

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he dust of the earth was turned to lice all across Egypt. The magicians tried to produce lice with their sorcery, but they could not. Meanwhile the lice still infested people and animals alike. "This," the magicians told Pharaoh, "is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was toughened, and – as the Lord had predicted – he would not listen to them (Exodus 8:12-15).

Too little attention has been paid to the use of humour in the Torah. Its most important form is the use of satire to mock the pretensions of human beings who think they can emulate God. One thing makes God laugh – the sight of humanity attempting to defy heaven:

The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and His anointed one. "Let us break our chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters." He who sits in heaven laughs, God scoffs at them (Psalm 2:2-4).

There is a marvellous example in the story of the Tower of Babel. The people in the plain of Shinar decide to build a city with a tower that "will reach heaven." This is an act of defiance against the Divinely given order of nature ("The heavens are the heavens of God: the earth He has given to the children of men"). The Torah then says, "But God came down to see the city and the tower . . ." (Gen. 11:5). Down on earth, the builders thought their tower would reach heaven. From the vantage point of heaven, however, it was so minuscule that God had to "come down" to see it.

Satire is essential in order to understand at least some of the plagues. The Egyptians worshipped a multiplicity of gods, most of whom represented forces of nature. By their "secret arts" the magicians believed that they could control these forces. Magic is the equivalent in an era of myth to technology in an age of science. A civilisation that believes it can manipulate the gods, believes likewise that it can exercise coercion over human beings. In such a culture, the concept of freedom is unknown.

The plagues were not merely intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed ("I will perform acts of judgement against all the gods of Egypt: I am God", Ex. 12:12). This explains the first and last of the nine plagues prior to the killing of the firstborn. The first involved the

Nile. The ninth was the plague of darkness. The Nile was worshipped as the source of fertility in an otherwise desert region. The sun was seen as the greatest of the gods, Re (and Pharaoh was considered to be his child). Darkness meant the eclipse of the sun, showing that even the greatest of the Egyptian gods could do nothing in the face of the true God.

What is at stake in this confrontation is the difference between myth – in which the gods are mere powers, to be tamed, propitiated or manipulated – and biblical monotheism in which ethics (justice, compassion, human dignity) constitute the meeting-point of God and humankind. That is the key to the first two plagues, both of which refer back to the beginning of Egyptian persecution of the Israelites: the killing of male children at birth, first through the midwives (though, thanks to Shifra and Puah's moral sense, this was foiled) then by throwing them into the Nile to drown.

That is why, in the first plague, the river waters turn to blood. The significance of the second, frogs, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. Heqet, the frog-goddess, represented the midwife who assisted women in labour. Both plagues are coded messages meaning: "If you use the river and midwives – both normally associated with life – to bring about death, those same forces will turn against you." An immensely significant message is taking shape: Reality has an ethical structure. If used for evil ends, the powers of nature will turn against man, so that what he does will be done to him in turn. There is justice in history.

The response of the Egyptians to these first two plagues is to see them within their own frame of reference. Plagues, for them, are forms of magic, not miracles. To Pharaoh's magicians, Moses and Aaron are people like themselves who practice "secret arts". So they replicate them: they show that they too can turn water into blood and generate a horde of frogs. The irony here is very close to the surface. So intent are the Egyptian magicians on proving that they can do what Moses and Aaron have done, that they entirely fail to realise that far from making matters better for the Egyptians, they are making them worse: more blood, more frogs.

This brings us to the third plague, lice. One of the purposes of this plague is to produce an effect which the magicians cannot replicate. They try. They fail. Immediately they conclude, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:15).

This is the first appearance in the Torah of an idea, surprisingly persistent in religious thinking even today, called “the god of the gaps”. This holds that a miracle is something for which we cannot yet find a scientific explanation. Science is natural; religion is supernatural.

An “act of God” is something we cannot account for rationally. What magicians (or technocrats) cannot reproduce must be the result of Divine intervention. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that religion and science are opposed. The more we can explain scientifically or control technologically, the less need we have for faith. As the scope of science expands, the place of God progressively diminishes to vanishing point.

What the Torah is intimating is that this is a pagan mode of thought, not a Jewish one. The Egyptians admitted that Moses and Aaron were genuine prophets when they performed wonders beyond the scope of their own magic. But this is not why we believe in Moses and Aaron. On this, Maimonides is unequivocal: Israel did not believe in Moses our teacher because of the signs he performed. When faith is predicated on signs, a lurking doubt always remains that these signs may have been performed with the aid of occult arts and witchcraft. All the signs Moses performed in the Wilderness, he did because they were necessary, not to authenticate his status as a prophet . . . When we needed food, he brought down manna. When the people were thirsty, he cleaved the rock. When Korach’s supporters denied his authority, the earth swallowed them up. So too with all the other signs. What then were our grounds for believing in him? The Revelation at Sinai, which we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 8:1).

The primary way in which we encounter God is not through miracles but through His word – the Revelation – Torah – which is the Jewish people’s constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God. To be sure, God is in the events which, seeming to defy nature, we call miracles. But He is also in nature itself. Science does not displace God: it reveals, in ever more intricate and wondrous ways, the design within nature itself. Far from diminishing our religious sense, science (rightly understood) should enlarge it, teaching us to see “How great are Your works, O God; You have made them all with wisdom.” Above all, God is to be found in the Voice heard at Sinai, teaching us how to construct a society that will be the opposite of Egypt: in which the few do not enslave the many, nor are strangers mistreated.

The best argument against the world of Ancient Egypt was Divine humour. The cultic priests and magicians who thought they could control the sun and the Nile discovered that they could not even produce a louse. Pharaohs like Ramses II demonstrated their godlike status by creating monumental architecture: the great temples, palaces, and pyramids whose immensity

seemed to betoken Divine grandeur (the Gemara explains that Egyptian magic could not function on very small things). God mocks them by revealing His Presence in the tiniest of creatures. “I will show you fear in a handful of dust”, writes the poet, T. S. Eliot.

What the Egyptian magicians (and their latter-day successors) did not understand is that power over nature is not an end in and of itself, but solely the means to ethical ends. The lice were God’s joke at the expense of the magicians who believed that because they controlled the forces of nature, they were the masters of human destiny. They were wrong. Faith is not merely belief in the supernatural. It is the ability to hear the call of the Author of Being, to be free in such a way as to respect the freedom and dignity of others. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt”l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**"A**nd I will bring you unto the land concerning which I raised My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage (morasha): I am God.” (Exodus 6:8) Every parent would like to leave an inheritance to their children and grandchildren; some even work their entire lives, denying themselves vacations and little luxuries, in order to amass some sort of nest-egg as an inheritance. And others live in disappointed frustration because they fear they will not have the wherewithal to leave behind a sizeable “will and testament.” What does our Torah have to say about a proper bequest for future generations?

The Bible has two cognate words which relate to bequest: morasha and yerusha. Morasha – which appears for the first time in the Torah in the portion of Va’era with regard to the Land of Israel and only once again, with regard to Torah itself, “Moses prescribed the Torah to us, an eternal heritage (morasha) for the congregation of Jacob” (Deut. 33:4) – is generally translated as “heritage”; yerusha is translated as “inheritance” and is the frequently found form for everything except Torah and Israel.

It is interesting to note that in Webster’s Dictionary, the words “heritage” and “inheritance” are virtually synonymous. The lead definition for heritage is “property that is or can be inherited.” The Hebrew of the Bible, however, is precise and exact. The use of different words clearly suggests a difference in meaning. The different contexts in which the two words “morasha” and “yerusha” appear can be very revealing about different kinds of bequests – and even different kinds of relationships between parents and children, different priorities handed down from generation to generation, which these bequests engender. Let us explore four different possible distinctions in meaning between yerusha and morasha, inheritance and heritage, which

should provide important instruction to parents in determining their bequests to their children.

First, the Jerusalem Talmud speaks of yerusha as something that comes easily. A person dies, leaving an inheritance, and the heir is not required to do anything except receive the gift. But just being there is not enough when it comes to morasha. The added mem in this term, suggests the Jerusalem Talmud, is a grammatical sign of intensity, the pi'el form in Hebrew grammar. In order for an individual to come into possession of a morasha they have to work for it. An inheritance is what you get from the previous generation, without your particular input; a heritage requires your active involvement and participation. A yerusha is a check your father left you; a morasha is a business which your parents may have started, but into which you must put much sweat, blood and tears.

This will certainly explain why morasha is used only with regard to Torah and the Land of Israel. The sages remark that there are three gifts which God gave the Jewish people that can only be acquired through commitment and suffering: "Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come" (Berakhot 5a). We understand that neither Torah nor the Land of Israel is acquired easily, passively. The Babylonian Talmud, confirming our earlier citation from the Jerusalem Talmud, specifically teaches that "Torah is not an inheritance," a yerusha, which comes automatically to the child of the Torah scholar. All achievement in Torah depends on an individual's own efforts. A student of Torah must be willing to suffer privation. Maimonides writes that on the path of Torah acquisition a person must be willing to eat only bread and drink only water, even snatching momentary sleep on the ground rather than in a comfortable bed (Laws of Torah Study 3:6). Indeed, no one can merit the crown of Torah unless they are willing to destroy their desire for material blandishments while in pursuit of Torah expertise (ibid. 12). Similarly, the Land of Israel cannot be acquired without sacrifice and suffering. The final test in the life of Abraham and the source of Jewish claim to Jerusalem is the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah; the message conveyed by the Bible is that we can only acquire our Holy Land if we are willing to place the lives of our children on the line. Nothing is more apparent in modern Israel today. A heritage comes hard, not easily, and our national heritage is Torah and Israel.

The second distinction between the terms is not how the gift is acquired but rather how it may or must be dispersed. Even the largest amount of money inherited (yerusha) can be squandered, or legitimately lost. In contrast, a morasha must be given over intact to the next generation. Its grammatical form is hif'il, and it literally means "to hand over to someone else." Silver is an inheritance, and can be invested, lent out, or melted down or used in whatever way the heir desires; silver Shabbat candlesticks are a heritage, meant to be passed

down from parent to child and used from generation to generation.

Third, one must have the physical and objective inheritance in one's possession in order to give it to one's heir; that is not necessarily the case with regard to a heritage, or morasha. Jewish parents bequeathed the ideals of Torah and Israel to their children for four thousand years, even when they were living in exile far from the Promised Land and even if poverty and oppression made it impossible for them to be Torah scholars. Jewish mothers in Poland and Morocco sang their children to sleep with lullabies about the beauty of the Land of Israel and the paramount importance of Torah scholarship, singing "Torah is the best merchandise" and Jerusalem the most beautiful city. Paradoxically, one can pass on a morasha (heritage) even if one doesn't have it oneself!

And finally, a yerusha is a substantive object whereas a morasha may be an abstract idea or ideal. There is a charming Yiddish folk song in which the singer "laments" that while his friends' wealthy parents gave them automobiles, his parents could only give him good wishes: "Go with God." While his friends' parents gave them cash, his parents gave him aphorisms: "Zai a mensch – be a good person." However, whereas the automobiles and cash were quickly dissipated, the words remained – and were passed on to the next generation.

The truth is that an inheritance pales in comparison to a heritage. The real question must be: Will you only have a transitory inheritance to leave your children, or will you merit bequeathing an eternal heritage? *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](http://bit.ly/RiskinShemot). © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l**

### **Wein Online**

**S**tubbornness can be a virtue or a terrible character defect. When it is a virtue, we call it tenacity. When it is a defect, it is just plain foolish and counterproductive. Pharaoh's stubbornness, as exhibited in this week's parsha, is an example. His advisers inform him that Egypt is headed for disaster because of his stubbornness, but he refuses to give in to the reality of the series of plagues that threaten to decimate Egyptian society.

The Torah tells us that his tenacity was reinforced by the fact that God hardened his heart. The commentators, especially Maimonides, judge that to mean that the Lord gave him the courage of his convictions not to be influenced by the events transpiring in his country but to continue on his evil path to enslave the Jewish people.

Hardening his heart did not influence Pharaoh's

choices in the matter. It merely allowed him to transform what previously appeared to be tenacity into ultimate foolishness and disaster. Hitler, Stalin, Mao and other such leaders displayed this same reckless stubbornness over the past century, resulting in the destruction of societies and the deaths of tens of millions of people.

Because of his behavior, Pharaoh becomes the paradigm for the self-destructive trait of foolish stubbornness. The Jewish people are also characterized as being a stubborn people. This trait has served us as well when we were and are tenacious in preserving our values and traditions. It is a foolish trait when we continue the policies and misbegotten certainties that have always led to our tragedies and misfortunes. Rashi and Midrash teach us the source of Pharaoh's suicidal stubbornness. It lay in his belief in himself as a god – arrogant and convinced of his own infallibility. People who are never wrong never have to change their policies, beliefs or behavior.

I am reminded of a sign that I once saw on the desk of a prominent public figure that said: "Don't confuse me with the facts; my mind is already made up!" He was joking about it (I think) but that danger lurks in all of us. Once we are convinced of the absolute rectitude of our position, we not only are tenacious in maintaining it, we become downright blindly stubborn. Moshe meets Pharaoh at the river's edge where he went to perform his bodily functions. Pharaoh is exposed there – not as a god but only as a mortal man. Moshe means to teach Pharaoh that the justification for his stubbornness – his sham sense of infallibility – is itself false. A little humility on the part of Pharaoh would have saved himself and Egypt a great deal of grief. That is why the Torah stresses that the desired quality for true leadership is humility.

Moshe becomes the paradigm for humility just as Pharaoh – his arch-nemesis – is the paradigm for arrogant stubbornness. This lesson of wise tenacity versus foolish stubbornness exists in all areas of human life and society – family, community, national policy and personal development. May we be tenacious enough in life to avoid foolish moments of harmful stubbornness.

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## ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

### Astrology

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**P**haraoh works closely with his astrologers and magicians in Parshat Va'era. What is the Jewish view of these practitioners?

The Rambam feels strongly that astrology and magic are nonsense and lies, with no power whatsoever. In contrast, Ramban and other *Rishonim* maintain that astrology is a tool through which G-d rules the world. He

Himself, of course, is not subordinate to it. He is free to do whatever He wants, and change anything that might be predetermined by the stars.

Given this debate, is it permissible according to Jewish law, for us to seek the advice of an astrologer, or to allow the daily horoscope to guide our decisions?

The Ramban asserts that following one's horoscope is permitted and does not fall into the category of the Torah prohibitions of magic and divination. If a person's horoscope predicts that something bad will happen to him, he should respond by praying to G-d for mercy and performing many *mitzvot*. This is because a person's actions can change what is predicted by the stars. Nevertheless, if a person's horoscope predicts that a certain day would not be a good time for him to undertake a certain activity, he should avoid doing it, as it is not appropriate for him to defy his horoscope and rely on a miracle.

In contrast, Rambam maintains that someone who plans his activities based on astrology is not only transgressing, but is even subject to lashes.

The Meiri is one of the rationalists among the *Rishonim*, but he takes a more moderate position than the Rambam. What is forbidden is to relate to the stars as having power independent of G-d. But they do have an effect, the same way that the sun does when it produces light and heat. Accordingly, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with taking a horoscope into account when planning one's day. The Meiri sees it as the equivalent of a person who wants bright light for an activity, so he plans it for the middle of the day, when the sun is at its maximum strength. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

## RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

### Migdal Ohr

**"B**ehold, the Children of Israel didn't listen to me, and how shall Pharaoh listen to me; and I am of stopped up lips?" (Shemos 6:12) Upon approaching the Jewish People with Hashem's message of the upcoming redemption, Moshe found them unreceptive. Moshe chalked up his failure not to the fact that they were overwhelmed, but to the fact that he was ineffectual as a communicator. Therefore, it was a given to him, that if they didn't listen, surely Pharaoh would not as well.

This was essentially the same argument Moshe had made at the time of the burning bush. Then, Hashem answered him, "Who places a mouth in a person?" Essentially, Hashem had told Moshe that He had given Moshe all the tools he needed, and an eloquent delivery was NOT a requirement for the success of his mission.

When Moshe makes that claim here, the Torah, in the next verse, tells us that Hashem commands Moshe and Aharon, his brother, to go together to Pharaoh. However, we find something unusual. After Moshe asks that Pharaoh will not listen to him because

of how he speaks, the Torah places a break there. Called a "pesucha," and symbolized by a {P} in the Chumash, it ends a parsha in the Torah, and the rest of the line is left blank.

At the next line, we find Hashem commanding Aharon to accompany Moshe. It seems like the answer, but traditionally, these complete breaks are thought to separate concepts or parshios, and the other type of break, a "stuma," consisting of nine blank letters, is considered an incomplete break, and the two paragraphs on either side are connected. That means Hashem didn't respond to Moshe's question here. He just began a new topic. What does this teach us?

Chazal understand that as Hashem dictated the Torah to Moshe, He made certain pauses and at those spots, giving Moshe time to reflect on what he had just been told. In that case, the break here, after the question, was Hashem giving Moshe time to reflect on his own question. Hashem had already answered Moshe that this wasn't a true concern. Moshe's repetition showed that he had not fully digested the response. That was unacceptable, so Hashem didn't dignify it with an answer. Instead, he gave Moshe a moment to reconsider what he had asked.

Then, Hashem commanded Aharon to go with Moshe. What Hashem had previously told Moshe he was capable of doing alone, would now be shared with his brother Aharon. R' Ephraim Lever Shlit"a suggests that perhaps Hashem was giving Moshe a chance to reconsider what he was asking for, much as when he asked for help in leading the Jewish People, and Hashem took from the spirit that was on Moshe and gave it to the seventy elders. He'd had the power, but his insecurities caused him to lose the sole claim to the reward for doing the act.

If the greatest man to ever live made the mistake of thinking he was incapable, how much more likely are we, to give up? But we should not do so. Hashem has given us each the tools and abilities to accomplish the missions He sends our way. If we take a moment to think about it, we will be able to tackle each challenge as it comes and succeed - because Hashem is by our side.

*R' Abba Zalka Gewirtz z"l was a rabbi in Bradley Beach, NJ and Waterbury, CT. One day, a congregant came to him to discuss schooling for her children. They were getting older and the local day school couldn't accommodate them. He advised her to send them away to Yeshiva.*

*"Rabbi," she cried, "I can't send them away. I'll lose them!" "Shirley," responded R' Abba Zalka with sincere emotion, "If you send them to Yeshiva, they will give you nachas for the rest of your life. But if you DON'T send them away, then you will lose them!" Shirley didn't listen.*

*Years later she came back. "Rabbi Gewirtz," she sobbed. "You were right. I didn't send them away... they didn't go to Yeshiva to study Torah... and now I've lost*

*them."*

*She couldn't see how sending her children away would be the right choice. Sadly, she paid the price for doubting the benefit of serving Hashem, and not trusting in His messengers. © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## The Miracle of Hail

**P**arashat Va'eira begins with the Ten Plagues and ends with the seventh plague, "Barad, Hail." The plagues were divided into threes, with the last set of plagues as four. Barad was the first of the last set of plagues. Hashem had Moshe express to Par'ao that He was now prepared to destroy every Egyptian, but that He kept them alive, "in order to show you My power and so that My Name may be declared throughout the world." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that "Hail, in Egypt, where any downpour at all from the air was hardly known, shows a complete revolution in the telluric and cosmic conditions of Egypt, shows that it only requires a nod from above and Egypt is Egypt no longer."

Hashem continued His warning: "'Behold at this time tomorrow, I shall rain a very heavy hail, such as there has never been seen in Egypt, from the day it was founded until now. And now, send forth your livestock and everything you have in the field; all the people and all the animals that are found in the field and will not be brought into the house – the hail shall descend upon them and they shall die.' Whoever among the servants of Par'ao feared the word of Hashem chased his servants and his livestock into the houses. And whoever did not take the word of Hashem to heart – he left his servants and livestock in the field. Hashem said to Moshe, 'Stretch out your hand toward the heavens and there will be hail in the entire land of Egypt, on man and animal, and on all the grass of the field in the land of Egypt.' Moshe stretched out his staff toward heaven, and Hashem sent thunder and hail, and fire went earthward, and Hashem rained hail upon the land of Egypt. There was hail, and fire blazing inside the hail – very heavy as had never been in the entire land of Egypt, everything that was in the field from man to beast; all the herbs of the field the hail struck, and every tree of the field it smashed. Only in the land of Goshen where the B'nei Yisrael were, there was no hail."

Many of the commentators on the Torah discuss the miracle of the hail as the fact that it contained fire within ice, a phenomenon which will be discussed later. What many fail to mention is the fact that a country which is basically devoid of rain, not only got precipitation, but suddenly hail descended from the heavens. As we have seen on other occasions, Egypt was a land that was so corrupt, that Hashem withheld gishmei b'racha, rains of blessing, from Egypt as He did from Sodom and her surroundings. Rain is considered a reward to societies that follow Hashem's commandments. Even in societies that are not righteous, Hashem does not withhold rain

necessarily because of their transgressions. When the society is so completely corrupt as Egypt or Sodom, Hashem will not grant them rain, even though rain is required to grow crops. Hashem finds a different way to water their crops and grant them food. In Sodom, prior to its destruction, the land was described as "well-watered." This meant that the Jordan River kept the land fertile. In Egypt the Nile River overflowed several times a year, and the people of Egypt diverted that overflow to their fields and water-storage pits for their crops. Hashem promised to feed Mankind, but He did not promise to reward corrupt societies with rains of blessing.

When warning Par'aoah of the coming plague, Moshe said, "Behold at this time tomorrow." The term in Hebrew is "ka'eit machar, (literally) sometime tomorrow." Were we not to have a Midrash about this statement, it would appear to be vague, and the word "machar, tomorrow" would have been sufficient. The Midrash, as quoted by Rashi, explains that Moshe drew a line on the wall and said, "When the sun reaches this point tomorrow, it will begin to hail." This Midrash is deeper than it appears on the surface. For Par'aoah to see the sun reach that mark, the Sun would have to be clearly visible when the hail began to fall.

The Torah states, "Whoever among the servants of Par'aoah feared the word of Hashem," which HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin says means that only Par'aoah's servants were warned of this plague and not the general population. This indicates that Par'aoah did not take Hashem's warning to heart, so the people of Egypt were not even warned to bring in their animals from the field. Whether it was Par'aoah's belligerence or his feeling that hail and fire together could not possibly be real, he did not feel that Moshe's warning was realistic. Perhaps that is the reason for Par'aoah's declaration to Moshe and Aharon that, "This time I have sinned: Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked one." This is what the Ramban explains was a part of the reason for this plague. While the previous six plagues were brought upon the Egyptians to cause damage, this plague brought both damage and fear of Hashem. Par'aoah and the people of Egypt were being taught to understand the power of Hashem and His control over the entire world. S'forno indicates that this is the meaning of the words which immediately preceded our section, "On account of this I have left you standing, in order to show you My power and so that My Name may be declared throughout the world."

Scientists will explain that the "miracles" mentioned in the Torah all have natural phenomena which duplicate them. What they cannot explain is why they occur in the form in which they occur and at the time when that phenomenon must occur to further Hashem's plan for the world. One of the more difficult miracles to explain is the particular phenomenon of Barad. The mixture of fire and ice combined should never be able to

exist. The fire would melt the ice so that it would no longer exist as ice, and the ice should put out the fire so that it no longer existed. This was the incredulity that Par'aoah saw which caused him to reject Moshe's warning. Yet this phenomenon does exist in the heavens – a comet. The fiery tail of the comet follows the structure of the comet, which scientists have proven to be ice.

We are surrounded by miracles every day that we fail to recognize. When one examines the incredible creation of a child from two cells which unite and then are rapidly divided and formed by DNA to produce the different, intricate parts of the body, it is miraculous that so infrequently are there problems with this process. It is clearly a miracle every time a perfect child is born. May we learn to recognize that each miracle we experience is a part of this world that Hashem has given us. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

### **RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

## **Perceptions**

**T**he Midrash says that it took God seven days to "convince" Moshe Rabbeinu to accept his mission of taking the Jewish People out of slavery and to Eretz Yisroel. Seven days!

From the Chumash, it seems like the whole conversation took maybe a couple of hours. I mean, what was the conversation like? Did they take breaks? Did Moshe eat...sleep...? It wasn't as if he was in Heaven already and living off miracles. Why didn't God just tell Moshe, "Here's the plan...now go!"

And after Moshe finally accepted his mission, he asked for the name He should use to refer to God when the people asked who sent him. God answered him, "I will be what I will be," and then shortened it to "I will be." Firstly, what kind of name is that, and secondly, what meaning would it have had to the nation back in Egypt if they had never heard it before? It's not like they had been kabbalists who knew the different names of God and what they meant!

To answer these questions, we have to first understand what the mission was about in the first place. Contrary to the simple understanding, Yetzias Mitzrayim was not only about freeing an enslaved nation, or even about getting to Mt. Sinai to receive 613 mitzvos. All of that was always only meant to be a means to the real goal and fulfillment of the purpose of Creation, which is...?

God told Moshe: "I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'akov with [the name] Almighty God, but [with] My name Hovayah, I did not become known to them." (Shemos 6:3)

Why not, and what difference did it make? This: "The purpose of Creation is the revelation of the way Radl" a works...and therefore, God emanated the world of Atzilus to clothe it, and through this reveal it to man." (Sha'arei Chochmah, Sifra D'Tzniusa, Vol. 1, 1c)

It would take many pages, and maybe even months to properly explain what this short little paragraph teaches. But we can explain it generally in a couple of lines, starting with how God made all of Creation just to reveal Himself to man. But, as we know, His original light is too intense for anyone to experience without going "poof" the moment they would be exposed to it. As God told Moshe on Mt. Sinai, "No man can see My face and live" (Shemos 33:20).

Therefore, God created ways to filter His light so that He could control its intensity according to His will. But overall, He has been increasing the intensity of it so that man's understanding of who God is becomes increasingly more sophisticated...for the person who is ready to receive that light.

That was the point of the seven days that God spent convincing Moshe to accept his historic role. It was to make him into a candidate to know God on new levels, after which he would have to "translate" that knowledge for the nation to understand. When he asked for God's Name, it showed that he had become worthy of knowing God on the level that God wanted to be known at that time.

The fact that Moshe Rabbeinu did not ask God, "What does that even mean?" shows how profound his knowledge had become in seven short days. He had become ready to be the vehicle to make this knowledge public..

After all, true freedom comes from personal knowledge of God, because it is the ultimate Da'as Elokim one can attain. Therefore, everything that has happened in the world has been to increase access to that level of knowledge, at least for the people who want to know it. © 2026 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

## **YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

# **Virtual Beit Medrash**

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA  
HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN TANAKH

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**O**ur parasha is a direct continuation of the previous one, with God opening with His promise to keep the covenant He had made with the Patriarchs and liberate their descendants from their enslavement to Egypt. However, a section is inserted at the beginning of the parasha that reminds us of the book of Bereishit: a description of lineages, starting with Reuven and Shimon and ending with a very detailed description of the tribe of Levi.

The description is exceedingly precise -- it includes the names of the women, all the children, and the ages of death -- and it seems to be modeled after the descriptions of the family of the Patriarchs. Indeed, the book of Shemot is the book of the selection of the tribe of Levi: Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon the Priest, two of

the greatest leaders of the nation, are chosen from this tribe, while the members of the tribe as a whole are "promoted" to the status of "servants of God."

This matter is not at all simple: in the book of Bereishit, Levi is not portrayed in a particularly positive light, and at best he is a son of Yaakov like all the other tribes. The Torah does not tell us what is unique about Levi. The selection of Avraham can be explained, as can that of Yitzchak and Yaakov, but it would seem that this is not the case with the tribe of Levi.

At the end of the first chapter of Hilkhos Avoda Zara, the Rambam explains the grounds for this selection: "[Avraham] would explain [his statements] to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him. These are 'the men of the house of Avraham' (Bereishit 17:23). He planted in their hearts this great fundamental principle, composed texts about it, and taught it to Yitzchak, his son. Yitzchak also taught others and turned their hearts to God. He also taught Yaakov and appointed him as a teacher. Yaakov taught others and turned the hearts of all those who gathered around him to God. He also taught all of his children. He selected Levi and appointed him as the leader. He established him as the head of the academy to teach them the way of God and observe the mitzvot of Avraham. Yaakov commanded his sons that the leadership should not depart from the descendants of Levi, so that the teachings would not be forgotten." (Hilkhos Avoda Zara 1:3)

Levi is portrayed here as continuing the tradition of Avraham, continuing the education to the service of God and His recognition. The Rambam goes even further when he tells us that Yaakov appointed Levi to serve as the head of a yeshiva, a claim for which no source is found in Scripture or in the words of Chazal. What does all this mean?

The book of Bereishit repeatedly emphasizes that the Israelites did not dwell in the land of Egypt proper, but rather in the land of Goshen, apparently in order to preserve their uniqueness. However, already at the beginning of the book of Shemot, there seems to be a change: "And Yosef died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them." (Shemot 1:6-7)

When Yosef died, and with him the last of the sons of Yaakov, their descendants and their descendants' descendants grew in numbers until they filled the land -- the entire land of Egypt. It is no coincidence that these two things happened together -- the foundations of the past, the direct connection to the forefathers and the people of the land of Canaan, disappeared, and with them the uniqueness of Israel slowly faded.

Egyptian culture was highly developed and most



attractive to the eyes and hearts of the children of Israel, and once the spell was broken and the foundations were removed, they flocked to it. All of them, except one. As in the sin of the golden calf, where the tribe of Levi did not succumb to the advice of the masses and did not break out in dance around the calf, so too here they did not forget the education they had received from time immemorial, and did not follow the abominations of Egypt.

It would seem that this is the image of the Levite throughout the generations. When Yehoshafat seeks to return the Torah to all parts of the people, to teach it to them and to bring them closer to their Father in heaven, the Levites are chosen for the mission: "Also in the third year of his reign he sent his princes, even Ben-Chayil, and Ovadya, and Zekharya, and Netanel, and Mikhayahu, to teach in the cities of Yehuda; and with them the Levites, even Shemayahu, and Netanyahu, and Zevadyahu, and Asahel, and Shemiramot, and Yehonatan, and Adoniyahu, and Toviya, and Tov-Adoniya, the Levites; and with them Elishama and Yehoram, the priests. And they taught in Yehuda, having the book of the law of the Lord with them; and they went about throughout all the cities of Yehuda, and taught among the people." (II Divrei Ha-Yamim 17:7-9)

And when the prophet Malakhi describes the role of the priests of the tribe of Levi, he describes it as follows: "Know then that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant might be with Levi, says the Lord of hosts. My covenant of life and peace was with him, and I gave them to him, and fear, and he feared Me, and was afraid of My name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and did turn many away from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts." (Malakhi 2:4-7)

Just as Avraham Avinu, who was chosen "to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (Bereishit 18:19), so too are the Levites responsible for the dissemination and study of the Torah among the people. The tribe of Levi did not attain this greatness by virtue of grace or lineage, but solely by virtue of its willingness to stand up against the waves of change that inundate the people of Israel, even at personal cost. This is the quality that Moshe recognizes, and with which he blesses Levi at the end of his life: "And of Levi he said: Your Tumim and Your Urim be with Your holy one, whom You did prove at Massa, with whom You did strive at the waters of Meriva; who said of his father, and of his mother: I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brothers, nor knew he his own children; for they have observed Your word, and keep Your covenant. They shall teach Yaakov Your ordinances, and Israel Your law; they shall

put incense before You, and whole burnt-offering upon Your altar." (Devarim 33:8-10)

He who seeks to stand with the tradition of his fathers against all odds, he who volunteers for the great missions that confront the people of Israel, must know how to give up at times comfort and family closeness. The Levites stood before the abominations of Egypt and said "no," and so they stood before the golden calf and said "no."

Such trials are faced not only by them; in every generation people are required to stand up for tradition and sacrifice of themselves for its sake. We will conclude with the words of the Rambam at the end of the book of Zera'im, in which he emphasizes the possibility that lies at the doorstep of each and every one of us: "Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and who understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek, he is sanctified as holy of holies. God will be His portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites. And thus David declared (Tehillim 16:5): "God is the lot of my portion; You are my cup, You support my lot." (Hilkhos Shemitta ve-Yovel 13:13) [This sicha was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat Parashat Vaera 5777.]

**RABBI YAAKOV ASHER SINCLAIR**

## Torah Weekly

**T**he necromancers did the same by means of their incantations; so Pharaoh's heart was strong and he did not heed them..." (7:22) What would you do if someone came along and turned the rivers into blood? You'd try to turn the river back to normal. What would you do if someone made all the frogs come up out of the river? You'd try to get rid of them.

But Pharaoh didn't seek to get rid of the plagues, rather he had his magicians duplicate them. This may have been very impressive and certainly boosted his self-confidence, but he was really shooting himself in the foot.

Wouldn't it have been better to get the magicians to get rid of the blood and the frogs? That would have been just as impressive and much more useful.

This is the way of evil. It doesn't matter if I lose—just as long as the other person doesn't win. © 1997 Rabbi Y.A. Sinclair and Yeshivat Ohr Somayach

