

Weekly Parsha SHEMOT
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

It is difficult to imagine a more unlikely scenario than the one described for us in the Torah as to the process of redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. We can readily understand a personality of holiness and tranquility such as Aaron becoming the hero and redeemer of the holy people of Israel. We could also easily understand that the redemption could come from negotiations and the recognition by Pharaoh and the Egyptians that it was in their best interests to allow the Jewish people who escaped from slavery. Yet, that certainly is not the way the Torah presents this story for us.

Instead, the redeemer is an unlikely figure, not even part of the Jewish story for approximately half of his lifetime. Not only that, he risked his life on behalf of the Jewish people but, in fact, was betrayed by Jews themselves. And he is a reluctant Redeemer, telling the Lord, so to speak, to find someone else to do the job for he feels that he is not capable to fulfill the task at hand.

Heaven disregards all his complaints and accepts none of his excuses. Heaven is aware of all human shortcomings and assigns great tasks for individuals to fulfill irrespective of the inadequacies that they may feel. Moshe is the most humble and modest of all human-beings, but he is not allowed to be humble and self-effacing at this moment. We see him in his most aggressive and assertive mode when speaking to the Pharaoh. For when it comes to the time to redeem the Jewish people, he cannot be fainthearted, passive, or subservient any longer.

In our time over the past century the redemption of Israel, the ingathering of the exiles to our ancient homeland, the establishment of the state of Israel and the revival of Torah values and study in the Jewish world all have occurred in a most unusual fashion. The logical odds against it happening were and are enormous but nevertheless it has happened and in front of our very eyes. Perhaps we would have chosen to have different leaders in a different series of events and policies that could have brought all this about. But it is well known that Heaven mocks all our pretensions and predictions.

The prophets of Israel have clearly told us that our redemption is a certainty and will occur. How this will happen was never spelled out for us in detail. The Jewish people will be rebuilt in our ancient homeland of the land of Israel and we see that this is happening in our days. We are taught that the wonders that we shall see and experience in this final redemption will outdo even the wonders and miracles that marked our exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moshe over three millennia ago. Experiencing Jewish life is not for the faint hearted nor the doubters nor the weak willed. This is only one of the many insights and lessons that we can derive from the Torah reading of Shemot.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Women as Leaders (Shemot 5781)

Rabbi Sacks ז"ל had prepared a full year of *Covenant & Conversation* for 5781, based on his book *Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks* will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

This week's parsha could be entitled "The Birth of a Leader." We see Moses, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, growing up as a prince of Egypt. We see him as a young man, for the first time realising the implications of his true identity. He is, and knows he is, a member of an enslaved and suffering people: "Growing up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people" (Ex. 2:10).

He intervenes – he acts: the mark of a true leader. We see him intervene three times, twice in Egypt, once in Midian, to rescue victims of violence. We then witness the great scene at the Burning Bush where God summons him to lead his people to freedom. Moses hesitates four

times until God becomes angry and Moses knows he has no other choice. This is a classic account of the genesis of a hero.

But this is only the surface tale. The Torah is a deep and subtle book, and it does not always deliver its message on the surface. Just beneath is another far more remarkable story, not about a hero but about six heroines, six courageous women without whom there would not have been a Moses.

First is Yocheved, wife of Amram and mother of the three people who were to become the great leaders of the Israelites: Miriam, Aaron and Moses himself. It was Yocheved who, at the height of Egyptian persecution, had the courage to have a child, hide him for three months, and then devise a plan to give him a chance of being rescued. We know all too little of Yocheved. In her first appearance in the Torah she is unnamed. Yet, reading the narrative, we are left in no doubt about her bravery and resourcefulness. Not by accident did her children all become leaders.

The second was Miriam, Yocheved's daughter and Moses' elder sister. It was she who kept watch over the child as the small ark floated down the river, and it was she who approached Pharaoh's daughter with the suggestion that he be nursed among his own people. The biblical text paints a portrait of the young Miriam as a figure of unusual fearlessness and presence of mind. Rabbinic tradition goes further. In a remarkable Midrash, we read of how, upon hearing of the decree that every male Israelite baby would be drowned in the river, Amram led the Israelites in divorcing their wives so that there would be no more children. He had logic on his side. Could it be right to bring children into the world if there were a fifty per cent chance that they would be killed at birth? Yet his young daughter Miriam, so the tradition goes, remonstrated with him and persuaded him to change his mind. "Your decree," she said, "is worse than Pharaoh's. His affects only the boys; yours affects all. His deprives children of life in this world; yours will deprive them of life even in the World to Come." Amram relented, and as a result, Moses was born.[1] The implication is clear: Miriam had more faith than her father.

Third and fourth were the two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who frustrated Pharaoh's first attempt at genocide. Ordered to kill the male Israelite children at birth, they "feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (Ex. 1:17). Summoned and accused of disobedience, they outwitted Pharaoh by constructing an ingenious cover story: the Hebrew women, they said, are vigorous and give birth before we arrive. They escaped punishment and saved many lives.

The significance of this story is that it is the first recorded instance of one of Judaism's greatest contributions to civilisation: the idea that there are moral limits to power. There are instructions that should not be obeyed. There are crimes against humanity that cannot be excused by the claim that "I was only obeying orders." This concept, generally known as "civil disobedience", is usually attributed to the nineteenth century American writer Henry David Thoreau, and entered international consciousness after the Holocaust and the Nuremberg trials. Its true origin, though, lies thousands of years earlier in the actions of two women, Shifra and Puah. Through their understated courage they earned a high place among the moral heroes of history, teaching us the primacy of conscience over conformity, the law of justice over the law of the land.[2]

The fifth is Tziporah, Moses' wife. The daughter of a Midianite priest, she was nonetheless determined to accompany Moses on his mission to Egypt, despite the fact that she had no reason to risk her life on such a hazardous venture. In a deeply enigmatic passage, we see it was she who saved Moses' life by performing a circumcision on their son (Ex. 4:24-26). The impression we gain of her is a figure of monumental determination who, at a crucial moment, had a better sense than Moses himself of what God requires.

I have saved until last the most intriguing of them all: Pharaoh's daughter. It was she who had the courage to rescue an Israelite child and

bring him up as her own in the very palace where her father was plotting the destruction of the Israelite people. Could we imagine a daughter of Hitler, or Eichmann, or Stalin, doing the same? There is something at once heroic and gracious about this lightly sketched figure, the woman who gave Moses his name.

Who was she? The Torah does not mention her name. However the First Book of Chronicles (4:18) references a daughter of Pharaoh, named Bitya, and it was she whom the Sages identified as the woman who saved Moses. The name Bitya (sometimes rendered as Batya) means “the daughter of God”. From this, the Sages drew one of their most striking lessons:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: “Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. You are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter.”[3]

They added that she was one of the few people (tradition enumerates nine) who were so righteous that they entered paradise in their lifetime.[4]

So, on the surface, the parsha of Shemot is about the initiation into leadership of one remarkable man, but just beneath the surface is a counter-narrative of six extraordinary women without whom there would not have been a Moses. They belong to a long tradition of strong women throughout Jewish history, from Deborah, Hannah, Ruth and Esther in the Bible to more modern religious figures like Sarah Schenirer and Nechama Leibowitz to more secular figures like Anne Frank, Hannah Senesh and Golda Meir.

How then, if women emerge so powerfully as leaders, were they excluded in Jewish law from certain leadership roles? If we look carefully we will see that women were historically excluded from two areas. One was the “crown of priesthood”, which went to Aaron and his sons. The other was the “crown of kingship”, which went to David and his sons. These were two roles built on the principle of dynastic succession. From the third crown – the “crown of Torah” – however, women were not excluded. There were Prophetesses, not just Prophets. The Sages enumerated seven of them (Megillah 14a). There have been great women Torah scholars always, from the Mishnaic period (Beruriah, Ima Shalom) until today.

At stake is a more general distinction. Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron in his Responsa, Binyan Av, differentiates between formal or official authority (samchut) and actual leadership (hanhagah).[5] There are figures who hold positions of authority – prime ministers, presidents, CEOs – who may not be leaders at all. They may have the power to force people to do what they say, but they have no followers. They excite no admiration. They inspire no emulation. And there may be leaders who hold no official position at all but who are turned to for advice and are held up as role models. They have no power but great influence. Israel’s Prophets belonged to this category. So, often, did the gedolei Yisrael, the great Sages of each generation. Neither Rashi nor Rambam held any official position (some scholars say that Rambam was chief rabbi of Egypt but most hold that he was not, though his descendants were). Wherever leadership depends on personal qualities – what Max Weber called “charismatic authority” – and not on office or title, there is no distinction between women and men.

Yocheved, Miriam, Shifra, Puah, Tziporah and Batya were leaders not because of any official position they held (in the case of Batya she was a leader despite her official title as a princess of Egypt). They were leaders because they had courage and conscience. They refused to be intimidated by power or defeated by circumstance. They were the real heroes of the Exodus. Their courage is still a source of inspiration today.

Shabbat Shalom: Shemot (Exodus 1:1 – 6:1)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – The Book of Exodus begins the story of the people of Israel, the nation that developed from the household, or the family, of Jacob. Many are the differences between the Book of Genesis and the Book of Exodus, but perhaps the greatest change lies in the “personality” (as it were) of God Himself.

Genesis, the book of creation, refers to God at first as Elohim, the sum total of all the powers of the Universe, who created the heavens, the earth and all of their accoutrements. And this God of the creation, actually the God Who was there before creation and Who brought creation into being, works very much alone: God creates, God speaks, God calls forth.

Very different is the God of the Exodus; at the opening of this book, God defines Himself as Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, “I will be what I will be,” the essence of being into the future, the God of history. In effect, God is saying that He will be, He will effectuate, He will bring about freedom and redemption, but in an indefinite time that cannot be revealed to Moses.

Why not? Because God now has partners. Firstly His Israelite covenantal partners from the Covenant Between the Pieces of Abraham (Gen. 15); secondly, the nations roundabout and especially the very powerful Egypt; and of course the leaders of Israel, especially Moses, and Moses’s brother Aaron and sister Miriam.

You see, if Genesis is the book of creation, Exodus is the book of history and history is an ongoing process between God and His Chosen Nation, between God and the nations of the world; God will effectuate, but only together with the cooperation of His partners.

For the remainder of the Five Books of the Pentateuch, Moses will be the strong towering figure, from servitude to freedom to revelation, to wandering in the desert, to our entry into Israel. And strangely enough, he is introduced in our biblical portion with no personalized mention of pedigree: “A certain man of the House of Levi went and married a Levite woman; the woman conceived and bore a son... and she hid him for three months.” (Ex. 2:1).

Why are Moses’s parents anonymous? Perhaps because it really doesn’t matter who your parents are: It matters who you are. Perhaps because we shall learn that he had a second mother who nurtured him, who saved his life from the baby-slaying Egyptians, who named him her son (Moses, in ancient Egyptian, means “son”) and brought him up in Pharaoh’s palace—perhaps to teach us that only someone who came from the “outside” could free himself of the slave mentality and emancipate the Hebrew slaves. Or perhaps to teach us that although the Egyptians enslaved us, it was also an Egyptian woman who endangered her life to save a Hebrew child.

It is only in Chapter 6 of Exodus that we learn the names of Moses’s biological parents, and trace his pedigree from his parents Amram and Jochebed all the way back to the Children of Jacob; and this study of his roots comes just at the time that he is about to confront Pharaoh for the first time and begin his mission to free the Hebrew slaves. Nevertheless, the Bible tells us nothing at all about Moses’s parents, their characters or their activities; we are only informed their names.

To be sure, we will learn much from the Bible about the almost superhuman achievements of Moses, who was not only a great political liberator but who also “spoke to God face to face” (as it were) and revealed God’s Torah laws for all posterity. We will also come to know his remarkable siblings, Aaron and Miriam.

But we cannot help but be curious about the two individuals who bore and to a great extent raised the three greatest leaders in Jewish history.

I may not know much about the parents of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, but I do know volumes about the grandparents of these three extraordinary people. Just imagine the circumcision ceremony which was made for Moses’ father and the simhat bat for Moses’s mother, rituals which must have occurred in fearful secrecy during a period of slavery and persecution.

The history of the children of Israel seems to be ending almost before it began, in the hellholes of Pithom and Raamses, in the turpitude of debasement and oppression.

Nevertheless one set of parents choose to name their son Amram, “exalted nation,” and the other set of parents choose to name their daughter Jochebed, “glory to God.” These grandparents had apparently been nourished on the Covenant Between the Pieces, upon the familial prophecy of “offspring who will be strangers in a land not theirs, who

will be enslaved and oppressed, but...in the end will go free with great wealth” (Gen.15:13-14), and will return to the land of their fathers.

And these grandparents apparently inspired their grandchildren with faith in the exalted status of their nation, a nation that will eventually bring the blessing of freedom and morality to all the families of the earth and with the ability to give glory to God in the darkest of times because they knew that eventually His great light would shine upon all of humanity. Yes, I may not know much about Moses’ parents, but by the names they bestowed upon their children I know volumes about Moses’ grandparents!
Shabbat Shalom!

Insights Parshas Shemos Teves 5781

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

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Growing Pains

It happened in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens... (2:11)

This week’s parsha introduces Pharaoh’s scheme and implementation of the Jewish enslavement. The Torah also discusses Moshe’s birth and development, and how he came to be the greatest prophet and leader of the Jewish people.

It is well known that Moshe grew up in Pharaoh’s house. Rashi (ad loc) explains that not only did Moshe grow into adulthood, he grew in stature as well. As Rashi explains, “Pharaoh appointed him over his household (‘beis Pharaoh’).” Rashi, by the Aseres Hadibros (20:2), explains that the Jewish slaves were owned directly by Pharaoh and were part of ‘beis Pharaoh.’ Thus, Pharaoh took the innovative step of appointing Moshe over his fellow Jews.

This was no accident. Many tyrants and despots appoint members of the victim class over the other victims. In fact, in Egypt the “shotrim” were Jewish officers appointed over the other slaves in Egypt to violently enforce quotas (which the shotrim refused to do). Similarly, cruel kapos were the method used by the Nazis to control prisoners in the concentration camps.

Theoretically, this is brilliant. It naturally pits members of the oppressed class against one another and breeds mistrust and deception; thereby destroying the unity of the group – exactly what it is supposed to achieve. Pharaoh also added an insidious twist: By appointing Moshe over them, Pharaoh was showcasing what a Jew can aspire to if he abandons his culture and becomes fully Egyptian.

But Pharaoh underestimated Moshe. He expected Moshe to sympathize with them and, at most, perhaps even advocate for better treatment. Yet Rashi makes a remarkable comment on the words “and he saw their burdens” (2:11); “He focused his eyes and heart to be distressed over them.” Moshe didn’t merely sympathize and feel pity for them, Moshe empathized with them. Sympathy is merely seeing someone’s pain and feeling bad for him; however, empathy is a vicarious experience of what another is going through.

Rashi is telling us that Moshe focused his eyes and heart to see what the slaves saw and feel what the slaves felt; he was seeing their situation from their perspective. In fact, Moshe later uses this understanding in his conversations with Hashem. This is probably one of the reasons Moshe was asked by Hashem to fill the role he did.

This is also why Moshe is sentenced to death for killing the Egyptian. On the face of it, this seems a little strange. A prince growing up in the house of a king would rarely be subject to such justice. But once Moshe kills the Egyptian because of what he did to a “lowly” Jew he undermines Pharaoh’s vision for his position in the palace – therefore he must flee for his life.

A Calling for Service

The anger of Hashem burned against Moshe and he said, “Is not your brother Aharon the Levi? I know that he will speak, behold he is coming out to meet and when he sees you he will rejoice in his heart” (4:14).

After a full week of trying to persuade Moshe to accept the position of redeemer of Bnei Yisroel, Hashem displays anger toward Moshe. This follows the last of Moshe’s objections as to why he should not be the one charged with this responsibility. Rashi (ad loc) explains that Hashem’s anger at Moshe’s final argument resulted in him losing the position of Kohen, and being “demoted” to position of Levi.

Additionally, Rashi (ad loc) explains that Moshe was concerned that Aharon would be jealous of his new leadership position. Hashem therefore reassured him that Aharon would actually be happy for him. Rashi also points out that it was for this reason that Aharon merited to become Kohen.

This seems a little hard to understand. Certainly Moshe wouldn’t accuse Aharon of being a lesser man than he, so this means that had the roles been reversed and he had been in Aharon’s sandals, Moshe himself would have been jealous. Why would Moshe be jealous, and if in fact it was natural to be jealous of this appointment, why wasn’t Aharon himself jealous?

Interestingly enough, we do find an instance in the Torah where Moshe feels a twinge of jealousy. The Yalkut Shimoni (Devarim 31:941) points out that Moshe experienced jealousy when he saw Yehoshua, his very own student, supplant him as leader of Bnei Yisroel and receive a communication from Hashem that he himself wasn’t privy to. Moshe said, “It is better to experience one thousand deaths than to experience one instance of jealousy.”

Clearly Moshe felt jealous because he saw his student taking his place, and the pain of seeing the loss of one’s own position can be overwhelming. So why didn’t Aharon feel jealous? After all, his younger brother was being given a position of leadership that rightfully belonged to him.

Aharon recognized that while it’s true that redeeming Bnei Yisroel and becoming their leader was a position of greatness, it’s not an appointment. In other words, when Hashem asks you to take this role, it’s one primarily of service to Bnei Yisroel and Hashem’s plan for the world. This job isn’t about the stature that comes with the responsibility, it’s about being a servant to that responsibility.

Moshe was bothered by the stature associated with the job. He spends a week explaining why he isn’t the right person for this job. When at the end of the week he still feels that Aharon would be jealous of his new position, Hashem gets angry and explains to him that Aharon understands that this is about responsibility to serve – not the associated stature. It is for this reason that Moshe loses the right to be a Kohen and this role is given to Aharon. Kohanim are “Meshorsei Hamelech” – ministers of the king. There is no sense of stature in this leadership role; only responsibility to serve Hashem. Aharon understood that when called to the responsibility of serving Hashem you have to accept and that stature plays no role in the decision.

Did You Know...

In this week’s parsha, Moshe was born hidden from sight, and subsequently found by Pharaoh’s daughter Basya. The Torah says that Basya named him Moshe, one of his famously numerous names. Let us examine some of his other names and how they came to be. Based on the Midrash (Vayikrah Rabbah 1:3):

1. Yered (ירד), implying “descent”: According to one opinion, Moshe was called this name because he brought the Torah down to the Jewish people, and the Shechina back down to this physical world.
2. Avigdor (אבי גודר): He was the chief one of those who made fences (safeguards) around the Torah.
3. Chever (חבר): One view is that Moshe joined (חיבר) the Jewish people with Hashem (Eitz Yosef, citing Gra), or because he prevented (העביר) disaster from coming to this world (Matnos Kehuna).
4. Avi Socho (אבי סוכו): Moshe would grow up to be the father of all the Neviim who see (סוכין) through Ruach Hakosdesh.
5. Yekutiel (יקותיאל): One opinion says that he caused Bnei Yisroel to look with hope (קיון) towards Hashem.
6. Avi Zanoach (אבי זנוח): Because Moshe caused Bnei Yisroel to abandon (למזנוח) idol worship.

7. Tuviah (טוביה): “She saw that he was good (טוב)” (Shemos 2:2). There’s an argument (Shemos Rabbah 1:20) as to whether his name is Tov or Tuviah. Moreover, whether it means he was fit for nevuah, that he was born circumcised, or that when he was born the whole house filled with light.

8. Shemayah ben Nesanel: Hashem heard (שמע) his prayers about the golden calf, and he was the son (בן) to whom the Torah was given (נתנה) from Hashem (ל-א).

9. Levi (לוי): Named after the shevet to which Moshe belonged.

10. Moshe: In Egyptian, Moshe means son. Basya took him as a son (Ibn Ezra). Alternatively, it comes from the Egyptian word “mo” (water) and “uses” (drown from) (Josephus, Antiquities 2:9:6). Some sources state that his Egyptian name was Monius (Ibn Ezra). Interestingly, Hashem told Moshe, “I will call you only by the name you were called by Basya” (Vayikrah Rabbah 1:3).

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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parshat Shemot

Traitor to Whom?

Pharaoh said, “Come let us deal cleverly with it (the People of Israel), lest it become numerous, and it may be that if a war will occur, it too may join our enemies and wage war against us and go up from the land.” (1:10)

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote that the majority of the scientists who built the American atom bomb were Jewish. Among others: Leo Szilard, Niels Bohr, Aage Bohr, Lise Meitner, Rudolf Peierls, Otto Frisch, Walter Zinn, Edward Teller and J. Robert Oppenheimer. It's interesting that more than one or two of the atom spies for the Soviet Union were also Jewish. Even though Klaus Fuchs was the son of a Lutheran pastor and John Cairncross, one of the “Cambridge Five” wasn't a Jew, Morris and Lona Cohen, Theodore Hall, George Korval, Saville Sax, Oscar Seborer, Morton Sobell, Irving Lerner, Arthur Adams, David Greenglas, Harry Gold and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were all Jewish.

Sometimes we are faced with a choice that makes us a traitor no matter what we decide. This type of decision will make us either a traitor to our country or a traitor to our principles. Before Stalin murdered his millions, many looked towards Russia as a Utopia. To the mind of a Jew, much was right about Communism. Typically, Jews have been at the front of every social revolution in history. The idea of a social contract, the idea of equality under the law, of society's responsibility to care for the poor and sick, the downtrodden and the dispossessed, are some of the Torah's most outstanding gifts to mankind — and to Socialist thought. In addition, these spies also saw the exclusive American possession of atomic weapons as a threat to world peace in the post-World War II world.

Typically, the Jewish atom spies received no financial reward except for their expenses. (Mind you, several received the Red Star and a lifetime pass to travel on Moscow's public transport — not too much use in Brooklyn...)

Pharaoh said, “Come let us deal cleverly with it (the People of Israel), lest it become numerous, and it may be that if a war will occur, it too may join our enemies and wage war against us and go up from the land.” (1:10) Pharaoh sensed that the Jews march to a different drum — the drum of conscience, even when the drum may lead to treachery.

True, there have been few whose conscience has led to such tragic mistakes. But, how many incomparably more is the number of those who have used that gift of conscience, a gift from Above, to serve their country, society and humanity with total loyalty and fidelity!

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Shemot: Imagining Redemption

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Passover, Pesach, is approaching. Fast approaching.

Now you may argue that it is still almost a full three months away, and you'd be right. But those who study Daf Yomi, the daily study of a page of Talmud, are already several weeks into their in-depth reading of the tractate of Pesachim and are already steeped in discussions about the search for chametz, leavened bread, and its elimination, and are considering the definitional parameters of matzah, unleavened bread, and maror, bitter herbs.

Of course, Daf Yomi students are accustomed to taking the long-range view, and, wouldn't you know it, they will be completing this fascinating tractate which treats the holiday of Passover so comprehensively during the week just prior to erev Pesach, a mere several days before the eve of Passover!

Those of us who are not committed to the rigorous Daf Yomi daily regime, which includes the great majority of Jewish people, will begin our rapid and inexorable march toward Passover this week. For it is on this Shabbat that we begin the book of Shemot, the story of the Exodus. And henceforth, for many weeks, every weekly Torah portion deals, in a dazzling variety of ways, with the drama of our servitude and our redemption, with the heroes of the Exodus and with its villains.

Each parsha, for the next many Shabbatot, provides us with a not-to-be-missed opportunity to prepare ourselves, intellectually and spiritually, for the wonderful holiday which lies ahead.

Somehow, more than any other Jewish holiday, we tend to speak of “preparing” for Passover. These preparations entail a variety of activities. Cleaning the house, for example, and making sure that none of the foods forbidden on Pesach, even in minute quantities, are to be found. This certainly is an onerous chore. Purchasing the provisions for quite a few festive meals is an expensive and time-consuming task. Another important task is assuring that there are sufficient quantities of the ritual foods such as matzah and maror, the ingredients for charoset, and sufficient wine for the entire household. And a proper Seder table requires appropriate decorations, which include tablecloths, silverware, candlesticks, goblets, and often floral arrangements and embroidered pillowcases and matzoh coverlets.

The more scholarly among us will spend significant time intellectually preparing for the festival. The Talmud tells us that the proper length of time necessary to review the laws and customs of Passover is thirty days, beginning on the day of Purim and extending throughout the entire Passover holiday. Preparation must also involve at least a perusal of several haggadot, if not careful study of at least some of one's personal favorite haggadot.

But I have often thought that we are called upon for an extremely unique and quite challenging preparation which is often overlooked. I refer to the passage in the haggadah which originates in the Mishnah and which reads:

In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see himself, lirot et atzmo, as if he personally left Egypt, as it is written, “And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.’” (Exodus 13:8).

Note the underlined phrase: “for me when I went free.” We are called upon to personally visualize ourselves as having experienced the Exodus in all of its detail. How many of us are capable of such an imaginative feat?

For me, this is the greatest challenge of the entire Passover experience: imagining myself, picturing myself, as a helpless slave and then reliving the frustration of the initial phases of the redemption process; personally witnessing a series of wondrous miracles; living through the original Passover experience, safely protected in our slave quarters while, hurriedly and almost surreptitiously, gulping down that first Passover festive meal.

And feeling, in the depths of my bones, the burst of sudden freedom, casting aside bonds and chains, and marching as a free man into an unknown wilderness. Is this not an almost impossible task? Can I possibly relive the powerful emotions that my ancestors felt millennia ago? How am I to “see myself as if I personally left Egypt”?

It is in response to such questions that I suggest a careful reading of all the Torah portions that we will be encountering, beginning this Shabbat and continuing for the next many weeks. My plan is to devote my columns for each of those weeks to a suggestion or two which might prove helpful in achieving this goal of creatively reimagining the entire experience as if we were there.

Let us begin our adventure with a teaching of the great commentator, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Ramban, or Nachmanides. He provides a brief introduction to the entire Chumash Shemot, commonly called the Book of Exodus. But the very point of his introduction is to reject the common title of this second book of the Bible. Instead, he insists that the book be known as the "Book of Redemption," *Sefer HaGeulah*. Why is he so insistent on his choice of this unusual title for this sacred and multi-themed book? And what does *geulah*, redemption, even mean?

Ramban considers the second book of the Torah to be the sequel to the first book, which is commonly referred to as the book of Genesis. For Ramban, Genesis is primarily a book about the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is less a book about the creation of the universe than it is a book about the creation of the people of Israel. Its theme is "the status of our forefathers," by which he means the ethical and moral stature of our first ancestors.

With the descent of our people into Egypt, exile, and slavery, there is a loss of "the status of our forefathers," a diminution of their ethical and moral stature. Redemption is the process by which we regain that status, that ethical and moral stature. Redemption is not the Exodus from Egyptian bondage. Rather, it involves the revelation at Sinai, the construction of the Tabernacle, and, ideally and ultimately, the return to the Land of Israel. Redemption is the reclaiming of the ethical and moral stature of our patriarchs.

Following this approach, the requirement of "seeing ourselves as if we personally left Egypt" is less about imagining ourselves as slaves, or even imagining ourselves as marching out of Egypt as free men. Instead, it is about the implications of freedom for our reclamation of the ethical and moral stature of our forefathers.

Ramban offers us a profound insight: a slave, a person in bondage, is not free to act ethically and morally. This is certainly true of a person who is literally enslaved. But it is also true of one whose choices in life are dictated by political propaganda, cultural influence, pressures to conform blindly, and other forces with which we are all very familiar nowadays.

Ramban's thirteenth century concept of "the status of our forefathers" is explained beautifully in the nineteenth century commentary of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, known as the Netziv, in his introductory remarks to the book of Genesis. For the Netziv, the defining quality of our Patriarchs was the characteristic of *yashrut*, which he defines as an ethic that transcends piety and saintliness and extends to the ability to relate to people very different from oneself, working together with others in a harmonious and constructive fashion.

We now know of one way that we can "see ourselves as if we have left Egypt." To do so, we must each come to grips with what it means for us to experience redemption. Following Ramban and Netziv, our charge is to reclaim what the former calls the "status of our forefathers" and what the latter terms the ability to act *yashar*. We must improve our ethical conduct, our interpersonal relationships, by cooperating with others in our surroundings and especially with those who are different from us. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were *yesharim*, and it is by emulating their "status" that we "leave Egypt," depart bondage, and experience redemption.

Please join me again next week as we explore other approaches to the difficult task of "seeing ourselves as if we left Egypt."

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message - Shemot 5781-2021

"The Not-So-Obvious Process of Hebrew Enslavement"

(revised and updated from parashat Shemot 5761-2001)

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Shemot, we begin our annual encounter with the story of the Egyptian enslavement of the Jewish people.

The Sons of Israel come down to Egypt as free people. They receive a royal invitation from Pharaoh himself, who in fact sends the royal "movers" to bring their families and belongings from Canaan to Egypt. The patriarch, Jacob, is welcomed at a special audience with Pharaoh himself, and the Sons of Israel are given privileged status, and serve as royal shepherds. To top it all, the children of Israel are granted their own land, the land of Goshen, where they may practice their unique Jewish lifestyle without interference. After all, Jacob was quite concerned that his children would quickly assimilate if they came down to Egypt and lived among the Egyptians.

And yet, despite all the preventive measures—we know that assimilate they did! We learn this from the festival of Passover, which literally means that G-d had to "pass over" the houses of the Jewish people when the Angel of Death struck the Egyptian first-born. Why would that be necessary? After all, the Jews lived separately from the Egyptians—in their own land of Goshen.

According to the Midrash, since the period of "enslavement" is calculated from the birth of Isaac, the number of years that the Jews actually dwelt in Egypt was 210 years. The number of years that the Jews actually performed "hard labor" was approximately 110 years. Obviously, during those 210 years, many Jews got tired of living in the Egyptian "Boro Park" and moved out of Goshen, to the more mainstream, upscale areas where they lived in closer proximity to the Egyptians.

If you check carefully in this week's parasha there is no mention in the entire parasha of any official decree formalizing the enslavement by Pharaoh. Perhaps, that is what is meant by Pharaoh's words when he says, (Exodus 1:10): *וְהָבָה נְתַחְמָה לָּו*, "Come, let us deal wisely with the Jews." Perhaps he means: We need not directly enslave them. We can, after all, accomplish our objective with subtlety and etiquette, and emerge with clean hands.

According to many commentators, the Egyptians employed a shrewd strategy, calling upon the civic sensibilities of the Jewish people, in order to draw the Hebrews into the process of assimilation. Scripture informs us (Exodus 1:11), that the Jews built the great storehouses in the land of Egypt, Pitom and Ramses. Were they forced to build them? Nothing in the text suggests that. Perhaps, there was social pressure. Pharaoh might have said: "And so, my fellow Egyptians, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." And, as we know, our civic-minded Jews are always Johnny-on-the-spot to volunteer. And so it was. The ancient Hebrews volunteer their talents, resources and efforts to build this important national project. They become, in effect, more Egyptian than the Egyptians, setting a pattern of behavior that Jews were to follow throughout their long history in the Diaspora.

The Jews in Egypt said to themselves: "We are, after all, acculturated, sophisticated Jewish Egyptians"—the equivalent of today's Jewish Americans. "We no longer need to live in ghettos. Have no fear, Oh father, Jacob! Surely you have no doubt that we will be able to maintain our Jewish identities, even outside the Ghettos?!" But, as we know, there is no truth to that proposition. Without intensive Jewish environment, good schools, and a strong commitment to Jewish rituals, Jewish identity quickly evaporates.

Eventually, the Jews do become physically-persecuted slaves in Egypt, and are forced to do rigorous labor against their will. Yet, the message of parashat Shemot is that the Jewish people probably became slaves long before the Egyptians enforced slavery upon them. Long before the back-breaking labor, the Sons of Israel had probably become slaves to Egyptian culture, Egyptian fashion and Egyptian values. It was inevitable that these committed Jewish-Egyptian "patriots" would become so deeply dedicated to Egypt politically, civically and emotionally that they would ultimately be unable to extricate themselves.

Is this what is happening to American Jewry today? I hate to spoil the party, but it seems to be so. The American Jewish Committee survey

from way back in the year 2000 reported that most American Jews have already defined-down their observance and notions of Judaism. We know that American Jews are the least observant of all religious groups in America. Jews attend synagogue far less frequently than other religious groups attend their houses of worship. For most of American Jews, the quality of Jewish life in America for most Jews has been in the process of decline for more than 50 years. It was inevitable that most Jews would eventually conclude that there is really nothing so terrible with intermarriage. The recent American Jewish Committee survey reports that a whopping 56% find nothing wrong with intermarriage, and only a paltry 12% strongly object to it. Even more amazing, were the recent criticisms leveled at the Birthright trips to Israel for promoting Jewish in-marriage!

And, so, the bottom line is: You don't need a Pharaoh or taskmasters to be enslaved. "Slavery" can be the direct result of one fateful little word, "attitude."

May you be blessed.

Drasha Parshas Shemos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Pushing the Envelope

This week's portion introduces us to Moshe Rabeinu, the messenger of Hashem who redeems the Jewish nation from Egypt. We are told of Hashem's proposal to Moshe to lead the Jews out of Egypt, and how Moshe refuses the opportunity.

First Moshe responds, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" (Exodus 3:11) After Hashem assures him of his ability Moshe asks, "When I go to the nation and they ask me, 'what is His name?' what shall I say?" (Exodus 3:14)

Hashem responds again. Then Moshe respectfully demurs, "But they will not believe me, and they will not heed my voice, they will say 'Hashem did not appear to you!'" (Exodus 4:1) Again Hashem responds by giving Moshe two miraculous signs that he, when challenged, should in turn show to the Jewish nation.

And again Moshe is hesitant. "Please my L-rd," he cries, "I am not a man of words, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech." Once again Hashem rejoins, "Who made a mouth for man or makes one deaf, or dumb, sighted or blind? Is it not I, Hashem!" (Exodus 4:10-11)

Hashem patiently responds to each of Moshe's excuses with a clearly defined rebuttal. Except when Moshe makes what proves to be his final plea. After exhausting all of his excuses, Moshe, seems desperate to absolve himself of the task and declares, "Send the one whom you usually send!" (Exodus 4:13) According to Rashi, Moshe was referring to Ahron, who prophesized to the Jews even before Moshe and throughout the time that Moshe was hiding in Midian.

Suddenly, the conciliatory answers cease. "The rage of Hashem burned against Moshe." Hashem declares to Moshe that Ahron is elated with the decision. "Ahron is going to greet you with joy in his heart!" (Exodus 4:14). There are no more protestations. Moshe journeys back to Egypt and into eternity. The question is obvious. What did Moshe finally say that inflamed the ire of Hashem to the extent that the Torah tells us that His "anger burned"? Hashem responded calmly to each of Moshe's previous justifiable issues. Why did Hashem only become angry when Moshe evoked the concept of using Ahron, the one who normally and previously did the prophesizing?

As a result of lower-level mismanagement, poor earnings, and low moral, the Board of Directors dismissed the CEO of a major corporation who had served faithfully and successfully for many years. His wisdom and experience, however, were well respected in the industry and the new boss looked to the former executive for introductory advice.

"I can't tell you much," said the seasoned executive, "but I will give you something." The older boss, handed the neophyte executive two envelopes. One of them had a large #1 written on it, the second was marked #2. "Young man," began the former CEO, "when you are challenged with your first major crisis open envelope number one. If things have not calmed down after a few days, then open envelope number two."

After a brief turnaround, things began to fall apart. Soon a crisis erupted, the employees were disgruntled, and chaos began to reign. The Board of Directors were once again looking to make major changes, and the unseasoned executive's job was on the line. As hard as the young executive tried to calm the situation, it was futile. He locked himself in his office and opened the first envelope. In small but clear typewritten letters were the words, "Blame your predecessor." He followed the advice but the results were short-lived.

The following weeks were not productive. In fact, things were getting worse. It was time for the second envelope.

The young CEO opened it. When he saw the message typed on the small piece of paper, he knew his time had come. It read, "prepare two envelopes."

The Bechor Shor explains that as long as Moshe's hesitations engendered reasons that entailed his own perceived shortcomings, Hashem responded with a clear and precise rebuttal. But when Moshe exclaimed, "send the one who used to go," and did once again not offer any reason for his own failing but shifted the responsibility to his brother Ahron, Hashem became upset. And at that point, "the rage of Hashem burned against Moshe."

When challenged with difficult tasks we must face the mission presented to us and deal with our own abilities. By shifting the responsibility to someone else, even if we feel he is better suited, we may be inviting wrath. Because when we are asked by Hashem to perform, then there is no one better to do the job.

Dedicated in honor of Tom Raskin

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The Big Picture

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky

Moshe asks of Hashem, "behold, I come to the people of Israel, and I will tell them that the G-d of their forefathers sent me to them; and they will ask me, 'What is His name?', how shall I respond?" (Shemos 3:13)

This question is highly perplexing. If the words "G-d of your forefathers" is at all meaningful to them, then surely they know His "name"? And is this really the important question they would pose? Wouldn't they focus on trying to get some real evidence that Moshe is genuine and capable of redeeming them, rather than simply finding out His name?

Not only is the request vexing, but the answer is perplexing as well. The name "Eh-keh" is indeed one of the sheimos of Hashem, and yet it appears nowhere else in Tanach besides here. Elsewhere in Tanach the word is used connoting its literal meaning, not as a name of Hashem

Let us start by understanding the mindset of people before the great events of Yetzias Mitzrayim and Sinai. The idea of a "Great and Mighty Power" was almost universal. Everyone in the world believed in forces that were very powerful, and the question was simply who or what is that force? Every nation had its idols that were considered the "power that be" until another nation bested them, and then the idols of the conquering nations were seen as being the all-powerful forces, and so on. All in all, that is a very logical approach. Just as the nation that wins the battle is seen as being the stronger nation, so too their god is seen as being the stronger god.

The Jewish nation had been enslaved for two centuries, suffering in a most excruciating way. They were slaves, working under torturous conditions, with all sorts of attempts being made to totally eradicate them. Where was the God of their fathers? The only "logical" conclusion was that either He had been bested by the Egyptian gods, or that He was insensitive to Israel's suffering. In either case, He no longer was a viable candidate for being Israel's redeemer, and thus Moshe Rabeinu's powerful question: how does he explain this to the Jewish People?

Hashem replied that in order to understand the God that is ready to redeem them, they must first relearn what G-d is all about. Their "Elokim" model pictured Hashem as a more-powerful, or even all-powerful, entity, but one for whom, any period of "inactivity" would

indicate a shortcoming. If the all-powerful is inactive, he either can't or won't act.

But the real essence of Hashem, is "Y-H-W-H", which means "Was, Is, and Will Be." Hashem transcends time, and to begin to understand Hashem one must be able to see the entire picture over a long span of time. Just as a two-dimensional picture (e.g. an X-ray) cannot do justice to a three dimensional object, and just as a single image cannot do justice to an entire movie, so too, man's chronologically segmented grasp of events doesn't properly appreciate and capture Hashem's Providence. If anything one sees a distortion. A farmer who plants a seed, watches it disintegrate, and sees nothing happen all winter, could be mighty disappointed if he lacks the knowledge and foresight to know what will happen in the spring. It is only when we can see all the events in a long sequence that we understand. It is the past, present, and future combined that may yield a more complete understanding of Hashem's hashgacha.

Hashem therefore told Moshe, "Klal Yisroel has knowledge of the past, i.e. the God of their forefathers. They must add the "Eh-keh", i.e. the understanding of the future. Only when they will be able to see the entire continuum in one fell swoop, will they be able to perceive Hashem's providence and benevolence which is to be found even in the present!"

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Shemot: Part-Time Slaves

Ben-Tzion Spitz

Slavery is a weed that grows on every soil. - Edmund Burke

It is a biblical command for the Jewish people to remember the slavery we endured in Egypt and the subsequent miraculous exodus from the bondage of Egypt. Though history has shown that there are different degrees of slavery, the Jewish tradition is that Egyptian slavery was particularly cruel.

Based on that tradition, Egyptian slavery has been depicted widely in both books and film to the extent that we can readily imagine our ancestors plodding in the mud pits, under the harsh Egyptian sun, and the harsher taskmaster's whip, as permanent prisoners of a tyrannical regime.

However, the Bechor Shor on Exodus 1:11 adds some nuance to the terms of enslavement that may not have been apparent to us. He explains that the enslavement was not constant but rather lasted for a few months at a time. He picks up on the parallel description of the much later "enslavement" which King Solomon decreed for the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon "taxed" the people, taking 30,000 men who would work for the king for a month, and then they would return home for two months, though we have no record that it was a particularly harsh situation for the conscripted men.

In a related vein, the Bechor Shor explains, the Egyptians forced the Jews into hard labor for several months at a time, and then let them go home to their families for a period, so they can support their own households until they were forced into hard labor again for a number of months. This is a cycle that continued for the long decades of Egyptian bondage. In the Egyptian case, even though the Jewish slaves had some "time off" it was still an extremely oppressive and dispiriting situation.

May we be cautious of the servitudes we get ourselves into – even if they're not full-time.

Dedication - In honor of our nephew, Mordechai Tzvi Kahen's Bar-Mitzvah. Mazal Tov!

Shabbat Shalom

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Bs"d Parashat Shemot 5781

An Unglamorous Leader

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, Rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites

This week, we begin reading the book of Exodus and we enter a world different from the one in the book of Genesis. The Jewish nation has settled in Egypt and has grown to the point of seeming like a threat to

Egyptian rule. The king of Egypt consults with his advisors and makes a fateful decision: to enslave the Jewish nation and embitter their lives.

The enslavement does not suffice with hard labor in construction and fieldwork. It also includes radical ideas about thinning out the population: "And Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, 'Every son who is born you shall cast into the Nile, and every daughter you shall allow to live'" (Exodus 1, 22).

And then redemption arises from this darkness. A baby is born to a known family, and after three months of hiding him, the desperate mother puts him in a cradle on the banks of the Nile river. King Pharaoh's daughter goes to bathe in the river, finds the baby, and adopts him. The boy, named Moses, grows up in the palace of the Egyptian king. Later, Moses gets into trouble after killing an Egyptian who was abusing and hitting a Jew. He is forced to escape from Egypt and arrives in Midian where he marries Zipporah, has two sons with her, and settles there.

But Moses' destiny was not to live a peaceful life in Midian. The Divine plan changed his life. One day, Moses was shepherding his father-in-law's herd when G-d revealed Himself to Moses from within a burning bush, telling him to return to Egypt and represent the Jewish nation before Pharaoh ahead of their liberation and exodus from Egypt.

Moses does not accept the job easily. He tried to argue and refuse it five times, offering a different excuse each time for why he was unsuitable for the job and why his mission was bound to fail. Let us focus on his fourth refusal when Moses made the following persuasive claim:

Moses said to the Lord, "I beseech You, O Lord. I am not a man of words, neither from yesterday nor from the day before yesterday, nor from the time You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." (Ibid 4, 10)

This is actually a significant claim. Moses did not have rhetorical skills and even suffered from some kind of speech impediment making his speech unclear. This disability, Moses claimed, was significant enough to make him unsuitable for the job he was being told to do. One of the skills a leader needs is the ability to make speeches and persuade the masses, and this was something he felt he could not do.

G-d's answer was clear-cut:

But the Lord said to him, "Who gave man a mouth, or who makes [one] dumb or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? So now, go! I will be with your mouth, and I will instruct you what you shall speak." (Ibid Ibid, 11-12)

Reading G-d's answer, it seems that He did not promise Moses that his speech impediment would disappear. There was no imminent miracle. Moses would get G-d's help, and he would be able to speak before Pharaoh and the nation and deliver His words, but he would remain inarticulate.

This begets the questions – Why wasn't this handled differently? Why was Moses taking on the leadership position with this speech impediment? The Ran, Rabbi Nissim of Gerona, a Spanish sage of the 14th century, explained that had Moses been an articulate speaker, skeptics could claim that the Jewish people accepted the Torah only as a result of Moses' charisma. But since it was actually difficult to listen to Moses, it was clear that we did not accept the Torah because we were impressed by Moses.

There are dangers inherent in rhetorical skill. A leader with outstanding speaking skills can persuade the masses to follow him even if the content of his words is not necessarily true. Moses, as leader of the nation, carried no external glamor so that when the Torah would be given by him later on, it would not be accepted by the nation because they were carried away by momentary enthusiasm.

The Torah had to be received in a state of composure, with consideration and understanding of its significance. For Divine truth to be taken to heart by people, it had to be devoid of external glamor. Truth has to be clear from content, not presentation.

A person interested in investing and advancing in Torah learning and fulfilling commandments must be prepared for the fact that Judaism does not always look outwardly glamorous. Satisfaction and joy come

when the focus is primarily on content and not on how things look or sound. Investing in our internal world is the correct and better choice
The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah

The Prayer of Chanina ben Dosa

Chanan Morrison

The first-century sage Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was deeply troubled. His son was seriously ill. When the child's condition became life-threatening, the rabbi turned to one of his students, known for his piety and ability to perform miracles: Chanina ben Dosa.

"Chanina, pray for my son so that he may live!"

Chanina ben Dosa promptly placed his head between his knees and prayed for God's mercy. And the boy recovered.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai remarked to his wife: "If I were to place my head between my knees all day long, it would not have made a difference."

The rabbi's wife was surprised. "What? Is Chanina greater than you?"

"No," replied Rabbi Yochanan. "But he is like a servant before the King, while I am a minister before the King." (Berachot 34b)

What is the difference between the king's servant and his minister?

And why was Chanina ben Dosa's prayer more efficacious than the prayer of an eminent scholar like Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai?

Service of the Mind and Service of the Heart

In general, we have two paths to serve God. The first path is to use our intellectual faculties to contemplate and follow the ways of God.

The second path relies on the heart. It is based on our innate disposition towards kindness and holiness.

Both are valid ways to serve God, whether we are guided by the intellect's truth, or by our innate sense of goodness and purity.

Those whose path is an intellectual service must concentrate their efforts on studying and internalizing true knowledge of God's ways. Prayer, on the other hand, primarily engages the emotions and contributes less to the path of intellectual spiritual growth.

But for those who choose the path of the heart, prayer is key in refining and uplifting their service. Their prayers are more likely to be accepted, as Divine providence assists and completes us in the path that we have chosen. As the Sages taught in Makkot 10b, "According to the path that one wishes to follow, one will be directed."

The service of the mind is loftier than that of the heart, just as the intellect is a higher faculty, above the emotions. Nonetheless, prayer will be more effective for those who have chosen the path of feelings of holiness. Those who seek to elevate their spirits through an outpouring of prayer will experience a natural sense of closeness to God.

The Servant and the Minister

Now we may understand Rabbi Yochanan's response to his wife. His student Chanina ben Dosa was like a servant before the King. Chanina's service was based on holy and pure emotions. He performed God's will like a faithful servant, without questioning or deeper understanding. And his sincere prayers, straight from the heart, suited his spiritual service. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, on the other hand, was a great scholar. He was like a minister to the King. His service was a lofty path, the service of Torah wisdom and scholarship. For one accustomed to this higher service, the emotional service of prayer is a descent; it is less central for this spiritual path.

Perhaps that is the significance of the Talmud's description of Chanina ben Dosa's prayer: "he lowered his head between his knees." This position indicates a service of God in which the intellect takes a backseat. The head is lowered, while the heart and its emotions take center stage.

(Adapted from preface to Olat Re'iyah vol. 1 p. 27; Ein Eyah vol. 1 p. 166)

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Shemos

פרשת שמות תשפ"א

ותיראן המילדות את האלקים ולא עשו כאשר דבר אליהן מלך מצרים

And the midwives feared G-d; they did not do as the King of Egypt told them. (1:17)

The Torah lauds the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, for defying Pharaoh's diabolical decree, maintaining that their inner strength and courage were the product of their profound *yiraas Elokim*, fear of G-d. Two weak, defenseless women stood up to the most powerful despotic ruler in the world and refused to murder the Jewish infants. True, they gave excuses, but anyone with a modicum of intelligence knew that what they claimed could not have been true all the time. Their *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, knowing fully-well that Hashem is above everyone and no excuses or mitigating, extenuating circumstances can rationalize transgression guided them. It is either permissible or it is prohibited. There is no gray area. *Elokim* is Hashem's Name connoting Strict Justice – which means exactly what it reads: strict, unembellished, unvarnished justice.

What, indeed, is the essence of *yiraas Shomayim* that grants a person the strength to overcome all obstacles and stand up to all challenges? *Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl*, quotes the *pesukim* in *Yeshayah* (51:12,13), *Mi at va'tiri mei'enosh yamus u'miben adam chatzir yinasein. Va'tishkach Hashem oseich noteh shomayim v'yoseid eretz*, "Who are you that you fear from mortals and from men who will be made as grass? You have forgotten Hashem, your Maker, Who spread out the heavens and set the foundation of the earth. The *Navi* says clearly that a person can only be afraid of another human being if he has *chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid, forgotten *Hashem Yisborach*. To the contrary, the only way a person can stand fearless before any human being, regardless of his position/station in life, his power and ruthlessness, is if he possesses a strong, uncompromised sense of *yiraas Shomayim*. One who fears Hashem – fears no man. One whose fear of Hashem is deficient – has no limits to whom and what he fears.

To define *yiraas Shomayim*, I would suggest that a person who truly fears Hashem feels His immediacy at all times. Some people are observant and very committed, but do they feel Hashem's Presence in their lives at all times? When the *Gerrer Rebbe*, the *Imrei Emes*, arrived in Vienna in 1923 to attend the *Knessiah Gedolah*, he remained outside the hall, refusing to enter. His *gabbaim*, attendants, explained to the event organizers that the *Rebbe* had issues with the *mechitzah*, separation between men and women. Although the women were seated in the balcony which surrounded the entire room, there were no curtains. Thus, anyone who looked up saw the women. This, as far as the *Rebbe* was concerned, was a breach of Jewish law. He would not enter the room until the breach had been corrected.

When a group of *rabbanim* heard about the *Rebbe's* "stringency," they disagreed; they felt the *mechitzah* was fine and did not require repair. The consensus of opinion ruled that they would ask the *Chafetz Chaim, zl*, who also happened to be attending the conference. They would all abide by his ruling. The sage replied, "According to *halachah*, Jewish law, the *mechitzah* is kosher and does not require any alteration. However, since some Jews have requested an 'upgrade', we should acquiesce to their demands."

He continued with this reasoning (as quoted by *Horav Elimelech Biderman, Shlita*), "When Hashem is with us, we have nothing to fear. David *Hamelech* states in *Tehillim* 23, 'Even when I go in the valley of death, I have no fear... because You are with me.' However, when Hashem's Presence is not with us, we are in grave danger. When there is a lack of *tznius* (moral modesty, chastity), Hashem removes His Presence from within our midst. It is, thus, to our benefit to be *machmir*, stringent, in matters of *kedushah*, holiness, and *tznius*. It will catalyze a higher level of protection and *siyata diShmaya*, Divine assistance." These *gedolim* felt Hashem's Presence in their midst and realized the consequences that relaxing a stringency might catalyze.

The *Chafetz Chaim* was wont to say, *Der velt zagt az mir zol zein frum, un frum un klug*. (G-d-fearing, G-d-fearing and wise). *Ich zog, az mir zol zein klug, un klug, un frum*, "The world says that one should be G-d-fearing and wise, I say that he should be wise and G-d-fearing." (In other words, wisdom should precede his observance, because a person should have sufficient common sense and acumen to determine

when it is appropriate to be stringent, upon whose shoulders one is imposing his stringency, and at what expense. Every issue must be carefully weighed and decided appropriately in such a manner that no one is offended. Obviously, this applies only with regard to a stringency. When it involves normative *halachah*, we have no room for compromise. There are no gray areas.)

בשרם תבוא אליהן המילדת וילדו

Before the midwife comes to them, they have given birth. (1:19)

The midwives explained to Pharaoh that the Jewish women were unique in that they gave birth even prior to the arrival of the midwife. Thus, the midwives were powerless to prevent the male infants from entering the world. Certainly, Pharaoh did not want them to commit a wanton act of murder. *Horav Ovadia Yosef, zl*, related the following incredible incident. One *Erev Pesach*, a young father who lived on a *Moshav* south of Yerushalayim came to him with a six-year old boy.

“*Kavod Horav*, will the *Chacham* bless my son? After all, he was born because of ‘you,’” the young father explained. (There are quotes on “you” for a reason, to be explained in the course of the story.)

“In 1998 (four years after *Rabbanit* Margalit Yosef had returned her soul to its holy source), I was asked to conduct the *Pesach Seder* at an absorption center. Many of the new *olim*, emigres, were experiencing Judaism for the first time. The *Seder* would be, for many of them, their segue into traditional Judaism. I agreed to lead the *Seder* and make use of this opportunity to reach out to the attendees to bring them closer to the religion of their forebears. Shortly before the *chag*, festival, was to begin, my wife felt that her pregnancy was coming to its conclusion and she must go to the hospital. Imagine, arriving at the hospital to be informed that due to the upcoming festival, all the midwives had left for *chofesh*, vacation, to spend time with their respective families. There was, however, one midwife on staff who was present to cover any emergencies. If my wife could ‘wait’ a little, while the midwife attended to another patient, she would soon be in to help her.

“When my wife saw that it would be some time before she would be attended to, she asked me to leave and attend the *Seder* for the *olim*: ‘*B’ezras Hashem*, with the help of the Almighty, in the merit of the *mitzvah* that you will perform, I will get through this without mishap, and it will be a *mazel tov* for us.’ With tears in my eyes, I left my wife to lead the *Seder*. It pained me greatly to leave her alone in the hospital, but how could I ignore the three hundred *olim* who were waiting to hear the *d’var Hashem*?”

“Understandably, following the *Seder*, I returned to my wife to learn of the *mazel tov*, birth of our son, who stands with me here today. My wife told me that she had an intriguing experience while I was gone. She lay there alone in the room, happy that I was performing a *mitzvah*, but nervous and afraid, when suddenly a woman stood before her, dressed all in white, similar to that worn by the nurses. She said to her, ‘Listen to me. My name is Margalit. I am the wife of *Horav Ovadia Yosef*. I come to you from Heaven to assist and be with you. Do not be afraid; do not worry. I will be with you the entire time.’ Within a few moments, my wife gave birth and the (*neshamah* of) *Rabbanit* disappeared.” (The reader now knows why there were quotes on “you.”) When the story was related to *Horav Chaim Kanievesky, Shlita*, he said that he believed the story. In the merit of the *mitzvah* and in the merit of the woman’s *mesiras nefesh*, dedication to the point of self-sacrifice, Hashem did something *l’maaleh min ha’teva*, supernaturally, to help the woman. She deserved it.

ותרד בת פרעה לרחץ על היאר

Pharaoh’s daughter went down to bathe by the river. (2:5)

The *Baal HaTurim* writes that the last letters of *va’tired bas* Pharaoh – *daled, saf, hay*, spell *dassah*, her religion. This teaches us that Bisyah, daughter of Pharaoh, was not taking a random trip down to the river. She went there to immerse herself as her concluding step toward converting to Judaism. This comment is already stated in the *Talmud* (*Sotah* 12b), “She went down to the river to wash herself off from her

father’s idols.” *Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita*, asks an intriguing question. Of all times to join the Jewish People, this was not the most propitious. No people were more reviled in Egypt than the Jews. They were treated as parasites and enslaved. Their lives were meaningless to the Egyptians, who persecuted and murdered them, first at random, and later in a systematic process to destroy them physically and emotionally. Why would Bisyah decide now, of all times, to join this downtrodden, rejected nation?

Rav Gamliel explains that it all depends on one’s perspective. How one views an incident determines how he will experience it. In his commentary to *Va’yaar b’sivlosam*, “And (he) observed their burdens” (2:11), *Rashi* comments: “*Moshe Rabbeinu* went out to see the suffering of his brethren and grieve with them.” He identified with the Jewish People. Although he was raised in Pharaoh’s palace, an environment that bespoke anti-Semitism, he retained his pedigree and remained committed to the heritage of his parents, Amram and Yocheved. By identifying with the pain experienced by the Jews, Moshe became one with them. Likewise, Bisyah ruminated over the fact that the Jews were the target of such vicious animus. Why the Jews? It must be that their values, way of life, and religious conviction posed a threat to the pagan, hedonistic culture that characterized Egypt. The average Egyptian viewed the downtrodden Jews as dismal failures, pathetic examples of human deficiency. Why would they want to have anything to do with them? Not so Bisyah, whose perspective was like Moshe’s – empathetic, profound, intelligent. The Egyptians must have had a reason to single out *Klal Yisrael* as the subject of such treachery. Rather than simply being punished, they were being refined, much like gold in a crucible. Egypt was the crucible for purifying and refining the Jewish nation, and from there it will emerge to distinction – both spiritual and material. She wanted to be a part of this nation. She sought to share in their greatness.

Rav Gamliel relates that he spoke to a Jew who is fully observant, who claimed that the suffering he witnessed during the Holocaust inspired his current level of observance. Prior to the war, he was a free-thinking, assimilated Jew, who maintained no belief in Hashem, His Torah or *mitzvos*. This transition was actually an anomaly, since it was increasingly more common for one’s questions *vis-à-vis* the Holocaust to catalyze a rejection of the faith, rather than motivate return and embrace. The man explained with an analogy that allowed him to see the light: “A young child who was brought to *shul* was disturbing the congregation. Unable to read and bored, he reacted to being cooped up with a bunch of “old” men who were *davening*. The members of the congregation did not like being disturbed, so they responded in the usual manner, by “shushing” and motioning to him to be quiet. At times, their patience wore thin, but, one thing was certain, no one would lift a finger to the child – except for his father. When the father saw that all the signals and warnings failed to quiet his son, he lifted his hand and administered corporal punishment. Certainly, this was not out of a lack of love, but rather, out of a sense of responsibility, because he loved his child and wanted to see him develop into a fine, upstanding, fully-observant *ben Torah*. The slap was an expression of love and care – not animus – or lack of control. Likewise, the discipline to which we are privy is a demonstration of our Father in Heaven’s love for His children. Evidently, we are not all able to see or sense this phenomenon. When you think about it, do all children recognize and acknowledge that their parent’s discipline is an expression of love? It demands maturity and even a little empathy, whereby the child imagines that he/she was the parent who was compelled to address their child’s present behavior, and to “modulate/tweak” its course so that the future they all hope for would be realized.

Rav Gamliel sums it up: For every event experienced both by the communal *Klal Yisrael* or the individual Jew, if he/they apply their heart and eyes to it (in other words, they think rationally, with common sense, empathy and an open mind), it will have a positive effect in catalyzing a better Jew and a better nation. One who expands his mind and thinks will soon see how much Hashem loves him/us. Troubles should not turn us away from Hashem; on the contrary, they should bring us closer, because it shows that He cares.

ויאחזנו בני ישראל מן העבודה ויזעקו ותעל שועתם אל האלקים... וישמע... ויזכר אלקים את בריתו את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב
And Bnei Yisrael groaned from the labor, and they cried out, and their outcry rose up to G-d... and G-d heard... and G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. (2:23,24)

The Jews had been suffering for years from the back-breaking labor forced upon them by the Egyptians. They must have cried, groaned and moaned before. Now, the covenant with the Patriarchs came into play. This was not a new covenant. It had been around for quite some time. Why now? What change transpired that now, after all this time, Hashem listened, remembered and responded to these pleas? *Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl*, recounts from a *Shabbos Shuvah drashah*, lecture, rendered by *Horav Yonasan Shteif, zl*, that responds to this question.

Golus comes in two forms: physical and spiritual. Physical bondage is physically painful, causes deep anxiety and depresses a person, as he sees life and hope diminishing every day. Spiritual exile requires a deeper sense of self and one's spiritual needs in order to feel the spiritual angst that overwhelms a person as he feels his relationship with Hashem waning with each passing day. To put this into perspective, I suggest that we each ask ourselves how we felt locked in our homes as the Covid virus raged. No *shuls*, no *bais hamedrash*, with *shiurim* on the phone. The first time that we were allowed back into *shul* to *daven* with a *minyan* was exhilarating. Imagine, living like this in an oppressive country, where Jewish religious observance is punishable by death or life in Siberia – which is the same. This is spiritual bondage. In order for it to be considered exile, however, one must feel that he is missing something, that he is being deprived of life itself. If he feels no loss, then it is not much of an exile.

It is natural to complain when one is in pain. When one is suffering, anxiety and depression are to be expected. Thus, when *Klal Yisrael* first began to cry out, it was tears inspired by pain – the pain of physical deprivation. The labor was overwhelming, backbreaking work that produced absolutely nothing. Physical pain, anxiety and demoralizing labor will destroy a person. So they reacted with tears. Hashem heard them, but waited patiently, because the *golus*, exile, would eventually come to an end. The Jewish People would outlast and outlive the Egyptians. Their suffering would come to an end. Hashem had promised this to the *Avos*, Patriarchs. It was like engraved in stone. So what had changed?

During the many (210) years of miserable suffering, the cries had subtly changed. The people began to realize and finally acknowledge that physical pain was not the worst that one could experience, as long as he was not alone. When one comes to the horrible realization that, with time and increasing pain, his relationship with Hashem, his sanctity, was slowly diminishing, and, if things were to continue in this manner he would have nothing – neither body nor soul; he had reached the end of the line. The inexorable toll that the hard labor was taking on their emotions and ability to think and connect with Hashem was destroying their Jewishness, without which they were nothing. Now, they had serious reasons for crying. The physical pain was destroying them spiritually.

This is what they cried about – now. The last vestiges of their closeness to Hashem was quickly dissipating. If Hashem would not listen to them, they were finished. It was crunch time. This is why Hashem remembered His covenant with the *Avos*, which is the root of our eternal connection with Hashem. The Almighty saw that we were in danger of losing that connection; the twines of the “rope” that connected us to Him were tearing, one by one. Without the *kedushah*, sanctity, of being *Bnei Avraham, Yitzchak, v'Yaakov* – what makes us distinct? It is what exemplifies us and discerns us. In the merit of this heightened awareness which was (sadly) inspired by their suffering, Hashem hastened the redemption and liberated them from the Egyptian bondage.

Perhaps the greatest exile is when one does not know that he is in exile and begins treating his dismal circumstances as the “new” way of life. I was just learning with someone who had once been observant. “Life,” “situations,” “environment” all took their toll on his spiritual

development. Soon after completing his *yeshiva* high school education, his religious trajectory changed directions, and today he is far from his original destination. Obviously, his children and grandchildren were never introduced to, or indoctrinated in, his “original” way of life and are today very distant from Torah and *mitzvos*. I asked my friend if he has, over the years, talked to his grandchildren about his parents, who were Holocaust survivors, and whether he has touched on the Holocaust and the spiritual heroism manifest by our brothers and sisters. His response troubled me: “I am not permitted to mention anything negative to my grandchildren. In fact, when they conduct a *Pesach 'Seder*, I have to gloss quickly over *Makas Bechoros*, killing of the firstborn Egyptians, because it implies negativity and sadness.” This is my understanding of spiritual exile, when one does not even understand what is happening, when Hashem speaks to us and no one is listening – because it might project negativity.

What keeps us going? Only our connection to Hashem allows us to maintain our fortitude in the face of the most horrific challenges. A well-known story concerning the saintly *Horav Meir, zl, m'Premishlan*, was often related by the holy *Kaliver Rebbe, zl*. *Rav Meir* used to immerse himself in a *mikvah* situated on top of a snow covered mountain. Despite his advanced age, *Rav Meir* clambered up the mountain without help. The man who accompanied the *Rebbe* was much younger than he, yet he slipped and fell with almost every step. He asked the *Rebbe*, “How is it that Your Honor walks up so steadily, while I am constantly stumbling?” The *Rebbe* replied, “He who is bound to the One Above will not fall below.”

We each have our own unique “cord” for connecting with Hashem. Our nation has survived throughout the millennia because we never let go. The holy *Berdichever Rebbe, zl, Horav Levi Yitzchak*, would declare in his *Erev Yom Kippur drashah*, “*Ribono Shel Olam!* To build a building, iron, stone and water are needed. If You need iron to build the Third *Bais Hamikdash*, we are iron, since we have continued our commitment throughout time, despite a sea of troubles. If You need stones, how many Jewish hearts have slowly turned to stone because of all their troubles and suffering? If You need water, you have plenty of it in the endless tears of *Klal Yisrael*.”

We each have our own way of holding on.

Va'ani Tefillah

שים שלום – Sim shalom

Establish peace.

Shalom, peace; *shleimus*, wholeness, perfection: Two words that are actually one. True peace is *shleimus*, perfection. It is an absolute similar to truth; it is either perfect or it is not peaceful. Flawed peace is not peace; it is nothing. As *Horav Avigdor Miller, zl*, says, “Peace is a wondrous contrivance, for peace requires countless thousands of factors which must participate and which must function perfectly; and if one factor would be lacking or would malfunction, there would be no peace.” Thus, we conclude *Shemoneh Esrai* with the blessing of *shalom*. Furthermore, when we have peace, it does not just happen. Hashem contrived peace as a creation that represents ultimate inclusiveness and kindness. *Rav Miller* observes that when blessing follows adversity, everyone notices and thanks Hashem. What about when nothing transpires, there is no enemy, and people “just happen” to live in harmony with tranquility reigning throughout? People often make the mistake of thinking that peace does not need a Supreme Motivator and that tranquility is not a positive gift, but merely a lack of misfortune. As believing Jews, we know that nothing “just happens.” Peace is no different. Without Hashem's intervention, peace, like everything else, would be nothing more than an elusive dream.

לע"ג האשה החשובה

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ע"ה In memory of Mrs. Toby Salamon

נדבת מנחם שמואל וריווא דבורה סלומון

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