

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights
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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair -
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Parshat Bo

Escape From Egypt

“Rise up and go from among my people” (12:31)

When I was young, there was one phone in the entrance of our house on a little table, and a chair to sit down on to ‘make a call.’ Now, anyone without a phone in his pocket is considered a little pretentious or a little weird. Speaking “in person” could also mean a Zoom or a Skype face-to-face. And nobody writes anymore — people just text, spelling mistakes and all.

As fast as life has become, so have its spiritual challenges. A couple of decades ago, if someone wanted to do something wrong, he’d have to travel to the seedy side of town, risk being seen by a friend or a teacher, going into a shop and confessing his low desires to the person behind the counter. Nowadays, people don’t need to “prepare” to do something wrong. As soon as the negative impulse strikes — bingo, the transgression is right there at your fingertips, quite literally.

How does one fight such a battle?

It is fought by using the enemies’ weapons. The media brainwashes us with the culture of consumption, of instant gratification: Olam Hazeh. We need to “dry-clean” our brains with images of deferred gratification.

The Chafetz Chaim writes in Nidchei Yisrael, Chapter 26:

“When someone overcomes the yetzer hara (negative drive) for arayot, for immorality, his head becomes encircled with a light from Heaven — a halo. We can’t see it but in the time of Chazal that aura was visible. The Chafetz Chaim continues, “Someone who overcomes his yetzer, especially today, merits that not only that he, but all his descendants until the end of time, will be blessed with the virtue of his courageousness and his strength of character, and their nature will lead them to do what is hatov v’hayasha — “what is good and just.”

Think about that! Burn that image into your consciousness. Please remember, if you ever have an impulse to do something improper, that standing behind you are your children, who you want to become righteous members of the Jewish People. Remember what the Chafetz Chaim promises: One moment can save your children. And that’s not all.

Standing behind your children are their children, and behind them as far as your eye can see are the exponentially increasing number of your descendants. There are hundreds and thousands of them, all watching you, holding their breath while waiting to see what you will do. To see whether you will succumb or if you will elevate

those thousands of lives and your name for all eternity — through a moment’s self-control.

The Exodus from Egypt was not just a physical escape, but a spiritual escape for all of time. Burned into our genes was the dormant greatness to rise above the moment and achieve spiritual greatness for ourselves and all of our progeny for all of time.

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Rabbi YY Jacobson

Depressing Time, Productive Time, and Redemptive Time

Is Time a Storm in Which We Are All Lost?

Always Late

Sarah was always late to work no matter how much she tried to be on time, or how many times her boss scolded her. She just could not wake up on time. Her boss said she would fire her if it did not stop. Sarah decided to seek the advice of her doctor. He prescribed her some medication and told her to take one pill before going to sleep, so she can fall asleep immediately and rise early. She did just that and she woke up before dawn and headed into work feeling well-rested. Sarah told her boss about the doctor’s prescription and how well it worked.

Her boss said, “That is great, Sarah, but where were you yesterday?”

Choosing the World & the Jews

It is a strange Midrash, found in this week’s Torah portion, Bo. At the surface, it seems baffling, but upon deeper reflection, it contains an extraordinary meditation on how we live our lives and manage our time.

The Jewish calendar has twelve lunar months. The first day of each month is known as Rosh Chodesh (the head of the month); the first day of the year (the first day of the first month of the year) is known as Rosh Hashanah (the head of the year.)

Says the Midrash:[1]

שמות רבה טו, יא: דָּבָר אֶחָד, הַחֲדָשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם. הֲדָא הוּא דְכָתִיב (תהלים לג, יב) אֲשֶׁרִי הִגֹּי אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֵי, מִשְׁבַּחַר הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ, קָבַע בּוֹ רִאשֵׁי חֲדָשִׁים וְשָׁנִים, וְקִשְׁבַּחַר בִּינְעָלָב וּבְנֵי קָבַע בּוֹ רִאשׁ חֲדָשִׁים שָׁל גְּאֻלָּה.

When G-d chose His world, He established ‘heads of months’ and ‘heads of years.’ When G-d chose Jacob and his children, the Jewish people, He established the ‘head of the month of redemption’ (the first day of the month of Nissan, the month of the Exodus).

What does this Midrash mean? What does it mean “when G-d chose His world?” Why does the Midrash not say, “when G-d created His world?”

And what does choosing a world have to do with the establishment of the head of a month and the heads of a year? And what does the Midrash mean when it says that

“when G-d chose Jacob and his children, He established the Head of the month of redemption?”

Delineating time into months and years is based on the astronomical lunar and solar orbits. The moon completes its orbit after one month. The sun completes its orbit after a year. What does any of this have to do with G-d “choosing His world,” or “choosing Jacob and his children?”

An Address to High School Girls

On January 16, 1964 (2 Shevat, 5724), the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) addressed a group of teenage girls, the graduating class of a New York Jewish girls’ high school, Beth Rivkah.[2] He offered them a most marvelous insight into this Midrash. This profound perspective can teach us volumes about how to view a one-liner in Midrash, and how to speak to the hearts of teenage girls.

(This coming Shabbos marks the 70th anniversary of the leadership of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who succeeded his father-in-law as the leader of Chabad 70 years ago, on the 10th of Shevat 1951. The following insight is characteristic of the profundity and richness of his Torah teachings and perspectives.)

Three Types of Time

Aristotle said that time was the greatest teacher who killed all his students. There is no “teacher” like time. What we learn through time and aging is unparalleled by any class or teacher. The experience of life is the greatest teacher. The saying goes: When a man with money meets a man with experience, the man with experience ends up with the money; the man with the money ends up with an experience.

And yet the clock stops for nobody. “Suspect each moment, for it is a thief, tiptoeing away with more than it brings,” John Updike said. You may be sleeping, sipping a coffee, surfing the web, or getting angry at your boss or your spouse, the clock is ticking away. How do we deal with the merciless reality of time?

There are three ways, suggests the Midrash. There are three experiences of time: depressing time, meaningful time, and redemptive time. You choose in which time-zone you will breathe.

Depressing Time

For some, time is just an endless flow, a shapeless blob, a random stream that never ceases. A day comes and a day goes, and then another day comes and goes. Each day is the same as the day before, and they all add up to nothing.

Sometimes you watch people who allow their days and years to pass without goals. Every day is an invitation to squander yet another 24 hours until it too will bite the dust. If the boredom gets to you, you find ways to escape and dull the void.

This is an empty time: time devoid of any theme. Time as it is on its own, without human initiative and creativity. Shapeless and formless. One set of 24 hours is indistinguishable from another set of 24 hours.

Productive Time

Comes the Midrash and says, “When G-d chose His world, He established ‘heads of months’ and ‘heads of years.’” For the world to become a chosen place, a desirable habitat, a place worth living in, a place that G-d not only created but chose, we must grant the endless flow of time the dignity of purpose. Every day ought to have a productive objective, every month—a meaningful goal, every year—a dynamic rhythm. The world G-d chose and desired was one in which humanity learns to confer meaning on time, to utilize it for constructive and beneficial endeavors. A meaningful life is a life in which every day is filled with meaningful choices and experiences, utilized to promote goodness, righteousness, and justice.

This is what it means to choose your world and choose your life, to appreciate that G-d chose this world. There is meaning and purpose in each moment. You can view life as random and valueless, or you can see life as a gift, and view time as priceless, something I ought to cultivate in the fullest way. I choose to invest all my energy, creativity, and passion into each moment; and for me, each day is an invitation to deeper growth and awareness.

So “When G-d chose His world, He established ‘heads of months’ and ‘heads of years.’” For time to be utilized purposefully, every month must have a “head,” which gives the month its tone and direction. Every year must have a “head,” Rosh Hashanah, the time to put into focus the year that passed and the year ahead. For time to be used productively, it must be delineated. I must take note of sunrise and sunset, of a new month and a new year. Each presents me with a specific energy, calling, and opportunity.

Redemptive Time

You can live a productive life, mark your days with worthy objectives. Your life has rhythm. You have a morning, a night, a lunch break, a weekend, and a vacation.

But you are still confined within the realm of a mortal, finite and frail universe. As one wise man said, Men talk of killing time, while time quietly kills them. Or: Time is a storm in which we are all lost; time is free, but it’s priceless; you can’t own it, but you can use it. You can’t keep it, but you can spend it. Once you’ve lost it you can never get it back.

Within the restricted structure of our bodies, life span, and circumstances, we can use our time productively. Yet, we can’t free ourselves from the prison of mortality. Even when I work hard and use my time well, it is still cruel to me. It ages me. At any moment something can happen which will shake up and destroy my entire structure and rhythm.

Here is where the Midrash opens us up to another dimension of time, and this is where the Jewish story is introduced into history. “When G-d chose Jacob and his

children He established the head of the month of Redemption.” G-d gave us the ability to liberate and redeem ourselves from the natural, mortal, and finite reality. He allowed us to align our posture with Divine infinity; not just to be productive with our time, but to confer upon each moment transcendence, to grant it the resonance of eternity, to liberate it and ourselves from the shackles of mortality.

You can be productive with your time. You can use it to shovel the snow, mow the lawn, fix the garage, read a good book, shop in Costco, enhance your computer speed, sell a building, cook a gourmet meal, and help society. This is worthwhile. But you are capable of more: You can make each moment Divine, elevating it to the realm of the sacred, where each moment, hour, day, week, month, and year become infused with G-dliness and are thus transformed into eternity. You can allow your time to become a conduit for the timeless.

"When G-d chose Jacob and his children He established the head of the month of Redemption." This is the month of Nissan, the month when we were set free of Egyptian bondage and were empowered to free ourselves from every form of bondage. Torah and Mitzvos make our time not only productive but Divine.

When you align your time rhythm with the Divine, realizing that every moment of time is an opportunity to connect with the infinite light vibrating through your body and the cosmos; when you use your time to study G-d's Torah, to connect to G-d, to perform a mitzvah, and to live in the Divine consciousness of oneness, your time is not only productive, but it is redemptive, uninhibited by the shackles of nature finitude. You redeem and transform your time—by aligning it with the divine blueprint for life.

The Choice

When the sun rises, and I declare “Shema Yisroel” to align my posture with Divine oneness—the moment of sunrise is now etched in eternity. When the sun of Friday is about to set and I kindle the Shabbos lights, it is a moment transformed into transcendent peacefulness. When I take a moment to do a favor for another person, for tuning into the love of the universe, for studying Torah or praying, I elevate the moment into transcendence.

In the words of the Tanya (ch. 25), "In the higher reality, this union (between the soul and G-d when we perform a mitzvah) is eternal, for G-d and His will transcend time... Only here below is the union within the limits of time."

Each of us must choose in which “time zone” we will live. Do I live in a “depressing time,” letting my days and nights pass without meaning? Do I elevate my days into worthwhile experiences? Or, in my ultimate calling, do I turn each day into a redemptive experience, into a conduit for infinity?

How We Study Science and Physics

The Rebbe said one more thing to these girls about their academic studies. Some of us study the sciences and see

them merely as interesting data, raw facts. However, much of humanity has come to appreciate that when we study biology, physics, history, or math it must be with a productive and meaningful purpose—to make the world a better place, to enhance life on our planet, and to promote justice and compassion.

Yet, our ultimate calling is to see all of our studies, all branches of wisdom, as an instrument to transform our world and our lives into an abode for the Divine infinite reality, to infuse all aspects of our lives with true and timeless meaning, with everlasting love and holiness, by revealing that ultimately, we are all one, and everything is part of that oneness.

[1] Shemos Rabba 15:11.

[2] The talk is published in Likutei Sichos vol. 4 p. 1263-1267. (The Rebbe bases his explanation on Or Hatorah Parshas Bo p. 264. This Sichah is an extraordinary example of how to “translate” a maamar into relevant language. The maamar in Or Hatorah is abstract and the Rebbe applied it in the most practical and relevant way.)

Weekly Parsha BO

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

As the drama of the Exodus from Egypt draws nearer its climax in this week's Torah reading, one cannot help but be struck by the stubbornness of Pharaoh in the face of all of the plagues visited upon him and his nation. His advisers had long before told him that all was lost and that he should cut his losses quickly by freeing the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. This seemingly wise and rational counsel was rejected by Pharaoh out of hand.

Pharaoh sees himself as a godlike figure, omniscient, supremely brilliant and all knowing. He is trapped in a propaganda web of his own making – he can never admit to being wrong or to having made an error of judgment or policy. In the course of human history this has often been the fatal error made by dictators who were always supremely confident in their arrogance and who never acknowledged their mistakes.

Just recall the mass murderers and dictators of our past century – Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Arafat, etc. None of them ever admitted to error and all of them led their people to disaster and untold suffering. This was the arrogance of power overwhelming rational thought and nullifying good strategic planning. There is also an arrogance of intellect. The intellectuals amongst us, who always know what is best for everyone else, are never reticent about rendering opinions on all issues and policies. Again, the fact that they have been wrong – dead wrong – so many times in the past causes them no inhibition in advancing their current viewpoints.

The Torah seems to attribute Pharaoh's continuing folly of unreasonable stubbornness, to God, so to speak, ‘hardening his heart.’ This implies that somehow Pharaoh's freedom

of choice was diminished and he could not have capitulated to the demands of Moshe even if he had wished to do so. This philosophic and theological difficulty has been dealt with by the great commentators of Israel over the ages, with varying theories offered and advanced.

It seems from many of their opinions that at a certain point in human decision-making, a tipping point is achieved when the leader can no longer admit to error and remain the leader. 'Hardening' the leader's heart means there is an unwillingness to give up one's position of power. Very few leaders in the history of humanity have willingly surrendered power.

Simply rising to a position of leadership, let alone absolute and dictatorial power, almost automatically 'hardens one's heart' and limits one's choices and policy options. The Torah blesses a generation that is privileged to have a leader that is capable of admitting sin and error and can offer a public sacrifice in the Temple in atonement.

The greatness of King David lies not only in his heroic spiritual and physical accomplishments as king of Israel but in his ability to admit to personal failings and errors of judgment. Pharaoh is incapable of such self-scrutiny and realistic humility. His lust for power has 'hardened his heart' beyond the power of recall. He has doomed himself as have so many of his ilk over the centuries.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Bo: It's not just the thought that counts!

25 January 2023

What is the relevance of tefillin in our times?

In Parshat Bo, the Torah states (Shemot 13:16),

"Vehaya le'ot al yadecha uletotafot bein einecha." – *"And they shall be a sign upon your arm and frontlets between your eyes."*

Here there is a reference to the tefillin shel yad which we wear on the arm and the tefillin shel rosh which we wear on our heads. But notice, with regard to the tefillin of the arm, that what the Torah says is in the singular: vehaya le'ot – it shall be a sign, whereas with regard to the tefillin shel rosh, it is totafot, in the plural. An explanation of this can be derived from the Aramaic translation of Onkelos, who translates totafot as tefillin, in the plural as well.

So from here we learn that while we only have on the 'shel yad' (the tefillin of the arm) which we start with, that is only in the singular – it's not the whole thing. It's only once we have the 'shel rosh' on (the tefillin of the head) together with the 'shel yad' of the arm that it is tefillin – we have the entire set.

'Shel yad' and 'shel rosh' are actually separate mitzvot. However the impact of them comes when both are there together.

There are two very powerful messages here for us. First of all, the 'shel yad' (tefillin of the arm) represents action, because the arm is the busiest, most active part of the body, whereas the tefillin 'shel rosh' (of the head) represents thought and intention. The message is that it's not good enough just to think, to have intentions. We need to implement our intentions so that they can be realised through our actions.

Secondly, the tefillin shel yad faces the heart which is the seat of emotion whereas the tefillin shel rosh is upon our heads which is the seat of logic. The message here is that we shouldn't only be cerebral beings; we need to be feeling beings. We need to connect emotionally with others with love and affection, and also we need to recognise that we can't allow our emotions to run away with themselves. We need to apply logic and reason and sometimes our minds need to put the brakes on our hearts.

So on a daily basis, therefore, tefillin are so relevant for us. They remind us to always translate our good intentions into meaningful action, and also to guarantee that we have the highest quality of mind power and also emotional capacity in everything that we do.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Parshas Bo

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is sponsored in memory of Frummit bas Yosef.

War: What is it Good for?

And so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I have amused Myself with Egypt [...] (10:2).

In Parshas Eikev, when Bnei Yisroel are on the threshold of entering Eretz Yisroel, Moshe Rabbeinu attempts to calm their fears: "Perhaps you will say in your heart, 'These nations are more numerous than I, how will I be able to drive them out? Do not fear them! Remember what Hashem your God did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt [...]' (Devarim 7:17-18). Moshe is reminding Bnei Yisroel of the incredible miracles that Hashem performed to utterly decimate the Egyptians and free them from slavery so that upon entering Eretz Yisroel they would not be apprehensive, but rather confident of victory.

However, Moshe's strategy to calm Bnei Yisroel is difficult to understand: Moshe is speaking to Bnei Yisroel after years of wandering in the desert – the story of the Exodus and all of the incredible miracles that Hashem performed happened almost forty years prior. In fact, almost every man who had experienced the Exodus was already dead, condemned to die in the desert. Those men who were children when Bnei Yisroel left Egypt would

only have vague recollections of what happened four decades earlier.

Moreover, just three months prior Bnei Yisroel had incredible victories against both Sichon and Og – whom the Torah labels the “arms of the world” (Devarim 33:26) (i.e. pillars holding up the world – see Rashi ad loc). Instead of recalling events that had taken place 40 years ago, why wouldn’t Moshe just refer to these incredible victories over Sichon and Og that were so fresh in their minds?

When the spies wanted to convince Bnei Yisroel that entering Eretz Yisroel was not going to be a cakewalk, they warned, “The Amalekites live in the land of the Negev” (Bamidbar 13:29), meaning that, assuming they would enter Eretz Yisroel from the south, the first people they would come across would be Amalek. Rashi (ad loc) points out that since they had already been attacked by the Amalekites, knowing that they would meet them again would surely drive fear into their hearts.

But this too is difficult to understand. While it’s true that Bnei Yisroel had been victims of a sneaky and brutal attack by Amalek, under the leadership of Yehoshua and Moshe, Bnei Yisroel utterly destroyed them. What kind of strategy was this of the spies to try to instill fear and dread by threatening them with an opponent they had already soundly defeated?

The answer is that in war even when you win, you lose. Even victors suffer heavy damage. Before the Six Day War 50,000 graves were dug in Tel Aviv because that was the anticipated losses and they wanted to be prepared. The United States soundly defeated the Japanese in WWII, yet there were many disastrous battles like Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima. The strategy of the spies was to instill the anxiety of entering a war knowing that even when you win many people die and never come back home. This is why Moshe didn’t bring up Sichon and Og; even though they won, it was a hard fought war.

The possuk in our parsha lays out exactly what the battle with Egyptians were to Hashem. Rashi (10:2) explains that Hashem amused himself with the Egyptians, it was like a game and He made a sport of it. This is similar to watching a cat toy with a mouse; there is never the possibility that the cat is going to lose or get hurt. It’s only a matter of how long the cat wishes to amuse himself. This is what Moshe is trying to impress on Bnei Yisroel – if you’re worthy Hashem will take you into Eretz Yisroel with no stress of losing battles or suffering casualties. Just as Hashem took them out of Egypt and the battle was merely an amusement, He is more than capable of bringing you into Eretz Yisroel in the same manner.

Out of Control

Moshe said, “With our youngsters and with our elders we will go, with our sons and daughters, with our flock and with our cattle shall we go [...]” He (Pharaoh) responded –

“Not so! Let the men go now and serve Hashem for that is your request” (10:9-11).

This week’s parsha opens with Moshe threatening to once again visit upon the Egyptians a horrific plague (locusts). At the urging of his advisors, Pharaoh initially relents to let Bnei Yisroel go and serve Hashem. Pharaoh recalls Moshe and Aharon to the palace and asks them, “Go and worship Hashem your God, who exactly is going?” (10:8). Once Pharaoh hears that Moshe intends that everyone as well as all the cattle will be going on this spiritual pilgrimage, Pharaoh responds, “Not so! Let the men go now and serve Hashem for that is your request.” When Moshe holds fast to his request Pharaoh angrily chases them out of the palace.

This same scene repeats after the plague of darkness. Pharaoh summons Moshe and informs him that he will permit all the people to go and serve Hashem; only the cattle is to remain behind. Moshe responds by telling Pharaoh that not only will all of the cattle be going as well, but that Pharaoh himself will provide animals as offerings to Hashem. Needless to say, this comment does not sit well with Pharaoh and he responds by once again throwing him out of the palace along with the threat that if he ever comes back he will be put to death.

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 182:2) gives the following parable: A lion and a variety of animals, including a fox, were on a ship. The ship comes to a toll where a donkey was the dock master in charge of collecting the tolls from all the vessels. The donkey demands that the lion’s ship pay the toll as well. The fox protests, “What impudence! Do you not see that the king of all the animals is among us! How dare you ask us to pay the toll?” The donkey retorts, “I am only collecting the toll to bring it to the king’s treasury!” At this point, the lion asks that the ship be brought closer to the dock. He thereupon leaps from the ship and kills the donkey. The Midrash concludes that Pharaoh is the donkey, and this is what he gets for demanding a tribute from Hashem.

This Midrash is difficult to understand. The Gemara (Sukkah 30a) relates that a king once came to a toll and proceeded to pay the toll. His servants asked him, why are you paying the toll when the proceeds from tolls belong to you anyway? The king responded that if someone sees him not paying the toll then others might learn from him that it is acceptable not to pay it. Therefore, he wanted to pay it. In essence, it seems necessary that the king pay the toll. Why then did the lion kill the donkey for his impertinence? Most disputes are about control. This is particularly true in family relationships and disharmony in marriage. The circumstances that created the problem are rarely the essence of the issue. The real point of contention is invariably control.

The Gemara is saying that, of course, the king can decide if he wants to pay the toll. If he has a valid reason to pay the tax he is entitled to do so because he can do whatever he

wants. However, the Midrash faults the donkey for trying to control the interaction with the king of the animals. He is trying to exert his own control by saying that he has to collect the tax in order to give it back to the king. The fact that he has the impudence to demand the tax from the king means that he doesn't really submit to the fact that the king is the one to decide whether or not he wants to pay the tax. For that, he deserves to be put to death.

The same is true for Pharaoh. Even though he somewhat acknowledges that he has to submit to the will of Hashem, he constantly tries to limit Hashem's will by placing conditions on how Bnei Yisroel are to serve Him. Of course, trying to exert his own influence means that he isn't really submitting to the will of Hashem. Just as the donkey who tries to exert control by forcing the king to remit his own taxes pays for his impudence with his life, so too Pharaoh brought destruction upon himself and his country.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Vaera 5783 :: Who Can't?

This week's parasha, Vaera, tells us about a series of meetings between Moses and his brother Aaron – as G-d's emissaries to take the children of Israel out of Egypt – with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Before one of the first meetings, G-d instructed Moses and Aaron as follows:

"When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Provide a sign for yourselves,' you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff, [and] cast [it] before Pharaoh; it will become a serpent.'" (Exodus 7, 9)

And indeed, when Moses and Aaron came to the meeting with Pharaoh, Aaron cast his staff down and it became a serpent. According to most commentators, it was some kind of snake. The Torah tells us that Pharaoh then called to the Egyptian sorcerers, the professional magicians of Egypt, and instructed them to perform for Moses and Aaron. The sorcerers managed through illusion to make their staffs turn into serpents, but Aaron's staff swallowed theirs.

A careful reading of Pharaoh's words to Moses and Aaron shows an interesting linguistic oddity. Pharaoh told them "Provide a sign for yourselves," when the sign was meant for Pharaoh, not for Moses and Aaron. Had it been for them, it would have made sense for Pharaoh to say "Provide a sign for yourselves." Pharaoh's idolatrous perceptions led him to believe that whoever could do the best magic was right. If he wanted the sign in order to be convinced that Moses and Aaron had actually come to him as part of a divine mission, why did he say "Provide a sign for yourselves"?

Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin (1887 – 1933; president of "Agudat Yisrael" in Poland, the head of the Chachmei Lublin yeshiva, and the initiator of the concept of "daf yomi") offered a profound interpretation of Pharaoh's words. When Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh and

demanding he let the Jewish nation leave for the desert to worship G-d, Pharaoh thought their request was surreal since he considered them slaves unable to worship any god. He saw them as tools in the service of the kingdom; slaves devoid of personalities. The demand brought by Moses and Aaron seemed to him completely illogical.

So, Pharaoh said "Provide a sign for yourselves." Pharaoh did not tell them to perform just any magic, but to prove that their demand was possible, and that the Hebrew slaves could rise to the level of G-d worshippers. The sign was needed to prove that the words of Moses and Aaron were not surreal.

And indeed, the sign was the staff becoming a serpent and then going back to being a staff. Moses and Aaron proved with this sign that when there is "siyata d'shmaya," help from Heaven, there is nothing that isn't possible. If G-d wants to take the Jewish nation out of Egypt and give them the Torah on Mount Sinai, then it is as possible as the staff becoming a serpent and then reverting back to being a staff. The redemption of the Jewish nation from Egyptian slavery and their becoming a nation who received the Torah involved an extensive and comprehensive change in consciousness. From slaves devoid of choice, they became the nation that stands for free choice; from people whose rights were trampled, they became "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" whose mission is to lead all of humanity toward a life of justice and morality. Could such a change even be possible?

The staff that became a serpent and went back to being a staff came to prove to Moses and Aaron, and to the entire Jewish nation, that this was a possible change. And it came to also teach us, learners of Torah thousands of years later, that we are not expected to do the impossible. What is expected of us is possible, because human effort that goes along with "siyata d'shmaya," help from Heaven, can surprise even the most optimistic person and bring about accomplishments that seem hard to attain.

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Rav Kook Torah

Bo: Donkey-Holiness

Rabbi Chanan Morrison

Immediately before leaving Egypt, the Israelites were commanded to commemorate the final plague of makkat bechorot, the death of the firstborn, by consecrating their firstborn, saying:

"When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us leave, God killed all the firstborns in Egypt, both man and beast. I therefore offer to God all male firstling animals, and redeem all the firstborns of my sons." (Exod. 13:15)

This mitzvah applies not only to firstborn babies, but also to kosher animals, and — surprisingly — to firstborn

donkeys: “Every firstling donkey must be redeemed with a sheep” (Exod. 13:13).

Why are firstborn donkeys also included in this mitzvah?

This is even more surprising when we consider that some non-kosher animals, such as camels and pigs, have only one sign of impurity. Donkeys, however, exhibit both signs of impurity — they are not ruminants, nor do they have cloven hooves. The Zohar teaches that the donkey is *avi avot ha-tumah*, the ultimate source of impurity.

In addition, the Maharal of Prague noted that the Hebrew word for ‘donkey’ (*chamor*) shares the same root as the word for ‘material’ (*chomer*). The donkey, he explained, is a symbol of materialism and crassness.

So why did God bestow the special holiness of *bechor* on this ignoble creature?

Hidden Holiness

One explanation proposed by the Sages in *Bechorot* 5b is that donkeys helped facilitate the Exodus, as they hauled the treasures of Egyptian gold and silver for the Hebrew slaves. Yet the Israelites could have used some other pack animal. It would appear that there is something special about the donkey, that it symbolizes an inner truth about the redemption of the Jewish people, both in Egypt and in the future national rebirth of the Messianic Era.

The Israelites in Egypt had sunk to the lowest levels of idolatry and impurity. Outwardly, they were indistinguishable from their Egyptian neighbors. According to the Midrash, even the angels were unable to distinguish between the two nations. They questioned God’s decision to rescue the Israelites at the Red Sea, protesting, ‘Both the Egyptians and the Israelites worship idols!’

But as with the donkey, the impurity of the Jewish people was only on the surface, hiding a great inner holiness. It was a superficial defect, as it says, “Do not look upon me [disdainfully] because I am black; for [it is only] the sun that has darkened me” (Song of Songs 1:6).

The Messianic Donkey

We find a similar idea with regard to the future redemption. The Sages noted that the prophets used conflicting metaphors to describe the Messianic Era. In Daniel’s nighttime vision, the Messianic king arrives “on the clouds of the heaven” (7:13). The prophet Zechariah, on the hand, spoke of a righteous king who makes his appearance as “a pauper, riding on a donkey” (9:9). So how will the Messiah arrive — floating on clouds, or sitting on a donkey?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explained that the Messiah’s form of transportation depends on us:

“If [the people of Israel] merit, he will come ‘on heavenly clouds.’ If they do not merit, then he will be ‘a pauper riding on a donkey.’” (Sanhedrin 98a)

In other words, if the Jewish people attain a spiritual level high enough, they will merit a supernatural redemption replete with wonders and miracles — the Messianic king on clouds. If, however, the redemption arrives because the

final hour has come, but the Jewish people are not worthy — then the redemption will unfold through natural means (see *Ohr HaChaim* on Num. 24:17).

Thus, “a pauper riding on a donkey” is a metaphor for an undeserved redemption, a redemption which comes despite a poverty of merits. It is a redemption based on natural processes, as exemplified by the donkey, a symbol of the material world. Yet this donkey, while externally crass and impure, has a special holiness hidden within — the holiness of the firstborn.

According to Rav Kook, the image of the Messiah arriving on a donkey characterizes the period of *Ikveta deMashicha*, the generation when the ‘footsteps’ (*ikvot*) of redemption are first heard. The Talmud (*Sotah* 49b) describes this era as a time of terrible spiritual decline, replete with brazenness, immorality, and corruption. But the Zohar asserts that, despite its external faults, the generation will be “good on the inside.” This inner goodness is reflected in the unusual nature of the Jewish people in the pre-Messianic Era. Despite the darkness clouding their behavior and beliefs, they are characterized by an innate holiness, which finds expression in their great love for the Jewish people and the Land of Israel.

The Function of *Chevlei Mashiach*

The Sages indicated the deeply disturbing nature of *Ikveta deMashicha* with the term *chevlei mashiach*, the ‘birth pangs’ that precede the Messianic Era. In his seminal work, *Orot*, Rav Kook discussed various reasons for the intensified degree of materialism that characterizes the era of national revival. His central argument is that the Messianic ‘birth pangs’ come to correct an imbalance stemming from centuries of stateless dispersion.

Rav Kook explained the process using the following analogy. The dregs at the bottom of a wine bottle help preserve the wine. If a bottle lacks dregs, and we wish to correct the situation by adding dregs, the initial result will be to muddy the entire bottle, temporarily ruining it. But as the dregs settle at the bottom, the wine regains its clarity and benefits from the preservative nature of the dregs.

So too, involvement in material pursuits is necessary to ensure the flow of normal life. The exile, with its concentration on spiritual matters, enervated the life-force of the Jewish people to such an extent that their national survival was in danger. The Jewish people needed to return to their land in order to survive as a nation. The return to the land and to a more balanced national life meant greater involvement in life’s material aspects. Thus the early pioneers were occupied primarily with the physical revival of the Jewish people in *Eretz Yisrael* — draining swamps, planting crops, building cities, establishing defense organizations, political institutions, and so on. Initially, the crassness and brazenness of the pre-Messianic Era are cause for great consternation. But as the negative forces are subdued, like the settling of the wine dregs to the bottom of the bottle, their detrimental aspects dissipate.

Transforming Darkness to Light

The period of *Ikveta deMashicha* is a difficult time, and not all the Sages were eager to experience it. Rav Yosef, however, demonstrated great spiritual courage, saying, “Let the Messiah come; and may I merit to sit in the shadow of his donkey’s dung” (Sanhedrin 98b). Once again, we find the metaphor of the donkey used in connection with the Messianic Era.

Rav Yosef was accustomed to looking at the inner essence of things. He recognized the tremendous inner holiness hidden in this problematic generation, as symbolized by the Messiah’s donkey. Rav Yosef understood that the Messianic light will demonstrate how to utilize all forces, even the most coarse — “the donkey’s dung” — for the sake of good. He knew that the darkness of national rebirth will lead to an even higher light of Torah and knowledge of God.

Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Igrot HaRe’iyah vol. II, p. 188, letter 555 (1913) (Igeret Takanah); Orot p. 85 (Orot HaTehiyah, sec. 45).

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Bo

פרשת בא תשפ"ג

ויאמר אליהם... מי ומי ההלכים... ויאמר משה בנערינו ובזקנינו נלך... כי חג ד' לנו

He (Pharaoh) said to them, “Which ones are going...” Moshe said, “With our youngsters and with our elders we will go... because it is a festival of Hashem for us.” (10:8,9)

Pharaoh finally showed a crack in his armor. He was prepared to allow some Jews to leave, and he was willing to negotiate concerning who may leave and who must remain. Moshe *Rabbeinu* replied that he had no room for negotiation, no juncture for compromise. They were all leaving. Pharaoh countered, saying that he would allow the adult men to go. Moshe said it was insufficient, “We will go with everyone – from our youngsters to our elders.” They were at an impasse, with Moshe insisting on including the young children and even feeble elders, and Pharaoh contending that this dispensation was only available to the able-bodied men.

Clearly, the debate between Moshe and Pharaoh epitomizes the varied approaches to education and the wide chasm that existed between the Torah perspective and the pagan viewpoint expressed by Pharaoh – which has found purchase even in contemporary society. Pharaoh was of the opinion that service to the Almighty belonged in the domain of the male adults. Children had no place in the ritual service. Moshe argued that we Jews see everyone as a worthy member of the nation. Children who do not commence their Torah education at a young age will be hard-pressed to adhere to it when they get older.

Furthermore, for the Jew, religion is a way of life. It sustains him. Children require religion at the earliest opportunity. It is their lifeline.

Horav Aizik Ausband, zl, explains the idea behind Moshe’s rejoinder, *Ki chag Hashem lanu*; “It is a festival of Hashem for us,” and its message to Pharaoh. Why *lanu*, for us? It would have sufficed to say that it is a holiday. He explains that parents do not take their children to a wedding of a close friend. They have no place there. If it is a family wedding, however, all family members are invited and expected to attend. This is what Moshe intimated to Pharaoh. *Maamad Har Sinai*, the Revelation at *Har Sinai* where we received the Torah, was no simple experience. It was a family wedding during which we were wed to the Torah. This was personal and, thus, mandatory requirement for all family members.

Torah *chinuch* begins as soon as a child is able to respond to instructions. For some, this begins at birth. The *Chazon Ish, zl*, related that from his very birth, his mother insisted on washing *netillas yadayim*, his hands, in the morning when he woke up. It was her deepest desire that, from his earliest infancy, he grow *b'kedushah u'b'taharah*, with sanctity and purity. This idea is supported by the *Ben Ish Chai*, who encouraged mothers to wash their infants’ hands. The *Brisker Rav, zl*, stated that for both boys and girls, Jewish education begins with washing their hands. In this manner, they are eventually inculcated with the notion that distancing oneself from *tumah*, ritual contamination, is a requisite for a Torah Jew.

It is related that when *Horav Chaim Kanievsky, zl*, was but a child of two-years-old, his father, the venerable *Steipler Gaon, zl*, would call him over and say, “Nu, jump up on the chair and tell me the names of each *meseches*, tractate, in *Shas*, the *Talmud*.” The lad jumped up on the chair, and, in a sing song voice, to a tune that the *Steipler* sang to him when he put him to bed at night, he rattled off all of the *mesechtos*. As he said the last one (*Uktzin*), he added, “And now give me the candy!” My postscript: When a child is raised with such *chavivus*, love, for Torah; when he sees from his earliest moments of cogency what his parents value, it is no wonder that he attained such extraordinary proficiency in those *mesechtos*.

The *Ponovezher Rav, zl*, related an inspiring story concerning *Rebbetzin Meita Schlesinger, a”h*, wife of *Horav Yechiel Michel Schlesinger*, founder and *Rosh Yeshivah* of Kol Torah. When the *Rav* was yet a young man, he founded a *Kollel* (in Lithuania) for young Torah scholars who would dedicate their entire days and nights to Torah study. These were not ordinary young scholars. They were the cream of the *yeshivah* world who would one day go on to become *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshivah*. The idea of *kollel* was then a novelty, but, the *Ponovezher Rav* was no ordinary *gadol*. His innovative nature spurred many of his projects. His dedication to Hashem and love of Torah

and *am Yisrael* are what catalyzed the merit for achieving Hashem's blessing.

One night, the *Rav* took a walk and noticed a young woman with a young child walking back and forth outside the *kollel*. Every once in a while, she would stop next to a window and listen to the sound of Torah emanating from the *kollel*. This went on for an hour. This (what appeared to be) strange behavior prompted the *Rav* to ask about this woman. Who was she? Perhaps she was in need of assistance? He walked over to her and asked, "Who are you, and why are you walking back and forth with your little boy by the *kollel*?"

The woman replied, "I am the wife of *Rav Yechiel Michel Schlesinger*, who sits by that window learning. I come here at night because my husband leaves the house early in the morning and returns late at night. We hardly see each other during the course of the day. My greatest pleasure is to stand outside 'his' window and listen to him learning. Also, I want my young son to hear and absorb the sounds of Torah."

That little boy grew up to be *Horav Moshe Yehudah Schlesinger, Shlita*, who has served as *Rosh Yeshivah* of *Kol Torah* for over fifty years. As a background to the story, *Rebbetzin* Schlesinger hailed from an aristocratic family in Hamburg, Germany. She could have chosen to live a life of luxury and entitlement. She instead chose Torah, because her greatest love was reserved for Torah. She sought a husband who was like-minded. They left Germany for Lithuania where her husband would achieve his greatest success in Torah. Aware of all this, the *Rav* told the woman who was inspired by the *kol*, sound, of Torah study, "One day, your husband will establish a *yeshivah*. I will advise him to name it *Kol Torah* in your honor. In 1939, *Rav Yechiel Michel* left Europe together with his wife and their young family and emigrated to *Eretz Yisrael*, where he founded *Yeshivas Kol Torah* – a fitting tribute to the dedication to, and love of, Torah that was the hallmark of his home.

והיתה צעקה גדלה בכל ארץ מצרים אשר כמהו לא נהיתה וכמהו לא תספ

There shall be a great outcry in the entire land of Egypt, such as there had never been and such a there shall never be again. (11:6)

Moshe *Rabbeinu* warned of the impending plague of *makkas bechoros*, smiting of the firstborn. He added that the cries of grief would supersede any cries that had been and any cries that would ever be. These are strong words coming from the individual who was the medium for the last nine plagues that had devastated Egypt. One would expect that such words would have shaken up the Egyptians to their very core. The *Midrash HaGadol*, however, relates a dialogue that ensued between an elderly Egyptian woman and Moshe. The woman screamed, "You are a false prophet! An old woman who has no father, no

mother, no brother, no sister, no son, and no daughter, for whom will she cry out?"

When Moshe heard this, he countered, "Your outcry will precede their outcry. (In other words, she will be beset with inconsolable grief.) Apparently, at one time, the woman had had a son who had died. She was now left alone, bereft of all family. Indeed, what did she now have to cry about? Ostensibly, this woman did not give up on the only family member that she had. She sculpted an image of him, an idol to remind her of her son. Every day, following each meal, she would stand and dance before this sculpture. This became the focus of her life. On the night of *makkas bechoros*, dogs came and attacked the sculpture, completely destroying it. The woman went berserk with grief. She cried and screamed over her loss. She fulfilled the *pasuk*, "There will be an outcry in the entire Land of Egypt."

Horav Yisrael Meir Druck, Shlita, quotes his father, who derived a fundamental lesson from this incident. We see that a person can experience visions of the Divine, actions that clearly indicate that there is a G-d Who controls the world. This woman saw the truth, but chose to either ignore or deny it. She saw and experienced the first nine miraculous plagues. She had no question in her mind that which Moshe was warning would occur – would certainly occur. Yet, she had the temerity to defy Moshe and say – "But I will not cry. So, the outcry will not be everywhere. There will be one person who (because she has nothing to cry about) will not cry." To call Moshe a false prophet exhibits an audacity that borders on mindlessness. This shows us how obtuse one's heart can be if he/she does not work on himself/herself.

The *shifchah al ha'yam*, maidservant who stood at the Red Sea, saw a revelation of Hashem's glory that was unprecedented and never repeated. *Chazal* teach that her level of prophecy (what she saw) was even greater than that of the *Navi Yechezkel*. "Nonetheless," says *Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl*, "she remained a *shifchah*." The experience did not transform her. We see what we want to see because we do not develop the ability to "read" what we see, so that we can spiritually elevate ourselves.

Horav Shmuel Truvitz, zl, relates that he once traveled in a *monit*, taxi. Seeing a Torah sage, the driver, who was not himself a practicing Jew, said, "I once witnessed the Creator in action. I saw a miracle taking place right before my very own eyes." This piqued *Rav Truvitz's* curiosity, "So, tell me what you saw."

The driver related that when he and his friend had been in the IDF, army, a venomous snake had wound itself around his friend and was poised to bite him. The driver told his friend, "I can shoot the snake, but he is wound so tightly around you, I might hit you by accident." The friend, who was facing certain death if the snake bit, agreed to let him shoot. After all, he really had nothing to lose.

A religious soldier who was part of their platoon suggested, “Let us all say *Shema Yisrael* together.” As soon as they began to recite the *Shema*, the snake slithered away.

“My friend whose life was saved became a *baal teshuvah*,” the taxi driver said.

Rav Truvitz was astonished, “Your friend became a *baal teshuvah*, but what about you? You, too, witnessed the miracle. How is it that you saw the miracle as did your friend and only he became a *baal teshuvah*?”

“The snake was not wrapped around me. My life was not in danger.” A person can witness miracles and still remain unmoved.

ולא יהיה בכך נגף למשחית בהכתי בארץ מצרים

There shall not be a plague of destruction upon you when I strike in the land of Egypt. (12:13)

ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח ביתו עד בקר

You shall not leave the entrance of the house until morning. (12:22)

The Jews were warned to stay home during the destruction that Hashem was wreaking in Egypt. What about the Jew who left his house? Did he perish together with the Egyptians? *Rashi* alludes to such a situation when he comments concerning the *pasuk*, “There shall not be a plague of destruction upon you.” If a Jew happened to be in an Egyptian home during the plague, was he smitten together with his Egyptian host? No. This was Hashem's promise: “Jews will not die.” *Mishnas Rashi* wonders why there is a question that a member of the Jewish People would suffer in the destruction. Just because he happened to be in an Egyptian home during the plague is not reason for inclusion in the punishment – or is it?

Mishnas Rashi explains that we must first ask ourselves what a Jew is doing in the house of an Egyptian. Apparently, a Jew who felt comfortable visiting an Egyptian must have been dealing with some severe spiritual deficiencies. If, after all the Egyptians did to us, he had the temerity to visit and maintain a social relationship with one of them, he was profoundly challenged in his spiritual realm. Furthermore, after Egypt endured so much from the plagues that devastated Egypt, one would think that by now the most obtuse person would acknowledge that Hashem was involved in every aspect of the world. Yet, this person defied Hashem and left his house to pay a social call to his Egyptian friend! While outwardly he may have appeared to be a Jew, his self-loathing actions indicated that he would have liked to be perceived as an Egyptian. This is grounds for the assumption that he should have been treated as an Egyptian and suffered their punishment.

Thus, the Torah writes, “There shall not be any plague of destruction upon you.” A Jew remains a Jew, regardless of his nefarious actions. A Jew has no exit strategy. Hashem protects him. He always leaves the “light

on” for His children – regardless of their errant behavior. That is what parents do.

When we see a Jew who, for a variety of reasons, has chosen – or was a victim of his parents’ choice – to negate Torah and *mitzvah* practice, it is not a reason for us to look at him askance. If Hashem accepts him the way he is – so should we. Impressions go two ways. When a non-practicing Jew looks at us in a disapproving manner, it is no less inappropriate. We are inclined to accept everyone who might be different from us even when he/she: adheres to and lives a life of moral deviance and abandon; chooses to liberalize his/her moral/ethical compass; or rejects the Divine Authorship of the Torah, including all the ramifications that result from this belief. Yet, when an observant Jew walks by with his *Tzitzis* proudly displayed, wears a *Tallis* in the street on *Shabbos*, or displays our distinctive mode of dress (both male and female), they cringe, snub, and, at times, make uncalled for remarks.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski, *zl*, related (“Generation to Generation”) that he was once on a bus, dressed in his usual *chassidic* garb. A passenger who was displeased with his mode of dress, accosted him. “Why can’t you people catch up with the times? You aren’t living in Europe. We are in modern America. Get with the program!” Rabbi Twerski replied that he was Amish. When the passenger heard this, he apologized profusely and even lauded him for adhering to his traditions.

קדש לי כל בכור... ויאמר משה אל העם זכור את היום הזה אשר יצאתם ממצרים... והיה כי יביאך ד'

Sanctify to Me every firstborn... Moshe said to the people, “Remember this day on which you departed from Egypt... And it will come to pass that Hashem shall bring you.” (13:1,2,4)

Rarely does a *mitzvah* receive such a *hakdamah*, foreword, prior to presenting the actual *mitzvah* to *Klal Yisrael*. Apparently, the *mitzvah* of *kiddush b'chorim*, sanctification of the firstborn, is tied directly to the story of the Egyptian bondage and the ensuing exodus. First, we note that unlike for the *b'chor* of an animal whose *kedushah* is pronounced by the declaration, *Harei zeh kadosh*, “This is sanctified,” this declaration does not suffice for a human firstborn. It is critical that we expend much effort in raising the infant *b'chor* to achieve Heavenly *kedushah*. This is the idea behind prefacing the *mitzvah* with the *Pesach* story.

Let me explain. *Horav Moshe Tzvi Neriya*, *zl*, quotes *Horav Tzadok*, *zl*, *m'Lublin (Pri Tzaddik)*, who observes that, concerning the *mitzvah* of sanctifying the firstborn, the Torah does not write, “Speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, and they should consecrate for Me their firstborn.” Rather, the Torah commences with, *Va'yidaber Hashem el Moshe*, “Hashem spoke to Moshe, sanctify for Me every firstborn.” It is almost as if Hashem issued the *mitzvah* directly to Moshe, that he should sanctify the firstborn. Why? He explains that Hashem commanded Moshe *Rabbeinu* – who

is the *shoresh*, root/source (who gave the), of Torah *She'b'ksav*, the Written Law, to imbue the *b'chorim* with *kedushah*, derived from Torah *She'b'ksav*, connecting them to the first word of the Torah: *Bereishis*, “In the beginning.” They are intricately bound with the Torah. They, too, are *bereishis*, first (the beginning of a family). Their *kedushah* should emanate from the Torah. While this is applied to the original firstborns who left Egypt, a similar idea holds true for ensuing firstborns throughout time: From day one, when they enter this world, they must be inculcated with *kedushas HaTorah*. It does not just happen; we must make it happen.

How is this done? *Rav Neriyah* explains that even prior to the *b'chor* learning Torah *She'b'ksav*, he must be imbued with the story of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, the exodus from Egypt. He should hear clearly of the *emunah*, faith, of his ancestors during their travail. *Chinuch*, education, begins in steps; the stories, the faith and love, precede the actual study.

Concerning *yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Torah commands us to relate the story to our sons and grandsons. With regard to the Revelation at *Har Sinai* and the Giving of the Torah, we are instructed to “Make them known to your children and your children’s children” (*Devarim* 4:10). We have no requirement to tell them the entire story of how it happened and what led up to that epic moment. Just tell them what took place without embellishing it with a story line. Why?

Concerning the transmission of Torah from generation to generation, stories are sorely insufficient. The only way to transmit Torah is to study and master it. If I may add – *yetzias Mitzrayim* is about the past. *Mattan Torah* is about the present and future of *Am Yisrael*. Stories will not suffice.

Va'ani Tefillah

ישלח עזרך מקודש ומציון יסעדך – *Yishlach ezricha miKodesh u'miTzion yisadeka*. May He dispatch your help from the sanctuary and support you from Tzion.

In his *Divrei Yechezkel*, the *Shiniever Rav*, *zl*, distinguishes between *eizer*, help, and *saad*, support. Concerning he who has sanctified himself, who lives a life of ascetic purity, far removed from the physical and material drives that overwhelm and take us captive, he deserves “help” – which is a stronger form of assistance. One, however, who appreciates *kedushah* and *taharah*, who yearns for it, whose desire to study Torah is powerful and all-consuming (but he is still not on the level of an individual who lives a life of *kedushah* and *taharah*), for him, who *kedushah* and *taharah* are but a *tzion*, signpost, marker, an impression that inspires – Hashem will support him *Mitzion yisadeka*: As a result of your desire to be inspired, you will be Heavenly-supported.

Malbim distinguishes between *eizer*, which refers to the primary cause of salvation, and *saad*, which is a reference to secondary, auxiliary support. David *Hamelech*

prays that his primary aid should emanate from *mikodesh*, holy sources. He understands that when armies march out of Yerushalayim to wage battle against our enemies, they are merely a *saad*, secondary support to the mainstay, *kodesh*, of the battle, which assures their victory.

לעילוי נשמת

איידל קעללער בת ר' יעקב שמעון פאללאק ע"ה

נפטר י"ג שבט תשס"ז Idu Keller

Marcia & Hymie Keller & Family

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Ohr Somayach Insights into Halacha

For the week ending 28 January 2023 / 6 Shevat 5783

Making Havdalah with Shemitta Wine

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Although we are currently in the Eighth year (Shenas Hashemini) of the Shemitta cycle, and hence actually post-Shemitta, all the same, now is the time when many Shemitta Sheilos first occur, as much Kedushas Sheviis produce only now starts flooding the marketplace and becoming commercially available. The vigilant consumer must remain on high alert to know how to properly deal with these ‘holy fruit’.[1] This includes “Holy Wine” that is currently easily obtainable.

As detailed at length in previous articles,[2] Chazal derived several essential Shemitta halachos from several pesukim in Parshas Behar that pertain to preserving the sanctity of Kedushas Sheviis produce.

Regarding to the Shemitta year, the Torah states “V’haysah Shabbos Ha’aretz Lachem L’achlah...V’livhementachah V’lechayah Asher B’artzechah Tihyeh Kol Tevuasah Le’echol - And the Resting of the Land should be for you to eat... and for your domesticated animals and the wild animals in your fields, all the produce should be for consumption.”[3]

Personal Uses

One important halacha that is inferred from these pesukim is:

Lachem- for you, lechol tzarcheichem, for all of your needs. (Sukkah 40a and Bava Kamma 102a)

According to the Mishnah, and duly codified as halacha, Kedushas Sheviis produce is not only permitted to be eaten, it is even allowed to be utilized in whichever manner the owner deems it necessary: including drinking, anointing, dyeing, and even lighting.

However, there is a very important caveat, namely that the owner’s use of it during Shemitta must be that product’s main use year round. Otherwise, it would be considered ‘ruining’ the ‘holy’ fruit and duly prohibited, as inferred from the pasuk.[4]

L'achlah- for you to eat, and not for hefseid, letting go to waste. In other words, one may not needlessly waste fruits containing Kedushas Sheviis. (Pesachim 52b)

Still, this maxim should not really affect our holy uses of holy Shemitta wine. This is because wine's main use is for it to be drunk, which involves direct bodily benefit (hana'ah) for us. In the immortal words of Dovid Hamelech, "V'yayin Yisamach Lev Enosh" – "(and) wine gladdens the hearts of man." [5] In fact, the great codifier of Ashkenazic psak, Rav Moshe Isserlis, better known as the Rema, concludes his writings on Hilchos Purim (as well as all of Orach Chaim) with the wise words of Shlomo Hamelech, "V'Tov Lev Mishteh Tamid," (and) one of good heart drinks often (i.e. is one who is happy with his lot). [6] We see that wine's main purpose is to benefit us, so why should potential Shemitta restrictions for improper use trouble us? Shemitta wine should be perfectly fine for sacramental purposes, including making Kiddush and Havdalah, as anyway it is being drunk and giving the drinker direct hana'ah.

Doubling-Up Your Mitzvos

Indeed, there is a minority opinion of Rav Yitzchak de Leon, the renowned Megillas Esther, in his commentary on the Ramban's additions to the Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvos, who makes an interesting inference from the aforementioned pesukim in Parashas Behar. He writes that "Lachem L'achlah, for you to eat," is teaching us that there is an actual Mitzvah incumbent upon us (Mitzvah Chiyuvis) to partake of Kedushas Sheviis produce. Although not the normative halacha, there are still Poskim who maintain that one does indeed fulfill a Mitzvah by eating fruit imbued with Shemitta sanctity (Mitzvah Kiyumis) even though one is under no obligation to eat specifically that fruit.

According to both of these opinions, if one can ensure that all Shemitta halachos are being strictly adhered to (including proper disposal of remains), and has the option to choose a Shemitta fruit or a similar non-Shemitta fruit, it seems that there would be a preference to do so. [7] Certainly, following this minority opinion, although not the halacha, would mean that not only is it permitted to use Shemitta wine for Kiddush and Havdalah, it would actually be the preferable option.

Indeed, this is the opinion of the famed Ridbaz, Rav Yosef Dovid Willovisky, perhaps best known for his renowned commentaries on the Yerushalmi. [8] His reasoning is that instead of simply performing one Mitzvah, making Kiddush or Havdalah with regular wine, one can instead perform it with Kedushas Sheviis wine and enhance the Mitzvah with another Mitzvah. What Jew does not like a good buy-one-get-one-free bargain, especially regarding Mitzvos, with their eternal reward?

Cooking Cause for Concern

Although this idea seems to have been widely accepted regarding making Kiddush with Kedushas Sheviis wine,

conversely, several Poskim raised a few concerns with using Kedushas Sheviis wine for Havdalah.

Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky and Rav Avrohom Yitzchok HaKohen Kook, utilizing a novel approach, advised not to use Shemitta wine for Havdalah. [9] They posit that since women generally do not lechatchilah perform Havdalah nor drink Havdalah wine, [10] Havdalah may not be fully considered a common enough use to allow its performance with Shemitta wine.

This idea, that if some cannot use Kedushas Sheviis produce then it becomes forbidden for others, stems from a Mishnah regarding the prohibition of cooking a Kedushas Sheviis vegetable in Terumah oil, as it will likely end up getting ruined. [11] According to the explanation of Rav Efraim Yitzchak, Dayan in Premishla, better known by the name of his commentary on Seder Zeraim, the Mishnah Rishonah, since Terumah produce may exclusively be eaten by a Kohen, this "minimizing use" is what forbids its consumption for the rest of us when cooking Kedushas Sheviis vegetables in Terumah oil. [12]

On the other hand, several Poskim argue, [13] explaining that this approach, as well as its application to making Havdalah with Kedushas Sheviis wine, seems to be a chiddush (quite novel), as well as a chumrah yeseira (an unfounded stringency) that is not the common minhag.

These Poskim point out that other Rishonim do not seem to agree with this explanation, rather understanding the Mishnah's warning that the Shemitta vegetable may end up getting Tamei, burnt, or used after Biur (this will be explained later in the article), all of which would be akin to causing its loss, and hence, prohibited. [14] Moreover, the Rambam allows cooking a small amount of Shemitta vegetables in Terumah oil, as long as one intends to eat it right away – ensuring that no hefseid (loss) occurs. [15] These Poskim assert that drinking a cup of Havdalah wine should not be afforded any less consideration, as it is also immediately drunk after reciting Havdalah.

Furthermore, according to the vast majority of Poskim, women actually can make Havdalah if necessary. It is simply the common minhag and preference that they do not. [16] Hence, these Poskim conclude, it would be a non-compelling comparison to the case of cooking Shemitta vegetables in Terumah oil, which would be actually prohibited from a halachic perspective. Therefore, it would seem that this argument is not the main one for not allowing Shemitta wine for Havdalah.

Cup Runneth Over

To be more precise, the main objection that many Poskim have for making Havdalah with Shemitta wine is not due to the actual act of making Havdalah itself, but rather due to several of its corollaries – the traditional overflowing of the Havdalah wine, as well as extinguishing the Havdalah candle in / with it.

As is well known, the Rema cites performing these specific actions as part of the Havdalah process as a Siman Bracha

– a Siman Tov (a blessed and good omen) for the new week being ushered in, as well as Chavivus HaMitzvah (showing affection for the Mitzvah).[17] Although these ‘extras’ have long become part-and-parcel of how much of Klal Yisrael makes Havdalah, they are precisely the cause as why many Poskim object to making Havdalah with Kedushas Sheviis wine. As overflowing the cup, and hence, essentially wasting the wine, is what brings the Siman Bracha to our homes, how can this be done with Kedushas Sheviis wine, which is prohibited from being wasted?

One approach to this dilemma is given by Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul, who maintains that since Kedushas Sheviis produce can be used in the same manner as its counterpart non-Shemitta produce normally is,[18] the same should apply here as well. Since we customarily overflow our Kos Havdalah and extinguish our Ner Havdalah using the spilled wine year-round, this has become considered normal uses of Havdalah wine. Ergo, in his opinion, both of these actions, as well as putting its drops into our eyes, are actually permitted with Shemitta wine as well.[19]

On the other hand, most other contemporary Poskim disagree, arguing that doing these Havdalah extras would be forbidden with Shemitta wine. Since spilling wine is not considered wine’s main use, and one receives no direct benefit from it, it might be more accurately defined as wasting (certainly extinguishing a flame in it would be), and many authorities prohibit doing so with Shemitta wine.[20] Therefore, although technically it would indeed be permitted to use Kedushas Sheviis wine for the actual Havdalah itself, the majority consensus is that it still should not be used any time one may not come to finish the entire cup. In fact, they rule that one must be careful not to spill it, nor use it to put out the candle; rather, if one wishes to use Kedushas Sheviis wine for Havdalah, they maintain that he must ensure that it not only is “good ‘till the last drop,” but that he drinks every last drop (even the overflow that spilled onto the saucer or plate). Definitely not necessarily the easiest way to make Havdalah!

However, it is known that Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach would use Sheviis wine for Havdalah while being careful not to let the cup overflow, and was not worried about the few drops that would naturally spill. Several other Poskim, including Rav Moshe Sternbuch, as well as Rav Shmuel Halevi Vosner conclude similarly, that one need not worry about a spill of several drops that one would not ordinarily concern himself with, as this is the normal way one drinks.[21] However, most agree that one should not purposely spill his Shemitta wine while making Havdalah.

Pondering Preferences

This leads us to an interesting question. If most Poskim maintain that one may not do the Havdalah extras with Kedushas Sheviis wine, then would it be preferable to perform Havdalah with all the trimmings using non-Shemitta wine, or to make Havdalah with Kedushas

Sheviis wine – without overflowing the cup, putting its drops in our eyes and pockets, or extinguishing the candle with it?

Not just a hypothetical question, it is reported that this exact question was asked to Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, as well as later his son-in-law, Rav Chaim Kanievsky. Both replied that as long as there are no other potential issues involved, it would be preferable to make Havdalah with Kedushas Sheviis wine, while being careful not to spill it et al. Rav Elyashiv explained that all of these extras are considered ‘Chibub Mitzvas Havdalah,’ whereas if people would refrain from obtaining Otzar Beis Din wine[22] - which assists in farmers being able to properly observe Shemitta[23] – simply due to this rationale of not using it for Havdalah, then it may cause irreparable damage to the observance of the Mitzvah of Shemitta. Hence, in their opinion, ‘Kiyum Mitzvah’ would trump ‘Chavivus HaMitzvah.’[24]

The Biur Necessities of Wine

Of course, it goes without saying that this remarkable ruling is only applicable when there are no other halachic concerns regarding the Kedushas Sheviis wine. These include its presence is exclusively in Eretz Yisrael (as using, and even just having Kedushas Sheviis wine in Chutz La’aretz hosts an additional set of problems, and certainly if it was purchased in a normal manner),[25] as well as this Havdalah taking place prior to the wine’s Zman Biur (or after one properly performed Biur).

This halacha detailing the obligation of ‘Biur’ for Shemitta produce is learned from Parashas Behar (ibid.) as well:

V’lechayah Asher B’artzechah -the fact that the Torah stressed that Shemitta produce is also relevant to wild animals teaches us that one may partake of such produce in his own home, but only as long as it is still available to the animals in the wild. After that time, one must remove such produce from his home and relinquish all property rights to the fruit. This action is known as Biur. (Taanis 6b, Pesachim 52b, Nida 51b, and Sifra / Toras Kohanim, Parashas Behar 1: 7)

According to most authorities, ‘Biur’ is accomplished by taking Kedushas Sheviis produce out of the house to a public place and giving up all rights to the fruit, announcing it as ‘hefker’ in front of three people.[26] After that, once one properly performs Biur he may actually reacquire the produce himself.[27]

Every type of fruit has its own specific Zman Biur, time of year when this must be performed, as it depends on when each species of fruit is no longer commonly available in the fields. The Gemara (Pesachim 53a) informs us of the Biur dates of four types of fruit: dried figs on Chanuka, dates on Purim, grapes on Pesach, and olives on Shavuot - all in the eighth year.

Since we know that the Zman Biur for grapes, and therefore wine as well, is Pesach of the eighth year, that means that anyone wanting to use Kedushas Sheviis wine

on this upcoming Pesach must perform Biur on Erev Pesach on all of his Shemitta wine. One more exciting thing to do on busy Erev Pesach - this means mandating lugging all of your wine bottles out to the street and publicly declaring them hefker. If one did not do so, according to most Poskim, all of his Kedushas Sheviis wine would be prohibited.[28] Talk about Erev Pesach pressure. But don't worry, according to most Poskim, after a successful Biur, you may simply reacquire your wine, and it is Havdalah-ready again.

In conclusion, we see that at least in Eretz Yisrael, it may be preferable to make a cautious Havdalah with Kedushas Sheviis wine; nonetheless, certainly while fulfilling a Mitzvah, one would not want to Chas V'shalom be transgressing others. Although the potential issues raised

are just several matters of concern when dealing with Kedushas Sheviis produce, who would have thought that a seemingly simple Havdalah could be so complex?

Yet, this demonstrates, why it is advisable for all of us, including those in Chutz La'aretz, and even in the eighth year (Shemini), and perhaps gives us the impetus, to become proficient in Hilchos Sheviis. Certainly a worthwhile investment.

Note: This article is not intended to serve as an exhaustive guide, but rather to showcase certain aspects of the intricate and myriad halachos of produce imbued with Kedushas Sheviis.

לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה