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A New Insight Into the "Great Wealth" That Avraham Avinu Witnessed

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1364 – The Halachic Issues Concerning Hearing Aids. Good Shabbos! A New Insight Into the "Great Wealth" That Avraham Avinu Witnessed The Gemara (Sotah 11b) says that in the zechus (merit) of the nashim tzidkanios (righteous women) of that generation (who encouraged their husbands to have children with them in the midst of the slavery), Klal Yisrael were zoche to (merited) beezas Mitzrayim (the spoils of Egypt)." This is a slight variation of another teaching of Chazal, also appearing in the same Gemara, that in the zechus of the nashim tzidkanios, Klal Yisrael were redeemed from Mitzrayim (Egypt).

In either case, the reference to the reward of the nashim tzidkanios in Mitzrayim relates to the fact that the Jewish men in Mitzrayim did not want to procreate. They did not want to bring children into the world because they felt such efforts would be in vain. The babies would be thrown into the Nile or they would be used as bricks in building the pyramids. The women, however, took a different approach. They argued "We need to do what we need to do." As the Gemara relates, they would go out into the fields and entice their husbands, and as a result of that they would bring children into the world.

The Gemara says that as a result of the fact that the women had this emunah (trust and belief in Hashem), they were rewarded with beezas Mitzrayim. When Klal Yisrael left Mitzrayim, they left with all sorts of gold and silver that came to them as a result of the nashim tzidkanios, who encouraged their husbands to have children with them.

There are four questions that I would like to present on this Gemara:

What is the connection between beezas Mitzrayim and encouraging their husbands to have children? The correlation is not at all obvious.

The pasuk in Parshas Bo says "Daber nah (Please speak) in the ears of the people: Let each man request from his fellow and each woman from her fellow, silver vessels and gold vessels." (Shemos 11:2). Rashi famously points out that the word "nah" indicates "request." Hashem instructs Moshe:

"Please ask them to take the silver and gold so that Avraham Avinu should not have a complaint that I fulfilled the promise of 'they will be slaves for four hundred years' but I did not fulfill the promise of 'afterwards they will leave with great wealth.'" (Bereshis 15:13-14). The question is: Why would it be necessary to ask the people to "Please take the money"? Usually, people do not need to be encouraged to ask for money. Money is money. It is valuable. Was there going to be some kind of resistance on the part of the people to ask for "free money?"

They are told to ask for the money so that the promise of the Ribono shel Olam that "afterwards they will leave with great wealth" will be fulfilled. Was there no other way for the Ribono shel Olam to allow His nation to leave Mitzrayim with great wealth other than to have them go through this sham of asking to "borrow" the silver and gold from the Mitzrim and then abscond with it? The wealth could have simply appeared magically on the doorsteps of every Jew before he or she left Mitzrayim!

There appears to be a contradiction between pesukim. In our parsha, the Torah writes: "...And it will be when you will go you will not go empty-handed. Each woman shall request from her neighbor and from the one who lives in her house, silver vessels, golden vessels, u'smalos... (and garments)" (Shemos 3:21-22) In other words, at the same time that they asked for gold and silver, they were told to ask for smalos. However, in Parshas Bo, when this is again repeated, the pasuk says "Let each man request of his fellow and each woman from her fellow silver vessels and gold vessels." (Shemos 11:2) However, smalos are not mentioned. Then, further on in Parshas Bo when they actually carried this out, it says "The Children of Israel did according to the word of Moshe; they requested from the Mitzrim silver vessels, gold vessels, and garments." (Shemos 12:35). There, it again mentions that they asked for smalos. This is very peculiar. Was the wardrobe part of the package that they were to request or not?

Rav Elya Svei, z"l, in his sefer on Chumash, presents a beautiful inference from a comment of the Seforno (Shemos 11:2). The Seforno writes "So that they (Klal Yisrael) will not worry that because of the ("borrowed") money, they (the Mitzrim) will risk their lives to pursue them." Asking the Mitzrim for their silver and gold was an act of tremendous faith on the part of Klal Yisrael. After the initial shock of the Makkos (Ten Plagues), including the loss of their first-born sons, the Mitzrim would be going to their bank accounts and shouting "Hey! They robbed us!" This would encourage the Mitzrim to run after Klal Yisrael to try to retrieve the gold and silver that Klal Yisrael had taken from them without repayment!

Why did the Ribono shel Olam do this? He did this because he wanted Klal Yisrael to show their faith in Him – that He will take care of us. Yes, this may increase the chances that the Mitzrim will run after us – which indeed they did – but the Ribono shel Olam has taken care of us until now. He will somehow or other solve the problem – which he did, by Krias Yam Suf. This answers why the Ribono shel Olam didn't just make the silver and gold appear miraculously on their doorsteps. He wanted them to go through this sham of borrowing from the Mitzrim as a test. And it was not only a test. It was a way of actualizing this midah (attribute) of trusting the Ribono shel Olam. This was one of several lessons in emunah that were part of the process of Yetzias Mitzrayim. Hashem asked the Mitzrim to shecht (slaughter) the lamb for the Korban Pesach, even though lambs were the Avodah Zarah of the Mitzrim. This is another example.

This also answers the question of "Please speak in the ears of the nation..." It was necessary to ask them to please take money. As the Seforno writes, they were hesitant to take the items because they knew that with the Mitzrim's borrowed money in their possession, it would be much more likely that the Mitzrim would pursue them into the wilderness.

As far as the third question regarding the on again off again appearance of the word smalos in the list of things to be requested: Rashi mentions that of the three items (gold, silver, and clothing), the hardest item for the Mitzrim to give up was their clothing. It is harder to give away the shirt off your back or the suit you are currently wearing than to reach into your wallet and give away your money!

Rav Svei explains as follows: The first time the Ribono shel Olam gave Moshe the instructions as to what Klal Yisrael was to ask for, He had faith in Klal Yisrael that they would do even the most difficult of the three things (asking for the smalos). But the Ribono shel Olam knew that Moshe Rabbeinu did not have as much faith in Klal Yisrael as He had. So when Moshe gave the people the instruction, he did not mention smalos because he knew that was the hardest thing to ask for. However, when the time came, they actually did ask for smalos. (They must have known that Hashem had included smalos when He originally told Moshe what would happen, back in Parshas Bo.) That is why when they actually asked the Mitzrim, it says that they asked for gold, silver, and clothing – because Klal Yisrael met the test set up for them by the Ribono shel Olam.

The answer to the original question about the connection between the women encouraging their husbands to have children with them and the reward of beezas Mitzrayim is that they are indeed connected. The source of this emunah that Klal Yisrael demonstrated when leaving Mitzrayim is the original emunah demonstrated by these women. The men learned from the women. The lesson they learned was that when someone has emunah in the Ribono shel Olam, things turn out alright. The women in Klal Yisrael imbued in their husbands this concept that a person needs to do what the Ribono shel Olam asks and whatever will occur will occur. Therefore, in the zechus of “those women,” they were zoche to the beezas Mitzrayim.

Based on this, Rav Svei says a new pshat in the concept “so that the righteous one (Avraham) will not say to Me that I fulfilled the part of the prophecy that they would suffer for four hundred years, but did not fulfill the prophecy that they would leave b’rechush gadol” (with great wealth). The “rechush gadol” that Avraham Avinu saw them go out with was NOT the gold and silver. It was their demonstration of emunah.

Rashi and the Ramban say that part of the reason that Klal Yisrael had to go down to Mitzrayim was because of the “aveira of Avraham Avinu.” What was this “aveira?” After being given Hashem’s promise that he would get the Land of Canaan (Bereshis 15:7), Avraham asked “How will I know that I will indeed inherit it?” (Bereshis 15:8).

If it is even possible to say such a thing about Avraham Avinu, this represented a slight deficit in his emunah. The Ramban says that when Avraham left Eretz Canaan (due to the famine) and went down to Mitzrayim, “chet gadol chatah” (He sinned a great sin). Avraham should have had emunah! You don’t have food? Don’t worry! The Ribono shel Olam will take care of you. According to these commentaries (and others), the whole Galus Mitzrayim was precipitated – to a certain extent – because of Avraham’s imperceptible lack of emunah.

So when Klal Yisrael emerges “b’rechush gadol” (with great wealth) because of their faith in the Ribono shel Olam, what could be a greater wealth for Avraham Avinu after he slipped up slightly in the matter of emunah, than to see that his descendants withstood the test and had full faith in the Ribono shel Olam. That is the rechush gadol that Avraham witnessed.

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 This week’s write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. ... A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2026 by Torah.org. Torah.org: The Judaism Site

from: **Ira Zlotowitz** iraz@klalgovoa.org date: Jan 8, 2026, 7:00 PM
 subject: Tidbits • Parashas Shemos 5786 in memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz zt”l

This week, the week of Parashas Shemos, we begin the weeks of Shovavim. Shovavim is an acronym for the six weekly Torah portions: Shemos, Vaera, Bo, Beshalach, Yisro and Mishpatim. Shovavim is an auspicious time to review the Laws of Taharas Hamishpacha and for introspection regarding

our spiritual purity. Some say additional tehillim and other tikkunim, while others fast on Mondays and Thursdays during this period.

Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Zevachim 117. The siyum is this Monday, mazal tov! Masechta Menachos begins next • Yerushalmi: Succah 22 • Mishnah Yomis: Arachin 3:5-4:1 • Oraysa (coming week): Yevamos 18a-20a • Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: 45:3-8

Make sure to call your parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rebbe to wish them a good Shabbos. If you didn’t speak to your kids today, make sure to connect with them as well!

Shabbos Mevorchim Chodesh Shevat is next week, Shabbos Parashas Va’eira.

SHEMOS: B’nei Yisrael experience explosive population growth • Pharaoh conspires to diminish the Jewish population by enslaving them • Pharaoh commands that all newborn boys be thrown into the Nile River • Shifrah and Puah ignore Pharaoh’s command to kill the newborn boys • Moshe’s birth • Yocheved places Moshe on the Nile; Miriam watches from afar • Pharaoh’s daughter, Bisyah, discovers and adopts Moshe • Moshe witnesses the oppression of B’nei Yisrael and kills an Egyptian beating a Jew • Moshe intercedes in a fight between two Jews • Moshe’s killing of the Egyptian becomes known; Pharaoh seeks to kill him • Moshe escapes to Midyan, he comes to the aid of Yisro’s daughters and marries Tziporah • Hashem speaks to Moshe at the burning bush • Moshe is appointed to act as Redeemer, with his brother Aharon assisting as his ‘spokesman’ • Moshe returns to Egypt and B’nei Yisrael are advised that they will be redeemed • Moshe and Aharon confront Pharaoh • Pharaoh increases the Jews’ workload • Hashem promises the redemption will be with a mighty arm.

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“וַיְהִי בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיִּרְאֵם בְּסֻבְלָתָם” “It happened in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and he perceived their burdens” (Shemos 2:11)

The Midrash relates that in the merit of Moshe going out - in those days - to observe the plight of his brethren, he merited Hashem’s descent from the heavens to speak to him face-to-face. What was unique about Moshe Rabbeinu’s action that earned him this great privilege? Also, what was significant about Moshe taking these actions in those days specifically?

Rav Yosef Elefant shlit”a quotes from Rav Wolbe zt”l that Moshe in those days was living ‘the good life’ in the house of Pharaoh and yet he sought out the state of his fellow Jews. Rashi says “Nasan einav v’libo”, he directed his eyes and his heart to their situation. Rav Wolbe quotes Rav Yerucham Levovitz zt”l as saying that this was the “gantze Moshe Rabbeinu”. This encapsulates the greatest leader of all time. The Alter from Kelm (Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv zt”l) further explains that being attentive to another is the first step in coming closer to our Creator. For if one cannot feel the pain of those close by, he cannot possibly understand the distress and desires of the Ribono Shel Olam, Who may seem to be far more distant. Moshe Rabbeinu, who in those days was living royally, left his own ‘comfort zone’ to seek out the plight of others. The Ribono Shel Olam responded that in the merit of this action, He would descend from His domain on high to speak to Moshe ‘face-to-face’. _

from: RIETS Kollel Elyon Substack <riets@substack.com>

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Parashat Shemot:

When Violence Becomes Thinkable
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

Moses encounters two men locked in imminent physical confrontation. To one of them, the Torah records Moses' admonition: "Why would you strike your fellow?" (Ex. 2:13). The verb tense is telling—no blow has yet landed. Yet the Torah already labels this individual "rasha," the wicked one. From this episode, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 58b) derives a remarkable prohibition: "He who raises his hand to strike another, even though he has not actually struck him, is considered wicked."

This law is surprising. Jewish law generally does not criminalize mere intent; crimes that are planned but not executed carry no label of guilt. Moreover, if no blow is completed, no injury is inflicted—seemingly, no offense has occurred. Why, then, does halakhah treat the raised hand as an independent transgression?

Some authorities view the prohibition as protective, designed to prevent threatened harm from being actualized. Others suggest it addresses the fear instilled in the potential victim, a violation of *ona'at devarim*, the prohibition against causing distress through words or actions. Still others, like the Lubavitcher Rebbe, understand that raising one's hand in violence is "intrinsically ugly," a misuse of the human hand that God designed to be an instrument of kindness.

Yet there may be something deeper still. A person who raises his hand in threat has fundamentally altered the tone of human interaction. He has signaled his willingness to introduce violence into the equation, to reduce human discourse from the level of words to that of physical force. The civil relationship between human beings has been corrupted, lowered to an animalistic conflict in which violence is no longer anathema.

Sigmund Freud once observed, "Civilization began the first time an angry person cast a word instead of a rock." In that, he took a cue from his ancestors and from one of his most famous subjects, Moses. The essence of the prohibition Moses conveyed with his language is that it identifies the moment of civilizational collapse not when the rock is thrown, but when violence becomes a conceivable response to conflict. This is not merely preparation for a crime; it is the declaration of a philosophy. It announces that the threatening party has opted out of civilization itself.

This understanding may explain why, according to many, such an individual is disqualified from serving as a witness in Jewish law. Maimonides frames the prohibition not just as calling someone wicked, but as establishing actual *rasha* status with all its implications. One who raises his hand against another has revealed himself as someone who operates outside the framework of civil society, someone whose entire orientation toward human relations has been compromised.

The work *B'Netivot HaRishonim* offers an additional perspective: the prohibition of hitting derives from the biblical command not to exceed the prescribed number of lashes when administering punishment. This situates the offense within the framework of unauthorized punishment: striking either the guilty excessively, or the innocent at all. Extending this logic to the raised hand, the very suggestion that one will issue punishment to another outside formal authorization (and absent justification like self-defense) constitutes its own violation. As Rashi notes in his commentary, Moses' choice of words, "Why would you strike your fellow?", emphasizes that "a wicked one just like you" has no standing to act punitively toward another of equal culpability.

This framework illuminates our contemporary challenge with terrorism. Terrorism represents the ultimate expression of the raised hand: not merely the threat of violence against an individual, but the systematic introduction of violence as a tool of political discourse. It declares that civilized modes of resolving disputes—negotiation, compromise, legal process—have been abandoned in favor of intimidation and bloodshed.

The terrorist seeks to normalize violence, to make it thinkable as an option in addressing grievances. By targeting civilians, by celebrating brutality, by rejecting the most basic distinctions between combatants and innocents, terrorism announces its fundamental rejection of the civilizational compact. It represents a reversion to the pre-Mosaic world where might makes right, where the stronger simply prevails over the weaker without recourse to justice or law.

In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud wrote that "civilized society is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards one another." He understood that civilization's task is to erect barriers against human aggression, to channel violent impulses into productive forms. The halakhic prohibition against raising one's hand serves precisely this function—it draws the line not at the point of contact, but at the threshold of intent, declaring that the very contemplation of violence as a solution corrupts the one who entertains it.

When Moses confronted the man about to strike his fellow, he was not merely preventing an assault. He was defending the boundary between civilization and chaos, between a society governed by law and one ruled by force. The lesson of that moment echoes across millennia: A culture that tolerates the raised hand, whether in individual disputes or in political terrorism, has already begun its descent from the world of words back to the world of rocks.

The challenge is not merely to respond to violence when it occurs, but to recognize and reject the mentality that declares violence a legitimate option. As Moses taught, wickedness begins not with the blow itself, but with the willingness to change the conversation into something else, and to take civilization down with it.

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from: **Rabbi YY Jacobson** <rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net>

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The Birth of Greatness

The **Psychological Burning Bush**

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

Moses' Story

Unlike his brethren suffering in slavery, Moses had been raised in the palace of the Pharaoh, and by the king's own daughter, Batya. A favorite of the king, as a child, he was not spared luxury. Moses could have easily chosen to isolate himself in the aristocratic life of a prince, oblivious to the hardship and suffering of the Hebrews, targeted for abuse and annihilation. But Moses did not.

Moses leaves the palace, choosing to spend his time comforting and bringing relief to the Jewish slaves. Quickly, he finds himself unable to stand idly in the face of injustice. To protect an innocent man being beaten senselessly by his Egyptian taskmaster, Moses kills the tormenting master, and then, to escape capital punishment, flees to the quiet land of Midyan. There, he meets his wife, Tziporah, the daughter of one of the wealthiest and most influential men in town, Jethro, and Moses settles down into the favorite biblical occupation, shepherding.

It seems that life has worked out for Moses. The horrors of Egypt are a thing of the past. True, Egypt is a place of unspeakable crimes against humanity, but what can Moses, or for that matter what can anyone, do about that?

Moses' life in Midyan, hundreds of miles away from Egypt, is now secure, domesticated, and peaceful. He builds a family and grows old.

Moses is now eighty years of age. By all calculations, a good time to retire. But then everything changes. And it has something to do with a burning bush.

A Burning Bush

One day, Moses is shepherding his father-in-law's sheep, when suddenly, he witnesses a bush, "burning with a heart of fire," yet the bush is not being consumed, it is not being transformed to ash. Moses says, "Let me turn aside, and see this great vision! Why is the bush not being consumed?"

The Torah describes the following scene:[1]

"G-d saw that Moses turned to see, so He called out to him from amidst the bush. 'Moses! Moses!' And he said: Here I am."

G-d tells Moses that "I have heard the pain and screams of the children of Israel in Egypt, and I have decided to save them." Now it is you, Moses, who I will send to Pharaoh, and you will take my nation out of Egypt. Moses

becomes the greatest leader of all times, liberating a people from oppression and giving the world the Torah, paving a road in the jungle of history.

A Turn of the Head

The Rabbis in the Midrash, always sensitive to nuance, focus our attention on the enigmatic words: "G-d saw that Moses turned to see, so He called out to him from amidst the bush." Clearly, G-d called out to Moses only because Moses turned to see the sight of the burning bush. But what exactly did Moses do? What does it mean that he "turned to see?"

On this there is a Midrashic argument:[2] Rabbi Yochanan says that Moses walked five steps[3] approaching the burning bush. Reish Lakish says that Moses did not take any steps at all; he simply turned his head to gaze at the bush, and when G-d saw that he turned his head in that direction, he called out to him.

What is the motif behind this strange argument?

The Light Bulb Moment

All biblical tales are not merely historical tales of the past, but contemporary lessons for our own lives. The story of Moses, the most important biblical figure, is no different.[4] It is a timeless blueprint for our own inner journey. Just like Moses, whose life at this point was slow and tranquil, far away from Pharaoh and the enslaved Israelites, and then suddenly is confronted with his burning bush and a new mission to change the destiny of mankind, we too often find ourselves far away from our destiny. We are living in our own orbit, "shepherding our own flock," minding our own business, in our inner psychological wilderness.

But then, suddenly, we experience a "burning bush," or a "light bulb moment." A fire is ignited in our hearts, a light bulb goes off in our minds. Our G-d within speaks to us about a larger mission in life.

Mark Twain said, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why." It is the day when you suddenly see your full potential and hence your full responsibility to both yourself and those around you. It is a moment of clarity when you know exactly what you are capable of, and what you were created for. It is when you shoulder full responsibility for your destiny.

But how can I know that the voice calling me is real? How do I know that it is not a fantasy created by an imagined ego, a childish dream, divorced from reality? How do I know that this is not the hallucination of a lunatic, or trauma protecting itself, but my personal call to greatness? Maybe I need to go to a psychiatrist or a therapist instead of returning to Egypt and confronting my Pharaoh.

The answer is when the fire burns and burns, yet never consumes your bush. The light bulb never dims. The voice inside me never falls silent. Then I know that this is not a fantasy, but a mission. My inner fire and secret passion, my 'heart of fire,' can never be extinguished, can never be placated by any alternatives. I can run, but I cannot hide, because the fire will continue to burn inside me.

Running From Your Burning Bush

And yet, many of us do not turn to see as the bush burns with a never-ending flame. We don't want to get disturbed. We have appointments to catch, emails to answer, bills to pay, goals to complete. Who has time and energy for a bush which refuses to stop burning?

We are tempted to look away, run away, to pretend we never saw what we saw. We don't like entertaining ideas that might severely shake up the status quo.

The greatness of Moses was that he turned to see the bush. According to one sage, Rabbi Yochanan, he actually walked five steps toward the flames—corresponding to the five layers of human consciousness: Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah, Chayah, Yechidah—the biological, emotional, intellectual, transcendental, and undefined quintessence ("quint" in Greek means five[5]) of the soul, beyond form or description. According to Rabbi Yochanan, Moses approached the burning bush with every fiber of his being, with every aspect of his identity.[6]

But Reish Lakish argues. Moses did not even take a single step. There is no need to even take one step toward the bush. All G-d wants is for you to turn your head and notice the bush ablaze. Just be attentive enough in life that

when the light bulb moment occurs, you will at least notice it; you will not repress it with a glass of alcohol, a TV show or a rib steak.

That is for some the most difficult and therefore most rewarding step: to turn their heads and see the moment.[7] And when you do turn your head, when you do tune in to the moment, you will be able to hear the call. Your inner Divine consciousness, your inner soul, will summon you: Moses! Moses! Declare "Hinani!" I am here. And listen, with your soul's ear, to your mission, the mission of your life.

Three Excuses

But Moses is not easy to convince. He begins arguing with G-d[8]: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Who am I that I should take the Jews out of Egypt?" And when G-d does not desist, Moses tries a different approach: "But the people, they won't believe me; they will ask me 'who is this G-d in whose name you speak!'" But G-d insists. Moses then speaks of the fact that he is not a man of words; his communication skills are compromised.

Finally, Moses begs, "Please G-d, send in the hand of the right person." G-d gets upset at Moses and promises him that He will be with him throughout the mission. Only then does Moses finally accept his calling. Once he accepted it, he never looks back again. The march toward redemption begins. This is true in our lives too. There are three major handicaps that prevent people from finding themselves and living their lives to the fullest; there are three rationalizations for why we shirk our greatest responsibilities; three forms of paralysis.

Moses first says "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Who am I that I should redeem the Jews?" In our vocabulary this is the response of insecurity. We are afraid, we feel inadequate to meet the challenges of life. We blame ourselves or our mothers: I am helpless, I am incompetent, I am a victim, I stutter, I can't communicate, nobody likes me, I am a small guy, a nobody. But G-d does not accept: To shy from responsibility due to feelings of inadequacy is not an act of humility, but one of cowardice, because it excuses inaction, avoids accountability, and most importantly it allows you to remain mediocre and for a people to remain enslaved. How can you allow your mediocrity to allow suffering of innocent people?

Another approach is not to blame ourselves, but to blame everyone else. In the words of Moses, "But the people won't believe me! They will say who is this G-d in whose name you speak; what will I respond to them?" We often claim that we are ready, but what can we do, the world is not ready for us! We blame our spouses, our in-laws, our family, our community, the media, the government, the masses—for being unresponsive. We blame our families for being unappreciative and our communities for not respecting us. We blame everyone but ourselves.

Finally, there is a third excuse: Perfectionism. If I can't be perfect, then I don't want to be anything at all. This is encapsulated by Moses' last argument: "G-d! Send in the hand of the right person." Moses, says the Midrash,[9] was referring to Moshiaich, the one intended to redeem us conclusively, permanently, and for all of eternity. Here Moses is saying, "I know that I am capable of fulfilling this mission to the fullest, and I know that the people will be responsive and will heed my call, but if my redemption is to be temporary, then I don't want to bother with it at all! It is either all or nothing!"

But G-d, once again, disagrees. Perfectionism, when misused, is not a strength, but a weakness. It is the enemy of progress.

Your Struggles

How do I know where my unique mission lies?

The answer, again, is in the thorn bush. The call to Moses did not come from any bush; it came from a thorn bush. Thorns represent pain, where I was pricked, where I was hurt, where I have been left scarred. Many times it is specifically that area where I have been hurt deeply but have persevered, where I struggle the most, where the inner battle rages most intense, that can become my unique strength and contribution. My 'heart of fire' rages within and grows out of my own inner thorn bushes.

You, and only you, are equipped with your unique mission to open hearts, to move people to action, to keep people from losing hope, to help people forgive themselves and others, to help people laugh at their humanity, to save

a soul, kindle a heart, to inspire a nation, to touch a community, to spread goodness and kindness, to share the light of Torah and Mitzvos with people around you, to reveal the energy of redemption in your part of the world. Can we see the burning bush? Will we turn around? That is the question I must answer in my life; and you must answer in yours.[10]

[1] Exodus 3:4.

[2] Midrash Rabah Shemos 2:6.

[3] In Midrash Tanchuma here the version is "three steps," not five steps. The midrashic commentators discuss this discrepancy, suggesting various explanations. Cf. footnote #6.

[4] The Chassidic masters teach that there is a spark of Moses in each of us (Tanya chapter 42.) Hence, all of Moses' experiences apply on some level to us.

[5] Quintessence means the fifth essence. The ancient Greeks taught that there were four elements, or forms, in which matter could exist: fire, air, water, and earth. Then there was the fifth element known as the fifth essence (quintessence) ether, more subtle and pure than fire. Now the word stands for the essential principle or the most subtle extract, the pure, undiluted essence of an existence that can be obtained. These five dimensions are discussed in many works of Midrash and Kabbalah.

[6] This also explains why according to one version in Midrash, Moses took three steps, since in many sources, the five levels of the souls are generally divided into the three levels of "naran," Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah.

[7] This is similar to the idea the Lubavitcher Rebbe once expressed about prayer. Prayer is a ladder of many rungs. There are many different levels and layers we explore during prayer. But the foundation of all of them is "shtelen zeich davenen," the person tearing himself away from everything and tuning-in to the mental state of communicating with the Divine. That in a way is deeper than all of the high levels following during the actual prayer (Likkutei Sichos vol. 2 Parshas Matos Massei.)

[8] Exodus 3:11.

[9] Midrash Lekach Tov. Pirkei Derabi Eliezer ch. 40.

[10] My thanks to Rabbi Avraham David Shlomo (Cape Town, South Africa) for his help in preparing this essay. -----

The Torah Any Times

Parashat Shemot, 21 Tevet, 5786/January 10, 2026

from TorahAnyTime.com

Rabbi Yoel Gold

Of Sensitivity and Scorpions

I once spoke to Rabbi Yaacov Haber from Ramat Bet Shemesh, who shared with me the following.

When Rabbi Haber was newly married, he and his wife lived in a small apartment in Jerusalem. In their neighborhood there was a homeless Jewish man who would knock on doors asking for a bit of money or a warm meal. As young newlyweds, Rabbi Haber and his wife felt compassion and invited him in. They gave him food, treated him with dignity, and welcomed him from time to time.

Over time, however, the situation began to change and the man grew increasingly comfortable. He started coming almost daily, and eventually, he stopped knocking altogether. He would simply walk in. The boundaries blurred, and the couple found themselves unsure how to handle it.

Eventually, their lease ended. They were also expecting a child and needed a larger apartment. Before moving, they asked a halachic authority whether they were obligated to inform the homeless man of their new address. Given the circumstances, they were told that they were not. They moved, and the man no longer knew where they lived. Naturally, the visits stopped.

Shortly after settling into the new apartment, one morning, Rabbi Haber's wife put on her shoe and felt something inside. She shook it out—and a scorpion fell to the floor. Alarmed, they called an exterminator. Yet nothing more was found. But then another scorpion appeared. And another, this time in the kitchen, and then in the bathroom. They brought in multiple professionals, but no one could explain what was happening.

The apartment was deemed safe, yet the scorpions kept appearing. At a loss, Rabbi Haber decided to seek guidance from Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg zt"l. When he described the situation, Rav Scheinberg responded calmly. "You have scorpions? Let's see what the scorpion says."

He opened Perek Shirah, the ancient text that assigns a verse of praise to every element of creation, and looked up the scorpion. The Pasuk read: "Hashem is good to all, and His mercy extends to all His creations" (Tehillim 145:9).

Rav Scheinberg offered no interpretation. He simply said, "I don't know your story. Take this message and do with it what you will." Rabbi Haber left, still unsure what it meant. But as he boarded a bus to return home, he looked out the window, and there he was. The homeless man. Walking the street.

In that moment, everything clicked. "Stop the bus!" he called out. He ran off, embraced the man warmly, and said, "I haven't seen you in so long. We moved. Please, come with me now." He brought him home, gave him a hot meal, and treated him once again with warmth and kindness.

From that moment on, the scorpions never appeared again. This story is not a simplistic message about ignoring boundaries. Halachah matters and boundaries matter. The couple had acted correctly according to the ruling they were given. But teshuvah is not only about technical correctness. It is about repairing what was broken, restoring compassion where it quietly slipped away, and responding when Heaven nudges us to look again at our actions.

Hashem, in His great mercy, sometimes sends us messages not to accuse us, but to invite us to grow. Teshuvah is more than just regret. It is the courage to make things right

The Torah Any Times

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Rabbi Yitzchok Aryeh Epstein

A Promise for Long Life

The first words of Sefer Shemos begin: "V'eileh Shemos Bnei Yisrael—These are the names of the children of Israel." The Ba'al HaTurim notes that the letters comprising the words "Ve'eileh Shemos" form an allusion to a powerful promise: if a person is careful with Shnayim Mikra Ve'Echad Targum, reciting the words of the Parsha twice and the Onkeles translation once, he merits long life.

The source is the Gemara in Berachos (8a-b), where Chazal speak about the obligation to complete the weekly Parsha.

But here's the question. This exact phrase "Ve'eileh Shemos Bnei Yisrael" already appears earlier in Parshas Vayigash (46:8). And yet, the Ba'al HaTurim is silent there. Only now, in Shemos, does he suddenly attach this remez about Shnayim Mikra. Why is that?

One answer is that the Ba'al HaTurim is sending a message that is not only halachic, but practically relevant.

This is what happens every year. People get busy. Life fills up. Deadlines, pressures, weddings, children, Shabbos preparations, and the voice in a person's head keeps saying: "Tomorrow. I'll catch up tomorrow." Then Shabbos comes, and the plan was: "I'll wake up early. I'll learn. I'll be mavir sedra And suddenly it's 8:15, and davening already started, and the whole week got away again.

So the Baalei Mussar give practical advice: don't leave it for one heroic session. Do it steadily, one aliyah a day for a few minutes. And if you add Rashi, even better. But the point is consistency.

And now we understand why the Ba'al HaTurim highlights it specifically here, in Shemos. Shemos is a fresh beginning. A person may have missed Vayeishev, missed Miketz, missed Vayigash. Chanukah came, life came, the year moved, and a person can fall into a dangerous mindset: "Forget it. I blew it. If I already missed, I'm out." So the Ba'al HaTurim turns to you in Shemos and says: Start now. Don't let yesterday's failure cancel tomorrow's growth. Shemos is the beginning of the story again, so begin again.

And halachically too, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 285:4) discusses catching up, and many note that there is room to complete what was missed up until later in the year, even until Simchas Torah. The yetzer hara loves “all-or-nothing.” But Torah is “start-and-continue.”

R’ Lipa Schechter once related in the name of Reb Chatzkel Levenstein zt”l that a person who is not careful with Shnayim Mikra is either a tipesh (fool) or an apikores (heretic) because he either doesn’t understand what it means that every moment of life is priceless, or he doesn’t take Chazal’s promise seriously.

Because every extra day of life is not just “time.” It’s a chance to study more Torah and perform more mitzvos and grab priceless, precious opportunities. There was a sofer named R’ Elazar Kempeh, a man who spent his life writing Sifrei Torah, Mezuzos, and Tefillin. Across the course of his life, he wrote fifteen Sifrei Torah. He passed away at the age of 102, and in his final year he was still buying the honor of Chasan Torah during Simchas Torah. He once remarked that he was careful with Shnayim Mikra Ve’Echad Targum, and he attributed his longevity to that consistency.

The detail that shook people most was that he passed away the week of Parshas Shemos, and it was said that he was holding a Sefer Torah and was in the middle of Shnayim Mikra when he passed.

Whether or not we can measure reward in this world, one thing is certain. Chazal promised long life. The Ba’al HaTurim reminded us. And Parshas Shemos tells you: begin again.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Royal Garment: Tzitzit as an Expression of the Israeli Destiny Revivim

The mitzvah of tzitzit particularly expresses faith and the unique destiny of Israel * A garment covers the flaws within a person and thereby grants him honor, but it may be a false honor * The most honorable garment is the fringed tallit, for the four-cornered tallit expresses all the latent powers within the person and within the world * Although there is no obligation to cover the head with the tallit, there is an advantage in doing so, since covering the head expresses submission before God

Faith is Hidden and Must be Revealed

Emunah (faith) is implanted in the heart of every person, for since one possesses a soul, he possesses faith. The more aware he is of that faith, and the more he lives in accordance with it, the more his life is strengthened and blessed, in every area. However, at the first stage, faith is hidden, and until it is fully and richly revealed, a person tends to divert it toward foreign directions of idolatry. As a result, a person becomes enslaved to the bonds of materialism, in all of its conceptions. Therefore, Israel — who are the heart of the nations — were the most enslaved of all, and they were required to perform back-breaking labor for Pharaoh, king of Egypt, with no ability to express the powers latent within them. And while they were sunk in bondage to materiality, God was revealed to them and took them from servitude to redemption, and gave them His Torah and commandments so that they would continue His blessing to all the families of the earth.

Tzitzit Expresses the Divine Revelation that “Peeks Through the Lattice”

The mitzvah of tzitzit, by means of the fringes that are visible outwardly, particularly expresses faith and the unique mission of Israel, as it is stated in the section of tzitzit:

“And you shall see it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and perform them, and you shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes ... so that you shall remember and perform all My commandments, and you shall be holy to your God” (Numbers 15:37–40).

This is what our Sages said:

“Why is its name tzitzit? Because the Omnipresent peered (hitzitz) upon the houses of our forefathers in Egypt.” As it is said (Song of Songs 2:8–9):

“The voice of my beloved—behold, he is coming, leaping over the mountains, skipping over the hills ... behold, he stands behind our wall, looking through the windows, peering through the lattice” (Sifrei, Shelach, sec. 115).

The Need for Clothing Stems from the Sin of Adam

Originally, in the Garden of Eden, a person had no need for clothing, since there was no shame in his nakedness. However, once he was drawn after the desires of the body and sinned, evil entered within him, and consequently, he began to feel shame in his nakedness. As it is said:

“And the man and his wife hid from before the Lord God among the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called to the man and said to him: ‘Where are you?’ And he said: ‘I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid.’ And He said: ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree concerning which I commanded you not to eat from it?’” (Genesis 3:8–11)

As a result of his sin, Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden and required protection from cold, rain, and the sun’s rays. God had compassion upon him, and made garments for him, as it is said:

“And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife tunics of skin, and He clothed them” (ibid. 3:21).

A Garment that Grants Honor — Or Expresses Betrayal

A garment covers the flaws within a person, and thereby grants him honor. However, it is possible that this be false honor, intended to deceive others by hiding evil intentions — and then the garment expresses betrayal (bege-d-bagad), and the mantle becomes me’il (from me’ilah, trespass).

On the other hand, a garment may express a person’s aspiration toward good and beauty, while estranging himself from his negative tendencies and attempting to suppress them; in this way the garment grants him true honor (see Resisei Layla §4).

The Garment of Tzitzit

The most honorable garment is the fringed tallit, for the four-cornered tallit expresses all the powers hidden in the person and in the world, and the tzitzit correspond to the 613 commandments that guide the person how to actualize them. And no tallit is more beautiful than this; as our Sages said:

“One who is careful with tzitzit will merit a beautiful tallit” (Shabbat 23b).

The Kabbalists explained that the tallit hints to the ohr ha-makif (the surrounding light), i.e., the lofty, divine illumination which, because of its loftiness and greatness, a person cannot grasp, but it nevertheless influences him (see Peninei Halakha, Sukkot 1:7). Through its influence, one understands well the ohr ha-penini (the inner light) — the defined ideas of the Torah and its commandments — that the threads of tzitzit express, which are considered a defined inner light.

Our Sages said (Bamidbar Rabbah 17:6; also 18:21; 25:21) that tzitzit hints to the 613 commandments, for the numerical value of the word “tzitzit” is 600, and together with the five knots and eight threads of the fringe, we arrive at 613. (Incidentally, women are more connected to the surrounding light; perhaps this is why they are not obligated in the mitzvah of tzitzit, which expresses the inner light that emerges. In its place, their mitzvah is to wear modest and dignified clothing, which expresses the surrounding light).

Must The Head be Covered With The Tallit Gadol?

Q: Must those who wrap themselves in a tallit gadol cover their heads?

A: Some poskim (Jewish law arbiters) say that the meaning of the word hit’atef (‘wrapping’, the blessing recited before wearing a tallit gadol), is wrapping both the head and the body, and any garment that is worn not in the manner of wrapping, is exempt from tzitzit. Therefore, in their view, our modern tallit katan is exempt from tzitzit. They supported their position from the wording of the blessing: “to wrap oneself in tzitzit” (lehit’atef batzitzit) (Ra’avyah and Or Zarua).

However, in practice, most of the Rishonim wrote that the tallit katan is obligated in tzitzit (Sefer Ha’Itur, Maharam, Orhot Hayyim, Nimukei Yosef, and many others). This is because the mitzvah of tzitzit applies to any garment “with which you cover yourself,” and “every garment and covering is implied — sometimes with the head covered, and sometimes with the head uncovered.” Therefore, one even recites a blessing over a tallit katan in which the head is not wrapped (Mahari”l; Tur and Shulchan Aruch 8:2, 6; and so ruled the later authorities).

Nevertheless, out of consideration for those who hold that the mitzvah is specifically wrapping, and also because the wording of the blessing is “to wrap,” the practice is that after reciting the blessing “lehit’atef batzitzit” on

the tallit gadol, one beautifies the mitzvah by wrapping oneself in the tallit for the time it takes to walk four cubits. That is: one wraps the tallit over the head and the upper part of the body, with all the tzitzit placed over the left shoulder, and stands so for the time it takes to walk four cubits; afterward, one dons the tallit as usual, with two tzitzit in front and two behind (Shulchan Aruch 8:4; Gra s.k. 9; Mishnah Berurah ad loc.). For the tallit katan, the blessing “al mitzvat tzitzit” is recited, since one is not accustomed to wrap oneself in it, but rather to wear it (Rema 8:6; Ben Ish Hai, Bereishit 6; Kaf HaHayyim 8:25, 27).

Is There an Advantage In Covering The Head With The Tallit?

Although there is no obligation to cover the head with the tallit, there is an advantage in doing so, since covering the head expresses submission before God; therefore, there are those who beautify the mitzvah by covering the head with the tallit throughout the entire prayer, and especially during the Amidah (Mishnah Berurah 8:4).

Q: It is uncomfortable for me to cover my head with the tallit gadol during the prayer. Is there a binding custom to cover the head throughout the prayer?

A: There is no binding custom, and therefore, one who finds it uncomfortable is not obligated.

Unmarried Ashkenazim and The Tallit Gadol

Q: According to the custom of Ashkenazim, may an unmarried man wrap himself in a tallit gadol during Shacharit?

A: The custom of unmarried Ashkenazim is to fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit with a tallit katan and not to wrap in a tallit gadol, because the tallit gadol expresses the surrounding light merited by a married person through his wife; by means of marriage, he is considered a complete person, dwelling in joy and peace, whereas the bachelor has not yet attained this (Yevamot 62b; Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei 13).

The early authorities wrote a support for this custom from the juxtaposition of verses (Deuteronomy 22:12–13):

“You shall make fringes on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself. When a man takes a wife...”

(Tashbetz Katan 362; Minhagei Mahari”l, Laws of Marriage 10)

Nevertheless, when bachelors are called up to the Torah or serve as prayer leaders, they wrap in a tallit gadol out of respect for the congregation, but they take care not to cover their heads with it, for this they will merit only after marriage (Mishnah Berurah 8:4). A source for this is what is told in the Talmud (Kiddushin 29b) regarding Rav Hamnuna, who did not cover his head because he was not married.

Changes in Custom

Among Kohanim of Ashkenazi origin, there are those who are accustomed to wrap in a tallit gadol from the time they begin ascending to the platform for the priestly blessing. In recent generations, due to the delay in marriage age, there were communities in Ashkenaz where even bachelors began to wrap in a tallit gadol before their wedding, without covering the head — so as not to postpone for many years the time of wrapping in a tallit gadol during Shacharit. On the other hand, many continue the earlier custom, which also serves as deep encouragement to marry at the proper time and not delay marriage.

It is Forbidden to Wear a Tallit with Invalid Tzitzit

The four tzitzit that one is commanded to place on the four corners of the garment each prevent fulfillment without the others; all four together constitute one mitzvah (Menachot 28a). Therefore, if one of the tzitzit becomes invalid, it is forbidden to wear the garment; and if one did wear it, one has nullified a positive commandment. If one was wearing a tallit and saw that one of the tzitzit tore from the corner of the garment, or its threads tore in such a way that it became invalid, he must remove it immediately, because every moment he keeps it on, he is nullifying a positive commandment (Menachot 37b).

When Does the Tearing of the Threads Invalidate?

If, after the tzitzit were properly tied to the garment, all of the threads extending from the braid were torn, yet a measure of “enough for tying” remained — meaning, a length sufficient to tie together all the torn threads,

approximately four centimeters — the tzitzit is still valid. If one thread was torn down to the braid, it is valid. But if two threads were torn down to the braid, it is invalid, lest those two belong to one original thread, such that from that thread whose two ends were cut, not even the measure of “enough for tying” remains (Shulchan Aruch 12:1–3).

However, if care was taken to tie the threads such that the four threads emerging from one side are always tied opposite the four threads emerging from the other side, then even if all four on one side were torn down to the braid, and on the other side only the measure of “enough for tying” remains — the tzitzit is valid, since from each of the four threads the measure of “enough for tying” remains. If one of the threads was cut at the point where the braid connects to the garment, the tzitzit is invalid, since the cut thread is completely invalidated (Mishnah Berurah 12:13).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

**Leadership and the People
Shemot**

The sedra of Shemot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moses, culminating in the moment at which God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant. I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which God summons Moses to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom — a challenge which, no less than four times, Moses declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else.

It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the Sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations.

The Torah states:

Moses replied: “But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, ‘God did not appear to you.’”

Shemot 4:1

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

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

The third detail is that, whereas Moses’ other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the Sages arrived at the following comment:

Resh Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, Moses replied: But they will not believe me. However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moses: They are believers, the children of believers, but you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the

people believed (Ex. 4:31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Abraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moses] Because you did not believe in Me (Num. 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written, And the Lord said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak' (Ex. 4:6).

Shabbat 97a

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

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

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

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

Maimonides' Epistle is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets who criticised the people of Israel, including the one above about Moses. He then writes:

If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels – because they briefly criticised the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the

least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who criticised the forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of Sages and their disciples, priests and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?

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

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. "Those people of whom you have doubts," said God to Moses, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them."

In Parshas Shemos, the Zohar shares that the Jews in Egypt were punished for saying loshon hora...

May I Dangle the Receiver?

Or

Hearing is Not Believing, and other Loshon Hora Questions.

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: "Two of my neighbors are in a tiff, and I have a good relationship with both of them. Should I get involved to try to make peace, knowing that both sides will tell me their version of the story?"

Question #2: "I was told that someone who believes loshon hora (disparaging things about people) does more harm to himself than does the person who spoke the loshon hora! How can this be?"

Question #3: Leora asked me:

"Some of my contacts are not careful about saying loshon hora. Is it sufficient that I hold the phone at a distance when they begin to tell me things that I do not want to hear?"

I asked Leora if she could think of other options, and she explained, "It is uncomfortable to tell people that they are violating halacha or to ask them not to gossip. I can create an excuse to end the conversation, such as, 'the baby is crying' or some similar emergency. But I would rather not do this unless I must."

Leora's method of being careful to avoid hearing loshon hora, as a halachically observant person must be, is indeed accomplishing its purpose. The question is whether she must do more than this, since the speaker thinks that Leora is still listening. Later, I will explain why this may be problematic, and whether it is sufficient for Leora to simply "dangle the receiver."

INTRODUCTION

We all know that telling or receiving disparaging information about members of Klal Yisrael is a Torah violation. "We are commanded not to accept loshon hora as true and not to look negatively upon the person about whom the story was told" (Shaarei Teshuvah 3:213). We should bear in mind that loshon hora is prohibited even if it is absolutely true.

Exactly what is the prohibition of believing or accepting loshon hora? Before we answer this question, we need to define loshon hora. Two types of derogatory information are included in loshon hora:

I. Loshon hora is information that reflects poorly on someone. For example, relating that someone once violated certain commandments or committed sins disparages his reputation and constitutes loshon hora (Chofetz Chayim 4:1).

II. Another category of loshon hora is relating information that might harm someone, even though it is not at all derogatory (Rambam, Hilchos Dei'os 7:5). For example, although it is not offensive to say that someone is in debt, there are many situations where this information could cause harm. Similarly, informing a person that someone has a wayward aunt is loshon hora, if this might result in disqualifying the person for a shidduch (see Taz, Even Ha'ezer, 50:8).

LOSHON HORA ABOUT A CHILD

There is an interesting halachic difference between these two categories of loshon hora. The first category, relating that someone did something improper, does not apply to the transgressions or faults of a child. Since a

minor's immaturity exempts him from responsibility, it is usually not *loshon hora* to discuss his misdeeds or capers. Therefore, it is permitted to mention that a child did something mischievous, since this action does not reflect negatively on him (see Chofeitz Chayim 8:3 and Be'er Mayim Chayim ad loc.). Some poskim contend that, if the child would be embarrassed by someone reporting what he did, or his activity was not considered age appropriate, then repeating this information is prohibited as *loshon hora* (Shevilei Chayim 8:4; Shu't Lechafeitz Bachayim #29). On the other hand, I once read a psak of Rav Chayim Kanievsky contending that as long as the story is not harmful to the child's interests, there is no *loshon hora* about his antics, since he is not yet required to observe mitzvot.

However, when the information could ultimately prove harmful to the child, one may not share it (Chofeitz Chayim 8:3). For example, if a school might refuse to accept a child based on his family background, it is *loshon hora* to provide the school with this information. Similarly, people smile when told that a young man drew on the wall when he was three years old, but they might assume that he is psychologically unhealthy if they hear that he had violent fits of rage at age 12½.

DEFINING KABBALAS LOSHON HORA

What should you do if you hear a story that reflects badly on someone?

Before I explain what to do in this situation, we should explain the two types of ill-doing involved when receiving derogatory information.

I. Believing (kabbalas) *loshon hora*.

II. Hearing *loshon hora*.

I. BELIEVING LOSHON HORA

The first prohibition against accepting *loshon hora* is that it results in one's now having a less favorable impression of a fellow Jew. I may not accept the report of his having sinned as fact (Zera Chayim pg 361, in explanation of opinion of Yad Ha'ketanah): if I do not accept the veracity of the story, I have not accepted *loshon hora*, and I did not violate kabbalas *loshon hora*.

HEARING JUICY GOSSIP

What do I do if I hear some juicy chitchat?

If you hear some gossip, just refuse to accept that the story is true. Most stories that one hears are distorted, so it should take no great effort to simply deny the story's accuracy.

If you find it difficult to doubt the story completely, re-interpret it in a way that casts the person in a favorable light. For example, perhaps he/she thought that the act committed was halachically acceptable, or perhaps the reported event was misunderstood or only partially observed (see Be'er Mayim Chayim 6:1). For example, if you heard that someone grabbed a child, perhaps he was pulling the child away from danger. If you heard that someone argued with his father, perhaps he was trying to convince him to take needed medication.

REINTERPRETING THE STORY

Here is an example of how to reinterpret a story: Sharon tells you that Michal treated her rudely. You know that Michal is a quiet person; on top of that, perhaps Michal was distracted or under stress and was therefore even less outgoing than usual. Sharon, whom you know is sensitive, may have misinterpreted Michal's lack of enthusiasm as discourtesy. This interpretation of events will add no negative understanding to what you already know firsthand about both of them. The result is that the reinterpreted story does not place either person in a bad light and is therefore not *loshon hora*.

In this example, convincing Sharon that Michal was not being rude would be a big mitzvah.

By the way, one may listen to each side of a dispute relate his/her negative impressions of the disputant in order to calm down the quarrel (Chofeitz Chayim, 6:4). Here, too, one may not accept either story as accurate, but one should, in one's own mind, reinterpret the events so that they do not reflect badly on the parties involved.

For example, you are aware of a situation in which siblings are in a dispute concerning how to allocate resources to care for their elderly mother. While resolving this conflict, your goal is to appreciate the merit of each side's approach and convince the other side that, although they might disagree, no

one bears any ill will. Even if you cannot convince them of this, you should certainly not accept that either side means any wrong, unless you have solid evidence to the contrary (Shabbos 56a; Hagahos Maimoniyos, Dei'os 7:4).

CALMING A FIGHT

Two of your neighbors are in a big tiff. According to Reuven and Rochel, the upstairs kids are totally undisciplined and boisterous, making a racket that ruins Rochel's life. Levi and Leah upstairs, however, have a different story. Their kids are extremely well disciplined and obedient, but Rochel is excessively sensitive to noise and cannot tolerate even the normal sliding of a chair under the dinner table. Since you have a good relationship with both parties and may be able to resolve the squabble, you may listen to each side's complaints about the other, being careful not to believe them. It may, indeed, be true that Rochel is highly sensitive, and it may also be true that Levi and Leah do not control their kids as much as they should. Your job is to make shalom between them, not to accept whichever interpretation of events is true.

One violates the prohibition against accepting *loshon hora* when one's impression of any party is disparaged without adequate evidence. In all the above instances, if one's positive impression of the people involved remains intact, despite all that one heard, one has successfully avoided accepting *loshon hora*. (There are exceptions when one may accept what one heard as true, but these are beyond the scope of this article.)

With this background, we can now answer Question #1 above:

"Two of my neighbors are in a tiff, and I have a good relationship with both of them. Should I get involved to try to make peace, knowing that both sides will tell me their version of the story?" The answer is that you should get involved, but be careful not to accept anyone's account as an accurate portrayal of the misdeeds of his/her neighbor.

II. HEARING LOSHON HORA

Until now, we discussed some basic halachos of accepting *loshon hora*. In addition to the prohibition of believing *loshon hora*, it is also prohibited to hear negative things about someone when there is no need. It is insufficient to simply not believe what one heard; one must avoid hearing it.

WHAT DO I DO IF SOMEONE BEGINS TO GOSSIP?

How far must one go to avoid hearing *loshon hora*?

The Gemara (Kesubos 5b) homilectically interprets a verse as saying, "there should be pegs [i.e., your fingers, which are shaped like pegs] in your ears," meaning, if you sense that someone is about to tell you something inappropriate, you should place your fingers on your ears to avoid hearing it. In other words, one must not only be careful to avoid *loshon hora* but must even do something unusual if that is the only way to avoid hearing it. Thus, if you are among a group of people and one of them begins to say *loshon hora*, you should leave immediately. If you are on the phone, and the other party begins saying *loshon hora*, you should quickly say, "An emergency just came up; I'll have to call you back later," and abruptly hang up. Of course, in this last case, you told the whole truth: an emergency did indeed come up, since the other party began saying *loshon hora*!

What if one is unable to leave and avoid hearing gossip? The Gemara states that one must even place one's hands over one's ears to shun *loshon hora*! Nevertheless, the Chofeitz Chayim (6:5) notes that, although this is the proper thing to do, many people may find it too embarrassing to sit this way and have people mock them. Under these circumstances, the Chofeitz Chayim rules that one should be careful not to believe the stories being told, and be careful not to want to hear them. It is preferable that one demonstrate his disapproval, at least with his facial expression (Chofeitz Chayim, 6:5). Rabbeinu Yonah implies that one should demonstrate to the speaker that he does not want to hear the *loshon hora*. Showing a total lack of interest in the conversation discourages the speaker from saying *loshon hora*.

We can now address Leora's original question: "Some of my contacts are not careful about saying *loshon hora*. Is it sufficient that I hold the receiver at a distance when they begin to tell me things that I do not want to hear?" Leora does not want to listen to the gossip she is being told. The question is: to what extent must she demonstrate that she does not want to hear *loshon hora*? Although dangling the receiver prevents Leora from hearing the

gossip, it does not demonstrate disapproval to the speaker. Whereas listeners who are visible to the speaker can actually show disinterest, the speaker here may think that she has an avid listener; thus, perhaps Leora should put an active end to the conversation. Even though the speaker is not saying *loshon hora* to anyone, as there is no listener, the speaker nevertheless thinks that she is sinning. Someone who thought he was doing something forbidden but ended up doing something permitted needs forgiveness and atonement (Kiddushin 81b; Nazir 23a). The Gemara's example of this is someone who wanted to eat something non-kosher, but inadvertently ate kosher. Even the unsuccessful intent to violate the halacha is itself a Torah prohibition.

As a result, although by dangling the receiver Leora is not hearing *loshon hora*, she has not prevented the person from thinking that *loshon hora* has been spoken, a sin for which she will require atonement. Therefore I told Leora that it would be better to terminate the conversation by saying, for example, "Something just came up, I'll call you back later!" This prevents the talker from violating any prohibition.

WHO IS WORSE?

After what we have discussed so far, we return to our second question: "I was told that someone who believes *loshon hora* (disparaging things about people) does more harm to himself than does the person who spoke the *loshon hora*! How can this be?"

Indeed, this is a quote from the Rambam (Hilchos Dei'os 7:3) who writes that one who believes *loshon hora* inflicts more self-harm than the speaker! Why should this be?

The reason is that the basic purpose of forbidding *loshon hora* is to avoid harming a Jew's reputation. Who is the greater maligner, one who spreads information that he knows to be true, or one who believes an unsubstantiated story? The one who accepts an unsubstantiated report denigrates *kedushas Yisrael* to a greater degree (see *Nesiv Chayim* 6:3).

Rav Chayim Pinchas Scheinberg zt"l noted that when people say the *pasuk*, *mi ha'ish he'chafeitz chayim oheiv yamim lir'os tov*, "Who is the man who wants life, loves his days to see only good," they often pay little attention to the concluding words, *lir'os tov*, "to see good," even though these words are the key to success in this mitzvah. If you view everyone with a good eye, you will be unable to believe derogatory information about them. As Rav Pam zt"l once said, "My mother was incapable of saying or accepting *loshon hora*; not simply because of her *yiras shamayim*, but because of her appreciation of what Jews are!" May we all reach the level of seeing the good and really appreciating our fellow Jews!

When Football Meets Faith: Does God Really Care Who Wins? By Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

On Sunday night in Pittsburgh, the Baltimore Ravens and Pittsburgh Steelers' seasons came down to one kick. Tyler Loop, the Ravens' rookie kicker who had not missed a single field goal under 50 yards all year, lined up for a 44-yard attempt that would decide the game and, by extension, the winner of the AFC North. The snap was perfect, the hold was clean, the ball had the distance. And then, before a stunned stadium and a national audience, it drifted wide. The Steelers won and are going to the playoffs, while Baltimore's season ended abruptly and stunningly.

The moment went viral not only because of the drama, but because earlier that evening a priest had walked the field and sprinkled "holy water" in one of the end zones. Hours later, it was that very end zone toward which the Ravens were kicking. Asked about it after the game, Steelers captain Cam Heyward smiled and said he wouldn't ask too many questions but said, "The good Lord made a good decision that night."

I don't follow football and didn't even know about the game until someone sent me the article about the "blessed" end zone and asked the real question behind the headline: Are Jews really meant to believe Hashem intervenes in a football game? But this isn't a sports question. It's a life question. Is anything too small for Hashem? Is a moment, a decision, a gust of wind beneath His notice or providence?

Though there is nuance, and there are different approaches, the short answer is that as Torah people of faith, we are meant to live with the belief that

Hashem is involved in everything. Dovid HaMelech wrote (and we sing in Hallel), *ha'mashpili lir'os ba'shomayim u'va'aretz*, He lowers Himself to see in the heavens and on the earth. Chazal understand that nothing is too lofty for Him and nothing is too small. The same God Who guides the fate of nations is attentive to the details of a single life. The same God Who orchestrates history also arranges the gust of wind that pushes a football a degree to the right. There is no realm of existence in which He is absent, no moment in which He is not present.

So does Hashem care who wins? In the sense that He is involved in and dictates everything that unfolds in His world, yes. But not in the simplistic way we imagine. Hashem was not only listening to the tefillos of Steelers fans. He was also speaking to the Ravens, to their coaches, and especially to the young kicker who missed for the first time from that distance. God was present not only in the celebration, but in the heartbreak.

We control our effort. Hashem controls the result. That is countercultural, but it is Torah. From our perspective, a capable kicker missed in a pressure moment. From the perspective of *emunah*, Hashem decreed that at that exact second, in those exact conditions, the ball would not pass through the uprights. For one side, that miss felt like a divine yes. For the other, a painful no. Yet both were within His plan.

Judaism insists that Hashem is as present in the miss as in the make. In the disappointment as in the triumph. The question this game invites is not whether God was in the stadium, it is whether we are listening to what He might be telling us through the moment.

Failure does not have to be a verdict. It can be an invitation. A chance to grow, to soften, to deepen. Sometimes Hashem uses a public disappointment to remind a person that he is more than his statistics.

This truth is beautifully symbolized in a custom many barely meaningfully think about or attach spiritual significance to. At a Bar Mitzvah or an *Aufbruch* we throw candies at the boy or the chassan. As Rav Schorr explains, these are moments of transition and growth. Life will soon begin throwing things at them. They will feel struck, pelted. But the things being thrown are candies. They hurt, but inside is sweetness. Inside the challenge is a gift, if one has the courage to pick it up and unwrap it.

The missed kick in Pittsburgh is one of those candies. Most of us will never stand in a stadium with millions watching, but all of us stand in our own decisive moments: a diagnosis, an interview, a *shidduch*, an application. We prepare, we daven, we give our all. Then the answer comes. Sometimes it is the yes we prayed for. Sometimes it is the no we feared.

When it is yes, we must remember Who decided it. When it is no, we must remember the candy, the possibility of hidden sweetness.

The "holy water" on the field made for a good headline. But the deeper story is not about a priest or an AFC North title. It is about *ha'Mashpili lir'os ba'Shamayim u'va'Aretz*, about a God Who lowers Himself to be present in every end zone and every human heart.

Because the real game is not played on the field at all. It is played inside the *neshamah* of each of us.
