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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

The sedra of Shemot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moses, culminating in the moment at which God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant. I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which God summons Moses to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom -- a challenge which, no less than four times, Moses declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else. It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations. The Torah states: "Moses replied: 'But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, 'God did not appear to you'.'" (4:1)

The sages, ultra-sensitive to nuances in the text, evidently noticed three strange features of this response. The first is that God had already told Moses, "They will listen to you" (3:18). Moses' reply seems to contradict God's prior assurance. To be sure, the commentators offered various harmonising interpretations. Ibn Ezra suggests that God had told Moses that the elders would listen to him, whereas Moses expressed doubts about the mass of the people. Ramban says that Moses did not doubt that they would believe initially, but he thought that they would lose faith as soon as they saw that Pharaoh would not let them go. There are other explanations, but the fact remains that Moses was not satisfied by God's assurance. His own experience of the fickleness of the people (one of them, years earlier, had already said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?") made him doubt that they would be easy to lead.

The second anomaly is in the signs that God gave Moses to authenticate his mission. The first (the staff that turns into a snake) and third (the water that turned into blood) reappear later in the story. They are signs that Moses and Aaron perform not only for the Israelites but also for the Egyptians. The second, however, does not reappear. God tells Moses to put his hand in his cloak. When he takes it out he sees that it has become "leprous as snow". What is the significance of this particular sign? The sages recalled that later, Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking negatively about Moses (Bamidbar 12:10). In general they understood leprosy as a punishment for lashon hara, derogatory speech. Had Moses, perhaps, been guilty of the same sin?

The third detail is that, whereas Moses' other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the sages arrived at the following comment: "Resh Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, Moses replied: But they will not believe me. However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moses: They are believers, the children of believers, but you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the people believed (Ex. 4: 31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Abraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moses] Because you did not believe in Me (Num. 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written: And the Lord said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak...' (Ex. 4:6)." (B.T. Shabbat 97a)

This is an extraordinary passage. Moses, it now becomes clear, was entitled to have doubts about his own worthiness for the task. What he was not entitled to do was to have doubts about the people. In fact, his doubts were amply justified. The people were fractious. Moses calls them a "stiff necked people". Time and again during the wilderness years they complained, sinned, and wanted to return to Egypt. Moses was not wrong in his estimate of their character. Yet God reprimanded him; indeed punished him by making his hand leprous. A fundamental principle of Jewish leadership is intimated here for the first time: a leader does not need faith in himself, but he must have faith in the people he is to lead.

This is an exceptionally important idea. The political philosopher Michael Walzer has written insightfully about social criticism, in particular about two stances the critic may take vis--vis those he criticises. On the one hand there is the critic as outsider. At some stage, beginning in ancient Greece: "Detachment was added to defiance in the self-portrait of the hero. The impulse was Platonic; later on it was Stoic and Christian. Now the critical enterprise was said to require that one leave the city, imagined for the sake of the departure as a darkened cave, find one's way, alone, outside, to the illumination of Truth, and only then return to examine and reprove the inhabitants. The critic-who-returns doesn't

engage the people as kin; he looks at them with a new objectivity; they are strangers to his new-found Truth."

This is the critic as detached intellectual. The prophets of Israel were quite different. Their message, writes Johannes Lindblom, was "characterized by the principle of solidarity". "They are rooted, for all their anger, in their own societies," writes Walzer. Like the Shunamite woman (Kings 2 4:13), their home is "among their own people". They speak, not from outside, but from within. That is what gives their words power. They identify with those to whom they speak. They share their history, their fate, their calling, their covenant. Hence the peculiar pathos of the prophetic calling. They are the voice of God to the people, but they are also the voice of the people to God. That, according to the sages, was what God was teaching Moses: What matters is not whether they believe in you, but whether you believe in them. Unless you believe in them, you cannot lead in the way a prophet must lead. You must identify with them and have faith in them, seeing not only their surface faults but also their underlying virtues. Otherwise, you will be no better than a detached intellectual -- and that is the beginning of the end. If you do not believe in the people, eventually you will not even believe in God. You will think yourself superior to them, and that is a corruption of the soul.

The classic text on this theme is Maimonides' Epistle on Martyrdom. Written in 1165, when Maimonides was thirty years old, it was occasioned by a tragic period in medieval Jewish history when an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, forced many Jews to convert to Islam under threat of death. One of the forced converts (they were called anusim; later they became known as marranos) asked a rabbi whether he might gain merit by practising as many of the Torah's commands as he could in secret. The rabbi sent back a dismissive reply. Now that he had forsaken his faith, he wrote, he would achieve nothing by living secretly as a Jew. Any Jewish act he performed would not be a merit but an additional sin.

Maimonides' Epistle is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets who criticised the people of Israel, including the one above about Moses. He then writes: "If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe -- Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels -- because they briefly criticized the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who criticized the forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of sages and their disciples, priests and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?"

The Epistle is a definitive expression of the prophetic task: to speak out of love for one's people; to defend them, see the good in them, and raise them to higher achievements through praise, not condemnation.

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. "Those people of whom you have doubts," said God to Moses, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them." *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And it came to pass…when Moses was grown up, and he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian man [ish] smiting a Hebrew man [ish], one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw there was no man [ish], he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. And he went out the second day, and behold – two Hebrews were fighting. 'Why are you beating your brother?' he demanded of the one in the wrong. And he said, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?'" (Exodus 2:11–14) Moses, the redeemer of the Hebrews, enters the stage of history like a man stumbling into a nightmare. The world, in contrast to the delights inside the palace, is filled with violence and hatred; the delicate prince is witness to the murder of a kinsman, a brother. He must take some kind of action, but in which direction and for what price? And how does this incident foreshadow his life's destiny? Indeed, only if we understand what Moses did and why, will we understand why the Almighty chose him as the supreme leader of his people.

First of all, we see from the above citation that a prerequisite for becoming the great prophet of the Exodus is renunciation of injustice and the courage to remove its perpetrator, even if as a result the prince will become the outcast, and his life will be placed at risk.

In fact, the great biblical scholar-teacher Prof. Nechama Leibowitz points out that in his own apprenticeship towards achieving his divine vocation, Moses will face three variations on the theme of unjust action: Egyptian striking Hebrew, Hebrew striking Hebrew, and Midianite taking advantage of Midianite – the Midianite shepherds chasing the Midianite shepherdesses, Tziporah and her sisters. In each instance, Moses acts on behalf of the oppressed. This is apparently the primary qualification of a leader-redeemer of Israel.

But the above-quoted verses, especially the one

dealing with the conflicts between Egyptian and Hebrew, raise several questions. First of all, upon examining the text we find that the Egyptian and the Hebrew are not simply identified by their nationality, but also by the extra Hebrew appellation "ish" (man): "He [Moses] saw an Egyptian man [ish mitzri] smiting a Hebrew man [ish ivri]." (Exodus 2:11)

After Moses turns "this way and that way," the text again uses the word "ish" in describing how he saw that there was no person around, no ish, presumably to view the incident and report Moses to the Egyptian authorities. However, having used "ish" three times in rapid succession, when the Torah comes to Moses' slaying of the oppressor, the text merely reads "he smote the Egyptian" without the additional ish – and the absence of that word "ish" requires our attention.

A second problem arises from an apparent discrepancy in Moses' two encounters. After morally castigating the two Hebrews, he finds himself being counter-attacked. And the line that puts dread into Moses' heart, forcing him to flee for his life, is: "Do you mean to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?" (Ex. 2:14). But haven't we just been told that Moses looked in all directions before going ahead and killing the Egyptian murderer? Obviously he had been on the lookout for witnesses. So how is it possible that the next day, what was presumably done in secret is known to all?

Rashi, apparently disturbed by this issue, comments (on Gen. 2:12) that when Moses, prior to killing the Egyptian, looked all around, he didn't merely cast his eyes to his immediate right and left; rather, he looked into the future, to make sure that he wasn't about to kill someone from whom a convert to monotheism would eventually emerge. Apparently, Moses was more concerned with this Egyptian's future progeny than with the actual proximity of potential prosecution witnesses.

An additional answer to our problem of Moses' faulty "look-out" may be derived from a mishna in Ethics of the Fathers: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man…" (Avot 2:6)

Moses witnesses a terrible event, the murder of a Hebrew, and he wants to make sure the Egyptian doesn't go unpunished. But Moses is a prince of Egypt. If he takes action and is found out, he will be placing in jeopardy his exalted status in Pharaoh's palace – and even possibly his very life. Certainly, he has much more to lose than any typical Hebrew slave. Therefore "he turns this way and that way" to see if there is anyone else who will come to the defense of the innocent Hebrew; someone else who will become the "man." But unfortunately, "there is no man" and so he himself must act and be that man. Thus, the next day when two Hebrews ask if he plans to kill them as he killed the Egyptian, he isn't surprised that he's been discovered; he was looking out for someone else with the fortitude to confront this moral challenge rather than for an eyewitness to his own slaying of the Egyptian.

But the first question still remains: Why the repetition of the word "ish" three times, and then the strange absence of the word at the end of the verse?

The Netziv explains that the Hebrew language possesses four basic terms for the human being: adam, gever, enosh, ish. Each one is a grade in the scale of human potential, and the highest achievement is reserved for the term "ish", the category of man who reflects most closely the image of God. In fact, our sages tell us that whenever there is an unidentified ish in the Torah, we should know it is speaking about an angel. (For example, when Joseph is sent by his father to locate his brothers, the text reads, "And a certain man [ish] found him" (Gen. 37:15), and Rashi points out that this ish is none other than the angel Gabriel.)

Keeping the Netziv 's concept in mind, the text now takes on added resonance. In the first verse, Moses sees two men – a Hebrew and an Egyptian – locked in unequal and unfair combat. But they are not mere random representatives of their respective nations. They are both men, extraordinary, accomplished and respected individuals, personages, each one worthy of being called ish. But as a result of their shared fate, they each lose their special status. When Moses looks "this way and that way" at each of them, "he sees that they are no longer 'personages'"(Ex. 2:2). This implies that both the Egyptian and the Hebrew have lost their ishiyut, their special quality, the one because he was doing the smiting and the other one because he was being smitten.

No one would argue that the Egyptian killer loses his ish quality, so that when Moses slays him he slays an Egyptian, not an Egyptian personage, ish. But even the Jewish victim's ish level is shattered. After all, the victim didn't fight back; he was devoid of the most minimal self-respect, which demands self-defense. When a person is beaten, contrary to popular notions, one's ishiyut is not increased, but diminished. The hard reality is that being beaten reduces a person to wounds and pain. And someone who is unable to protect his integrity as a person cannot live as an ish. James Baldwin once said that he can forgive the whites for persecuting the blacks, but he can never forgive the whites for making the blacks feel that they were worthy of persecution. Similarly, the real tragedy of abused wives and children is that they feel guilty and deserving of their pain.

Obviously, this use of the word "ish" also explains our second question, as to why in the subsequent verses we read that the men wanted to know if Moses planned to kill them too. Again, the Torah is telling us that once a person becomes either an oppressor or one of the oppressed, he ipso facto loses the unique human quality within him (although with no fault attached to the one oppressed).

During the Holocaust, many Jewish victims uprooted heaven and earth to retain their dignity, never to lose their ishiyut, their human quality, despite their

oppression. And since 1948, the great moral challenge of the nation of Israel has been how to deal with acts of violence and terror perpetrated by the Arab population without losing our ishiyut in the process, how to vanquish our enemies and still retain our humanity.

The challenge in Israel today is to be strong enough never again to suffer as the smitten and sensitive enough never to abuse our strength. The challenge is to belong neither to the smiters nor to those who are smitten; the challenge is to insist upon our rights with strength and compassion, with courage and sensitivity.

The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Shemot: Defining a Nation, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinShemot. © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

The change in eras is sudden, unexpected and unpredictable. The Jewish people have lived in Egypt for over a century in the land of Goshen in affluence and security. They are apparently very well integrated into Egyptian society and are comfortable in their future there. And then there arises a new king, a different era of eighty years of slavery and death, persecution and torture. Where did this new king come from? How was it that no one anticipated such a scenario?

Pharaoh called for volunteers to help build and modernize the infrastructure of Egypt. The Jews, as good and super citizens of Egypt, volunteered. But slowly, they noticed that they were the only volunteers present for the work. And eventually they came to work on the Egyptian city fortresses as slaves. Soon the entire Jewish population was enslaved, except for the tribe of Levi. In a blink of an historical eye, the Jewish population went from riches to rags, from citizens to slaves, from high society to becoming non-persons.

And the truth of this enormous sea change in the status of the Jews in Egypt caught the Jews by surprise. They knew that Avraham had a dream about bondage and exile, but they did not imagine that they were the generation that would experience its realization and that Egypt was the place where it would occur. So, when it did occur, they were its victims, they were completely unprepared for this new sad era. It would take the leadership of Moshe to readjust their thinking, to make them realize that their future no longer lay in living in Egypt, yearning for redemption.

Even so, our rabbis of the Midrash concluded, that most of the Jews did not survive physically and spiritually to leave Egypt.The truth is that any generation that lives at a time of great unforeseen change finds itself in a difficult situation. It becomes a generation of uncertainty longing to relive its past and seemingly powerless to deal with its present situation effectively, let alone its future.

I think that we can all agree that we are currently undergoing a great change, economically, socially and security-wise. While we may long for past situations which seemed so much more certain and secure, our task currently is to deal effectively with what is facing us now.

The example of Moshe must be replicated to the best of our abilities. The Torah always demands that Jews behave wisely, rationally, and with great faith and belief. Moshe's task is to fulfill this ideal situation of Jewish behavior and with these goals.

Moshe himself traverses the long road from being raised as a prince in the house of Pharaoh to being a hunted man and eventually the messenger of destruction to that very house in which he was raised. The Torah does not record for us Moshe's personal trials and angst in adjusting to situations that were completely new to him. But part of his greatness lies in his God-given ability to do so. So, as we begin the book of Shemot let us resolve to hang in there and deal with our current problems to the best of our abilities. Better days are surely on the way. *© 2026 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Raising a Hand to Strike

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"And Moshe said to the wicked one (*rasha*), 'Why do you strike your fellow?'" (*Shemot* 2:13). The word translated "strike" (*takeh*) is technically in the future tense. From this our Sages derive that one who simply raises his hand against his neighbor is referred to as a *rasha* (a wicked person), even before actually striking him.

The prohibition of injuring another is biblical, derived from the verse: "He may be given up to forty lashes **but not more**" (*Devarim* 25:3). As is the case for all biblical prohibitions (*lavin*), a transgressor is liable to *malkot* (lashes) for transgressing, unless he is already subject to a financial penalty. Therefore, if someone causes an injury to another and the damage done is minimal (less than a *perutah*), he is liable to *malkot*. We might therefore conclude that someone who simply raises his hand against his neighbor (causing no damage and earning himself no financial liability) should incur the punishment of lashes. Why then is such a transgressor only referred to as a *rasha* but not lashed?

It is possible that the prooftext cited above is not the real source of the prohibition. Instead, it may be that the prohibition is rabbinic, with the biblical text simply serving as an *asmachta* (support). Even though according to this understanding the transgression of

raising one's hand against a neighbor is only rabbinic, someone who does so is referred to as a *rasha*. This status may disqualify him to serve as a witness, and may mean that his oath is not relied upon. Alternatively, it is possible that calling him a *rasha* does not disqualify him as a witness. It may simply mean that we are permitted to refer to him as a *rasha*, which is what Moshe did.

There is another significance to a person being considered a *rasha*. The person whom he is threatening is permitted to report him to the ruling authorities, Jewish or non-Jewish, and he is not considered a *moser* (an informer who turns in a fellow Jew to the authorities in defiance of Jewish law). Furthermore, the person being threatened is permitted to attack his attacker – not physically (as he has not yet been struck) but verbally, by name-calling. For example, he may call the threatening person a *mamzer* (a child born of an adulterous or incestuous union), even though doing so may cause his attacker more harm than the attacker would have caused him had he landed his threatened blow.

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.

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

As the Jewish population in ancient Egypt swelled, the Torah tells us that vayakutzu -- The Egyptians "were disgusted" (Shemos 1:12). Rashi explains that "they were disgusted with their [own] lives."

A superficial reading of vayakutzu would lead to a simpler understanding, that the Egyptians, out of fear (as pesukim 8 and 9 describe), found the Jews, not themselves,disgusting. What is the significance of Rashi's comment?

The Mei Marom (Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, 1882-1951) posits that the pasuk as Rashi explains it is imparting a psychological truth: It is impossible to embitter the life of another unless one is embittered with himself. Anyone who appreciates and cherishes his own life will perforce be concerned about the lives of others.

And so, Rabbi Charlop concludes, if one sees someone oppressing another, one can surmise that the oppressor's cruelty is fundamentally sourced in self-loathing.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Pharaoh commanded his nation, saying, "Every boy that is born, into the river shall be cast, and every girl shall be kept alive."" (Shemos 1:22) We find two different times this king ruled that the Jewish

children should be killed. Once, he told the Hebrew midwives to kill the boys on the birthing table. Then, later, when the stargazers saw that the Jewish savior would be born and meet his downfall through water, he decreed that every baby born should be cast into the Nile.

The question is, why wait and throw him in the river? If you specifically want to meet the water criterion, drown him in a bucket at birth. What's the point of throwing him in the river where he might not die? It's like a villain trying to get rid of a hero and setting up an elaborate death plan, then leaving and not seeing it through to completion.

The commentaries point out that when he told the midwives to kill the babies, he did so only because his population demanded that he protect them by harming the Jews. There he is called "King of Egypt," not "Pharaoh," to indicate this was done only in order to remain in power. By ordering the midwives to do the dirty work, he could separate himself from it.

Later, when he had to command that Egyptians, as well as Jews, were to be killed, he opted for the requirement to throw them in the Nile. In this way, there was a chance they could escape, and he could avoid taking blame for their deaths by creating an arms-length distance. He could sleep at night knowing that he didn't kill them, but that they were killed by the forces of nature.

So, what prompted this hesitation? Why was he afraid to kill all these people? Perhaps it was because deep down, he did not have the conviction that he was doing the right thing. Should he keep the Jews enslaved? Should he try to prevent their destiny? Despite his own belief that he was a deity, he may have questioned the correctness of his choices. He was afraid to answer to a higher power, so he was unwilling to put himself out there.

Contrast this to Pinchas who saw a terrible act and personally killed Zimri, or Shmuel, who took a sword and killed Agag, king of Amalek, without compunction. These men knew they were destroying evil and doing Hashem's will, so they did it themselves. Pharaoh, who was in doubt, ordered others to do the killing and even opted for a less-sure means of doing it, to hedge his bets. Deep down, he knew the truth, that what he was doing was wrong. Therefore, he shied away from it.

This is a great lesson for us. Often there are things we wish to do but we know deep down they are wrong. We know that we should act a certain way, and when we don't, we must build up a defense for why we are doing what we do. Don't be foolish. Learn from Pharaoh to clearly identify whether your actions are right or wrong, and then don't make the mistake he did of trying to stand on both sides of the fence at once. Be a man like Pinchas and Shmuel, and stand up for what is right.

When R' Chaim Volozhiner z"l had the idea to found his famous yeshiva in Volozhin, which came to be the paradigm for the modern-day Yeshiva, he excitedly approached his Rebbi, R' Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna. He was surprised and more than a little disappointed when the Gaon did not share his enthusiasm. He shelved the project.

A few years later, he still thought it was a good idea, so he approached the Vilna Gaon again. This time his Rebbi wished him well and told him it was a wonderful idea. He was confused. Previously, the Gaon had not thought highly of the concept. What changed?

"When you first came to me," explained R' Eliyahu, "you were so passionate and sure this was a great idea that I was afraid the Yetzer Hara was involved. But now that you have let your passion cool, and you still think it's a good idea, I know your intentions are pure and your efforts will be blessed." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Moshe & Aharon Before Par'aoh

The Second Book of the Torah is called Shemot (literally names) in Hebrew, but Exodus in English. The Book begins with the words "V'eileh shemot B'nei Yisrael haba'im Mitzraymah, And these are the names of the Children of Israel who came down to Egypt." Whereas in the end of the First Book of the Torah, the names of all seventy descendants of Ya'akov were mentioned, here we see only the names of Ya'akov's twelve sons. This was the beginning of the exile foretold to Avraham even before Avraham had any offspring. Now, these seventy descendants would begin a time of hardship and slavery after the death of the twelve sons mentioned. This slavery would continue until Moshe's birth, exile from Egypt, and his challenge to free the B'nei Yisrael and return them to Eretz Canaan.

Moshe and Aharon were sent with the elders of the people by Hashem to speak to Par'oah. Rashi explains that each of the elders slowly slipped away, being afraid to approach Par'aoh. The Torah states: "Afterwards, Moshe and Aharon came and said to Par'aoh, 'So said Hashem, the Elokim of Yisrael, "Send out My People that they may celebrate for Me in the wilderness.'" Par'oah replied, 'Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice to send out Yisrael? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Yisrael.' So they said, 'The Elokim of the Hebrews happened upon us. Let us please now go for a three-days' journey in the wilderness, and we shall sacrifice to Hashem, our Elokim, lest He encounter us with the plague of the sword.' The king of Egypt said to them, 'Moshe and Aharon, why would you disturb the nation from its work? Go to your own burdens.' And Par'aoh said, 'Behold! The people of the land are now numerous, and you would have them cease from their burdens!' On that day, Par'aoh ordered the taskmasters over the people and its guards, saying, 'You

shall not continue to give straw to the people to make the bricks as yesterday and the day before yesterday; let them go and gather straw for themselves.'"

Mosaf Rashi explains that the word "ha'am, the nation (people)," is a negative term, describing the people as evil; but the term "ami, my nation (people)," indicates that the people had now become purified through teshuvah (returning to Hashem). Now, when Moshe and Aharon approached Par'aoh and told him the words of Hashem, the Torah states "send out MY people, clearly indicating that the people were now worthy of being saved. Par'aoh's answer to them was, "Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice to send out Yisrael? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Yisrael." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Par'aoh is really saying, "Even if He (Hashem) were asking a small thing from me, I would still not send the Children of Yisrael out – a big thing like that I would never do, even if I knew Who Hashem was." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Par'aoh was basically saying, "You come to me in the name of your G-d, whom I am to obey, and freely give away what belongs to me. I do not know of such a god, and if you speak in the name of your people, in the name of some future high mission which this god has given over to you, well, that also is not sufficient to make me give up even for a short time, anything which is mine."

HaRav Hirsch explains that with the rejection of Hashem as a G-d that Par'aoh should listen to, Moshe took a different approach, speaking instead of the G-d of the Hebrews. Hirsch interprets that Moshe said, "We, too, like the Egyptians, have our G-d, and if He, forced by that Higher Power that rules over gods and man appears here, down in the world, that is, as you know, of portentous significance, and He must be pacified. Otherwise, pestilence and sword may overtake us, and then not only we, but you and your people would be involved. So, for your own sake – you, too, fear the wrath of gods – grant us this festival!"

Par'aoh's reaction was on a more personal level. He suggested that Moshe and Aharon were using this request, not to benefit the people, but instead to gain power. This request to take a rest from their burdens to go worship a god that they do not know is only an attempt to ease the pressure of the labor. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that Par'aoh made a distinction between Moshe and Aharon and the Jewish People. Moshe and Aharon were Leviim, and as such were not working as slaves, since the Tribe of Levi were the priests, and Egypt did not enslave the priests of any religion. The Ramban explains that this was obvious by the fact that Moshe and Aharon were free to move about the land with no restriction on their time away from work. When Par'aoh said to them, "Go to your own burdens," He was not referring to their slavery but instead to their burden as messengers.

One problem which arises is Moshe's request to go on a three-day journey to worship Hashem. Why was it necessary to go so far away? Egypt was a corrupt society. Each day that the Jewish People separated themselves from that society enabled them to break away from the evil and the idol worship that filled the people around them. There is a concept in Jewish Law of a "Chazakah, a strengthened habit," which means that if a person does the same action three times, he is likely to continue to act in the same way. Separating the people both physically and spiritually from Egyptian culture would enable Israel to reassert its Jewish values and reconnect with Hashem.

Par'aoh's response was an attempt to keep the people so busy with the new task of gathering straw for the bricks that they would not have time for this "nonsense" proposed by Moshe. For many years, people have enslaved themselves with so much work that they have lost the time or the energy to connect with Hashem. They create fictitious reasons why they no longer need to connect with Hashem: He abandoned the world, He is no longer relevant, He does not exist, and more. These excuses disappear the moment that tragedy or pain comes into their lives. Hashem may choose not to relieve them of their pain, but He can help them to cope with their situation. May we never lose our ability to connect with Hashem, and may we constantly remember how Hashem betters our lives.

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

Slavery again, and only a whole year later. The good news is that redemption is two parshios away. Everything happens much faster in the Torah than it does in real life, which makes it easier to focus on the essence of ideas so we can implement them into everyday life.

When you think of exile, you probably imagine a nation being carted off to a foreign land, often in chains. That's how the Jewish People were taken from Eretz Yisroel after Nebuchadnetzar exiled them to Babylonia. Or, it can be as simple as a person leaving home for a short while, even willingly. Great rabbis of the past periodically exiled themselves to keep them humble before God.

But there is a form of exile that happens without actually going anywhere, and in truth, it is the real exile that tends to lead to all of the others. It is the exile of the mind, Golus HaDa'as, which can be momentary or, God forbid, permanent. When the Gemora says that a person only sins when a spirit of insanity enters them (Sotah 3a), it is not being melodramatic. You have to be crazy to sin, at least in the moment.

But what about people who don't even know they are sinning, especially if they're not sure about God and Torah? You have to be out of your mind not to check it out because, if God does exist and Torah is from Him,

the implications about life and the World to Come are staggering.

It's like a person taking all of their savings and randomly investing in something they know nothing about. While there is a chance they could make money, the odds are against it and favor losing a lot of money instead. It's one thing to shoot blindfolded at a target, but very different to do so without knowing where the target is before blindfolding. You'll hit a target alright, just not the one you intended and probably wished you hadn't.

That's why the exile wasn't only in Egypt, but in Mitzrayim. Egypt is just a geographical location, but "Mitzrayim" is a spiritual one. The word is comprised of "meitzer," which means "border," and Yud-Mem has the gematria of fifty, the number of Binah -- understanding -- and source of Da'as, what the Torah means by "wisdom." Mitzrayim is any place that constricts the Nun Sha'arei Binah, that is, the Da'as.

Therefore, though Egypt always remains in northern Africa, Mitzrayim can be anywhere in the world, and at any time in history. Secular society is just another name for Mitzrayim, wherever it is, and though a Jew can feel right at home there, they are in mental exile according to the extent that they have been impacted by the secular world around them.

Therefore, before a person can change their location, they need to change their mind. They need to know the Torah's view on where and how they are living to measure the accuracy of their approach to life and to current events. That's why God increased the slavery at the end of the parsha, to change the mentality of the Jewish People so they could take advantage of the redemption.

Because, at the end of the day, redemption doesn't occur because the host nation in exile tells us to leave, and it won't be because of some military strategy governments have worked out. Redemption occurs because God wants it to and makes it possible, and that is only after He sees that we have the Da'as for it.

This is why the Zohar, Ramchal, and GR"A have said that someone who learns Kabbalah at the end of days will be spared Chevlei Moshiach and the War of Gog and Magog. They only come to restore Da'as in the world, and so does the Zohar. Therefore, learning the latter eliminates the need to go through the former.e who understands the opportunities of life, and takes advantage of the chance to grab the true goodness.

R' Yankel Galinsky z"l would relate the story that, as a spirited and rambunctious young boy, his father sent him to the strict Novardok yeshivah in Bialystok, known for its focus on character improvement. The mashgiach told him he first needed to refine himself by learning mussar. Discouraged, Yaakov left the office and wandered into a small, seemingly empty synagogue. He noticed a single candle and heard a sweet voice repeatedly chanting a passage from the Gemara (Eruvin 54a): "Chatof ve'echol, chatof ve'ishtei d'alma d'azlinan minei k'hilula damei".

The passage translates to: "Grab and eat, grab and drink, for this world that we will leave is like a wedding celebration." The repeated chanting emphasized the urgency of seizing opportunities for good deeds and spiritual growth in this fleeting world. This mesmerizing mantra penetrated the boy's bones and he returned to the Yeshiva, where he was accepted. Years later, the young man chanting with such intensity was identified as none other than the future Steipler Gaon, R' Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky z"l, who became one of the greatest Torah leaders of his generation.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Lelamed 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.