you functioned when you were able to walk? Don't you ever get upset and down about having to be in a wheelchair for the rest of your life?"

"Tell me," said R' Schwab, "If someone gave you a million dollars and after a while asked you to give him back one hundred dollars, would you have any qualms about returning that amount? The Master of the World has given me a fully functioning and healthy body for 76 years, a million dollars. Now He has decided to take away my ability to walk, for valid reasons known only to Him. Should I now complain because He has chosen to take back a hundred dollars?" © 2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI YAKOV HABER

TorahWeb

"Moshe answered and said, 'Behold they will not believe me, and they will not heed my voice, but they will say, "The Lord has not appeared to you."' (Shemos 4:1). In response to these words of Moshe Rabbeinu -- presenting the argument before Hashem that the Jewish people will not accept Moshe's role as the redeemer without proof, Hashem instructs

Moshe to perform three signs before the nation: changing his staff into a snake, causing tzara'as on his own hand, and converting water into blood. The midrashim and commentaries present diametrically opposed interpretations as to the validity of Moshe's claim. They also offer different approaches both concerning the need for three signs and the symbolism behind them.

Moshe was the first redeemer, the first mashiach if you will; even if not formally anointed with shemen hamishcha, he was appointed as such by Hashem Yisborach. Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 12:3 quoted further on) defines the messianic mission as leading the Jewish people out of exile, teaching them Torah and bringing them closer to observing mitzvos, successfully warring against the enemies of Israel, and building the Beis HaMikdash. Moshe's role certainly consisted of all of these. (He built the mishkan and originally was supposed to lead the Jews into Eretz Yisrael and build the mikdash.) In the language of Chazal (see Koheles Rabba 1:1 and other places), he is dubbed the "go'eil rishon", and the "go'eil acharon", Mashiach ben Dovid, will share common characteristics with Moshe Rabbeinu. (Also see Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva 9:2.) Since Jewish history has seen its fair share of false messiahs, one can certainly understand Moshe's concern. Indeed, Rashba (Responsa, 1:548) writes the following about the identification of the redeemer: [The nation of] Israel, the inheritors of the true religion...[are] more willing to suffer exile...than believe in something until they investigate thoroughly that which is told to them even concerning that which appears to be an os and mofeis...Even the Jews [in Egypt] who were subject to back breaking, harsh labor [with] Moshe having been commanded to inform them [of the imminent redemption], with all that, [Moshe] said "They will not believe me!" and he needed several miracles [to prove himself]. This is a true indicator to our people, the people of G-d, not to be convinced of something, until they investigate it thoroughly.

Rashi (4:2,3,6,8), by contrast, quotes Chazal as criticizing Moshe for questioning the belief of the people concerning his appointment as the redeemer. Moshe is viewed as having spoken lashon hara about them, and the first two signs were meant to indicate his sin by showing him a snake, the first creature to speak lashon hara about its Creator, and by making his hand leprous, tzara'as being a punishment for lashon hara. Rashi quotes the midrash which even explains that by Moshe performing these signs before the people, this would demonstrate to the Jewish people how much Hashem had confidence in their belief such that Moshe who dared express lack of confidence in it was immediately smitten by tzara'as.

Chazal's view, at first glance, is difficult. Are the Jewish people expected to believe in any person who claims that he is the redeemer?! This objection was

exactly the thrust of Rav Sasportas' (Tzitzas Noveil Tzvi, p. 66) blistering attack against those -- even Rabbinic personalities -- who believed, at least initially, in the messiahship of Shabbetai Tzvi. In his words: "Have you seen in any book that we are obligated to believe in anyone who states, 'I am the messiah'?! [Without proof] anyone who wishes to be crowned with the title of mashiach will do so if his piousness is evident, and in accordance with the number of pious people will be the number of messiahs!"

The commentaries on Rashi rally to defend this view of Chazal asserting that there was proof of Moshe's appointment even without the need for signs. Rashi earlier (3:18) quotes the midrash that the Jewish people had a tradition from Ya'akov Avinu and Yosef that the redeemer will present himself with the language of "pakod pakad'ti -- I have surely remembered you". Hashem revealed this language to Moshe (3:16) who told it to the elders of Israel (4:31). Ramban (3:18) questions the value of this presentation as a proof since it would have been possible that Moshe learned it while he was in Egypt just as the elders knew it. He suggests that the elders of Israel had a tradition from Ya'akov Avinu that the first person to present these words would, in fact, be the redeemer, thus eliminating the possibility of impostors. Alternatively, Ramban answers based on a midrash which asserts that Moshe left Egypt at the age of 12 before the age of bar mitzvah when this sign would have been given over to the children. Maharal (Gur Aryeh ibid.) challenges both answers, the first one based on the fact the Hashem would certainly allow human free choice enabling an impostor to misappropriate the phrase. Consequently, he suggests that the key phrase "pakod pakad'ti" would merely serve as a means of piquing the B'nei Yisrael's interest so that they would listen to Moshe but would not conclusively prove his appointment; he would then prove himself through the subsequent miracles performed before them.

The Torah states concerning the miracle of K'rias Yam Suf, "14:31) (ויאמינו בד' ובמשה עבדו". Since the Torah states that they then believed in Moshe, it would appear that the former confirmation of Moshe as the redeemer was not fully settled in the minds of Israel until his mission had been completed by the utter destruction of the Egyptian pursuers. In other words, Moshe proved his messiahship conclusively by doing no less than doing what the redeemer is supposed to do -- redeem the Jewish people. What emerges then are two different models of the redeemer proving his authenticity: performing miracles or stating some kind of "password" on the one hand versus actually causing the redemption on the other.

These same two models are at the root of a Rishonic debate as to how the final redeemer will prove himself. Famously, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 93b)

comments that when Bar Kochba claimed that he was mashiach, the Sages asked him to rule on a halachic matter through smell based on the verse in Yeshayahu "והריחו ביראת ד". After he failed the test, they killed him. Ra'avad quotes this as the normative condition necessary for mashiach. Similarly, Rambam in his Iggeres Teiman states: "A previously unknown man will arise. The signs and miracles which will be performed by him are the proofs of the truth of his lineage." But this assertion is contradicted by no less an authority than Rambam himself! In Hilchos Melachim (11:3) Rambam writes: One should not presume that the Messianic king must work miracles and wonders, bring about new phenomena in the world, resurrect the dead, or perform other similar deeds. This is definitely not true.

Rambam then proceeds to prove his point from Bar Kochba since R' Akiva and the other sages did not ask him to perform miracles to prove his messiahship! Kesef Mishne notes that Rambam relied on other midrashim which differ from the aforementioned Gemara Sanhedrin quoted by Ra'avad. Rambam (11:4) then proceeds to state his view of how mashiach proves himself: If a king will arise from the House of David who diligently studies the Torah and observes its commandments according to the Written and Oral Torah as David, his ancestor [did], will compel all of Israel to walk in its ways and rectify the breaches in its observance, and fight the wars of God, he is the presumed mashiach. If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is the certain mashiach.

Several recent commentaries suggest a resolution of these seemingly contradictory sources. As explored elsewhere, the Gemara in Sanhedrin (98a) presents the statement of R. Yehoshua ben Leivi that there are two tracks of redemption: an on-time, natural track and a rushed, supernatural track. The latter depends on merit; the former does not. If the redemption is natural, then mashiach will prove his credentials by performing messianic activities as mentioned by Rambam in Hilchos Melachim. If we merit a rushed redemption, he will prove his role through miracles. A recent, prominent Jewish thinker added that each model is a foretaste of what era he will usher in. If the redemption is on time and will usher in a natural messianic era, then it is logical that he will prove himself naturally. If, on the other hand, the redemption is based on merit and hence, begins a supernatural era, the mashiach will introduce this era with miracles. This resolution helps explain why Moshe had to perform miracles to prove himself. The redemption from Egypt was "rushed" since the original exile was supposed to be for 400 years, and instead, only lasted 210 years. Indeed, the redemption from Egypt was followed by a forty-year



supernatural period of the Jewish people's sojourn in the desert, and perhaps that is why this period was introduced by Moshe's initial miracles. If Moshe had led the Jewish people into Eretz Yisrael, it is reasonable to assume that the miraculous era would have continued.

Rambam (ibid. 11:1) writes: "Anyone who does not believe in him or does not await his coming, denies not only the words of the prophets but the Torah itself and Moshe Rabbeinu". In our spiritually confused and geopolitically troubled world, it is our fervent wish that this brief summary and comparison of the revelation of the first and last redeemers should contribute to the longing for the blessed day when the true Go'eil and Master of history, Hashem Yisborach, will speedily send the true mashiach to redeem his beloved people. © 2020 Rabbi Y. Haber and TorahWeb.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

In this week's Parashah, we read of Bnei Yisrael's enslavement in Egypt. R' Eliezer Dan Ralbag z"l (1832-1895; Rosh Yeshiva of the Etz Chaim Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) writes: Hashem told Avraham (Bereishit 15:13), "Know with certainty that your offspring will be aliens in a land not their own, Va'avadum / and they will serve them, V'inu / and they will oppress them four hundred years." Our Sages say that the 400 years began when Yitzchak was born, for he, also, was an alien in a land not his own--the land of the Canaanites and Plishtim. This counted toward fulfillment of the prophecy because, in the Torah, the letter "Vav" before a word can mean "or" as well as "and"; thus, the prophecy can mean: "Your offspring will be aliens in a land not their own, or they will serve them, or they will oppress them." Any of those three situations -- alien status, slavery, or oppression -- could count toward completing the 400 years.

R' Ralbag continues: In this light, we can understand why the tribe of Levi did not need to be enslaved. It was sufficient that they were aliens. Indeed, for this reason, Moshe (a Levi) named his oldest son "Gershom" -- "for he said, 'I was a Ger / alien in a foreign land'." (Shmot 18:3)

In this light, as well, we can better understand Yosef's story. Yaakov hoped to fulfill Avraham's prophecy by being an alien, as Yitzchak had. Thus we read (Bereishit 37:1), "Yaakov settled in the land where his father was a Ger, in the Land of Canaan." However, Yaakov's growing and powerful family could not be considered aliens in Canaan, so "the troubles with Yosef began" (see Rashi there). Notably, Yosef was sold into slavery but soon was elevated to a position of authority, because he was, at least, an alien. But, when Yosef became too comfortable in Egypt and began preening himself (see Rashi to Bereishit 39:6), he was no longer an alien, so he was again imprisoned and enslaved. (Damesek Eliezer) © 2020 S. Katz & torah.org