

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog - VAEIRA

Moshe had complained to God that since the Lord had sent him on a mission to the Pharaoh, the situation of the Jewish people had not only not improved but in fact had worsened. Moshe's view of the matter was that somehow the Lord had not fulfilled the Divine part of the bargain. This opinion was based on Moshe's human logic and understanding, which, even though Moshe was on such a high level, was still only a human response.

He is described later in Scripture as being "slightly less than Divine" and that "slightly" is the difference between the created and the Creator. No matter how long our life span may be, we all realize that there are limits. Therefore we view time and schedules in a compressed, immediate and demanding manner. The one human trait that is perhaps most common with all of us is the lack of patience.

When personal computers first appeared on the market only a few decades ago, we thought it miraculous that in 30 seconds we could be connected to the whole world. Today any computer that takes 30 seconds to reach the Internet is absolutely obsolete, unmarketable and assigned either to the trash or to a computer museum.

The governing word in human society is "now." Only things and ideas that are "now" are to be treasured and respected. However, the Lord of history is not bound by our standards. Here Moshe is taught a basic lesson, that God's promises are always fulfilled but on the basis of Divine and not human scheduling and time.

Later, when Moshe glimpses Divinity and is taught the 13 attributes of God, so to speak, one of these attributes is inordinate patience. It is one of the supreme traits of the Divine that we are privileged to witness. And, it is not within the purview of our own life spans, at least not within the serious study of human and Jewish history. It is our human impatience that causes our lack of faith and belief in the fulfillment of prophecy and Godly promises.

A famous English statesman once stated that "the wheels of history grind exceedingly slow but they grind exceedingly fine." Generations upon generations of Jews longed to see the events that we are now experience and even take for granted. The state of Israel and the strength of Torah life in our time after one of the worst tragedies in the history of the Jewish people, are events that are historically breathtaking and nothing short of miraculous.

Yet we are impatient for more and for quicker developments. We are hard-pressed to take a long-term view of life and history. But we should take to heart the Lord's response to Moshe that patience is a Godly virtue meant to be emulated by humans. History is a process and so is Jewish history and Jewish life. There was a famous phrase in Yiddish that a workman should never show a lame man a job that is still in progress. Well, our job is still in progress and snap judgments on its accomplishments should be held in abeyance.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

**Parshat Vaera (Exodus 6:2-9:35)
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

Efrat, Israel — "These are Aaron and Moses, whom God has said are to take out the People of Israel from the land of Egypt...they are Moses and Aaron" [Ex. 6:26-27].

By virtue of an acclaimed Broadway production of recent vintage, many have come to a renewed appreciation of the fascinating story of an American "Founding Father." His roller coaster life, punctuated by the key role he played in the shaping of the great experiment called American democracy, inspired the opening words of "Hamilton": "How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by Providence, impoverished, in squalor, grow up to be a hero and a scholar?"

This triumphant question speaks to our delightful wonderment when "underdogs" succeed in the face of tremendous challenges and adversity. It reminds us that greatness is not reserved for the privileged few with "good yichus", but rather is available to anyone willing to make the effort necessary to attain it. It is in this context that we can perhaps best appreciate the Torah's curious presentation of Moses in this week's Torah reading, Va'era.

Curiously, the Torah withholds information about the lineage of Moses until well into his life and career. Why wait? We would have expected to learn of Moses' "yichus" at the time of his birth. Instead, we are merely told at the time that "a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi, and the woman conceived and bore a son..." (ibid., 2:1-2). This anonymous entry to the world is hardly the introduction we would expect for the most consequential figure in Jewish history.

Only later, in Parshat Va'era, is a more detailed genealogical account finally given, beginning with the tribe of Reuben, first-born to Jacob [ibid., 6:14], and culminating with the birth of Moses from the tribe of Levi: "And Amram married Yocheved...and she bore him Aaron and Moses" [ibid., v. 20]. Why do learn of this lineage at this time, rather than at the time of Moses' birth?

To arrive at an answer, let us examine an important juxtaposition of passages earlier in Exodus: God instructs Moses to declare to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, 'My first-born son is Israel. And I say to you, send out my son so that he may serve Me, and if you refuse to send him out, I shall kill your firstborn son!'" [ibid., 4:22-23].

Then, in the very next two verses, we read of an almost unfathomable incident: "And it happened on the road to the inn, and God met him desiring to slay him. And Tziporah [Moses' wife] took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, causing it to touch his feet. And she said, 'You are a bridegroom of blood for me!', and He released him; then she said, 'A bridegroom of blood for circumcision!'" [ibid., v. 24-26].

The common thread connecting these two passages is the serious consequence stemming from failure to comply with God's commands. If Pharaoh refuses to free God's "first-born son" (Israel), then Pharaoh's first-born son, and the first-born sons of all Egyptians, would be slain as a measure-for-measure punishment. Similarly – and ironically – Moses faces a similar punishment for his failure to circumcise his son.

Why is the Torah discussing God killing of the son of the man who attained a nearness to God unmatched by anyone before or since?! The lesson is striking: if Moses – the chosen of God to lead His first-born Israel – is lax in circumcising his son, a crucial religious obligation of initiating one's progeny into Jewish fate and destiny – then even Moses stands to be punished by God! By extension, the People of Israel will retain its elevated status only if it deserves to retain it, by keeping up to its national and religious ideals.

This dovetails with the Torah's adamant opposition to primogeniture. As we find throughout Genesis, there is nothing inherently superior about first-born status. Rather, it is achievement in life rather than birth order;

merit and morality rather than biology, which are of paramount importance. This explains the significance of the Torah's switching of the order of the brothers' names: "These are Aaron and Moses, whom God has said are to take the People of Israel from the land of Egypt...they are Moses and Aaron" [ibid., v. 26-27]. Even the elder brother, Aaron, must play second fiddle to the younger and more worthy Moses.

The success of the underdog has always, and will always, stir within us feelings of hope that we, too, can achieve great things in life. After all, if a penniless orphan from an island in the Caribbean can become one of the most important figures in American history, and a founding Hebrew child born to nameless parents doomed for Egyptian slavery can grow to adulthood as one of the greatest liberators in world history, every single one of us can make it big despite our lack of pedigree or lack of aristocratic standing.
Shabbat Shalom

Rav Shlomo Aviner

Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here's a sample:

Blessing from Groom and Bride

Q: Is there a custom for the groom and bride to bless everyone before or after the Chupah?

A: No.

Where was Hashem during the Holocaust

Q: If there is a G-d, how did He allow the Holocaust?

A: This is not a question for a text message. It is disrespectful of Hashem and of the Holocaust. In any case, there are questions which we are unable to answer (See at length Ha-Rav's book "Orot Mei-Ofel).

Borrowing Book from Shul

Q: Is it permissible to borrow a book from Shul when the Gabbai opposes it?

A: The answer is in the question.

Parental Presents for Wedding

Q: According to the Halachah, how much are parents obligated to give their children when they get married?

A: Nothing.

Q: And what is appropriate?

A: According to the couple's need and the parents' ability.

Preparing to Visit the Kotel

Q: How does one prepare to visit the Kotel?

A: By learning Mesilat Yesharim.

Middle of the Geula

Q: Rabbenu Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah said that during his time we were already in the middle of the Geula. Why then does Ha-Rav say that we are at the beginning of the Geula?

A: There is no difference. The expression "Atchalta De-Geula" (Beginning of the Geula) is used by our Sages in the Gemara Megilah (17b). There is no expression "Emtza'ita De-Geula" (Middle of the Redemption) amongst our Sages, although it is obvious that between the beginning and end of the Redemption and there is a middle. As long as the Redemption is not yet complete, it is referred to as "the beginning". See also Gemara in Berachot 4b. The "Middle of the Redemption" describes where we stand, i.e. Baruch Hashem, we are in the process. Our Rabbis began using this expression 150 years ago with the establishment of the first communities of Petach Tikvah and Rishon Le-Tzion, and since then we have progressed greatly. Some Rabbis say that the beginning of the Redemption was 500 years ago with the Aliyah of

Rabbi Yosef Karo and many others to Tzefat. How much we have progressed since then! We just need to open our eyes to see how far we have come.

Mezuzah as a Segulah

Q: Should one walk around with a Mezuzah as a Segulah for protection?

A: He should walk around with Tzitzit as a Segulah for protection against transgressions (Rambam, Hilchot 6:13).

Informing Others on a Terrorist Attack on Shabbat

Q: I volunteer for MADA. If, G-d forbid, there is a terrorist attack in a nearby Yishuv, and I travel there and know what occurred, is it permissible to me to tell others in my Yishuv if they ask me?

A: It is forbidden. On Shabbat, one should not relate things which will cause distress (Shemirat Shabbat Ke-Hilchata, p. 340 #56. And Ha-Rav Shlomo Perel, MADA volunteer in Yishuv Neriya, told me that many Rabbis have told him the same thing).

Terrorist Attack During Shabbat Dinner

Q: How is it possible that a terrorist attack occurred during Shabbat dinner, when the Gemara states, "Harm will not befall one on the way to perform a Mitzvah" (Pesachim 8b)?

A: The Gemara explains that this is said in regard to an infrequent danger. When there is a not wholly uncommon occurrence, like a terrorist attack, there is a chance that one may be harmed. The same question also applies to soldiers of Tzahal who are killed or wounded despite the fact that they are a fulfilling the Mitzvah of protecting Am Yisrael, protecting Eretz Yisrael and sanctifying Hashem's Name. May Hashem provide consolation.

Adopting a Convert

Q: It was suggested to our family that we adopt a young woman who is in the process of converting. It is worthwhile?

A: It is a great Mitzvah to love the convert, on condition that the conversion is a real acceptance of the Mitzvot.

Ha-Gomel for Underwater Tunnel

Q: If one travels on a train or in a car in an underwater tunnel, should he recite the blessing of Ha-Gomel, as one who travels by boat?

A: Some require it, but the basic halachah is that one does not recite it, since it is similar to driving on a regular, safe road (Sefer Meit Netivim - Kuntres Be'er Miriam #4).

Va'eira: Priceless Jewels on Tattered Clothes Rav Kook Torah

Every year at the Passover seder, we read Ezekiel's allegorical description of the Israelites in Egypt:

"You grew big and tall. You came with great adornments and were beautiful of form, with flowing hair. But you were naked and bare." (Ezekiel 16:7)

The prophet describes the Israelites as being large and numerous, yet, at the same time, impoverished and barren. Physically, Jacob's family of seventy souls had developed into a large nation. Despite Egyptian persecution and oppression, they had become numerous. Morally and spiritually, however, they were "naked and bare."

What about the "great adornments" that the verse mentions? What were these "jewels" of Israel?

Two Special Jewels

These "jewels" symbolize two special traits of the Jewish people. The first trait is a natural propensity for spirituality, an inner desire never to be separated from God and holiness.

The second "jewel" is an even greater gift, beyond the natural realm. It is the unique communal spirit of Israel that aspires to a lofty national destiny. Even in their dispirited state as downtrodden slaves in Egypt, their inner drive for national purpose burned like a glowing coal. It

smoldered in the heart of each individual, even if many did not understand its true nature.

For the Hebrew slaves, however, these special qualities were like priceless diamonds pinned on the threadbare rags of an unkempt beggar. The people lacked the basic traits of decency and integrity. They were missing those ethical qualities that are close to human nature, like clothes that are worn next to the body.

Without a fundamental level of morality and proper conduct, their unique yearnings for spiritual greatness had the sardonic effect of extravagant jewelry pinned to tattered clothes. “You came with great adornments... but you were naked and bare.”

(Silver from the Land of Israel (now available in paperback). Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. II, p. 276)

Freewill: Use It or Lose It Vaera 5778

In parshat Va'era we read for the first time, not of Pharaoh hardening his heart but of God doing so: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart,” said God to Moses, “and multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 7:3). And so indeed we find in the sixth plague, boils (Ex. 9:12), the eighth, locusts (Ex. 10:1, 20), and the tenth, the firstborn (Ex. 11:10). In each case the hardening is attributed to God.

Hence the problem that troubled the sages and later commentators: if God was the cause and Pharaoh merely His passive vehicle, what was his sin? He had no choice, therefore no responsibility, therefore no culpability. The commentators give a broad range of answers. One: Pharaoh’s loss of freewill during the last five plagues was a punishment for his obstinacy in the first five, where he acted freely.[1] Two: the relevant verb, *ch-z-k*, does not mean “to harden” but “to strengthen.” God was not taking away Pharaoh’s freewill but, to the contrary, preserving it in the face of the overwhelming disasters that were hitting Egypt.[2] Three: God is a partner in all human action, but we only usually attribute an act to God if it seems inexplicable in ordinary human terms. Pharaoh acted freely throughout, but it was only during the last five plagues that his behaviour was so strange that it was attributed to God.[3]

Note how reluctant the commentators were to take the text at face value – rightly so because freewill is one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism. Maimonides explains why: If we had no free will there would be, he says, no point to the commands and prohibitions, since we would behave as we were predestined to, regardless of what the law is. Nor would there be any justice in reward or punishment since neither the righteous nor the wrongdoer is free to be other than what they are.[4]

So the problem is an ancient one.[5] But it has become much more salient in modern times because of the sheer accumulation of challenges to the belief in human freedom. Marx said history is formed by the play of economic forces. Freud argued that we are what we are because of unconscious drives. Neo-Darwinians say that however we rationalise our behaviour, we do what we do because people who behaved this way in the past survived to hand on their genes to future generations. Most recently, neuroscientists have shown, using fMRI scans, that in some cases our brain registers a decision up to seven seconds before we are consciously aware of it.[6]

All of this is interesting and important, but contemporary secularists usually fail to see what the ancient sages knew: that if we genuinely lack freewill, our entire sense of what it is to be human will crumble into dust. There is a glaring contradiction at the heart of our culture. On the one hand, secularists believe that nothing should constrain our freedom to choose to do whatever we want to do, or be whatever we want to be, so long as we do not harm others. Their supreme value is autonomous choice. On the other hand, secularists tell us that human freedom does

not exist. Why then should we invoke freedom-to-choose as a value if it is, according to science, an illusion?

If hard determinism is true, there is no reason to honour liberty or create a free society. To the contrary: we should embrace Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, where children are conceived and hatched in laboratories, and adults programmed to stay happy by a regime of drugs and pleasure. We should implement the scenario of Anthony Burgess’s The Clockwork Orange, in which criminals are reformed by brain surgery or conditioning. If freedom does not exist, why be bothered by the addictive nature of computer games and social media? Why prefer genuine reality to virtual reality? It was Nietzsche who rightly observed that the greater our scientific achievements, the lower our view of the human person. No longer the image of God, we have become mere incarnated algorithms.

The truth is that the more we understand about the human brain, the better able we are to describe what free action really is. At present, scientists distinguish between the amygdala, the most primitive part of the brain, conditioned to sensitise us to potential danger; the limbic system, sometimes called the “social brain,” which is responsible for much of our emotional life; and the prefrontal cortex, which is analytical and capable of dispassionately weighing the consequences of alternative choices.[7] The tensions between these three form the arena within which personal freedom is won or lost.

Patterns of behaviour are shaped by neural pathways connecting different parts of the brain, but not all of them are good for us. So, for instance, we might turn to drugs or binge eating or thrill-seeking to distract us from some of the unhappy chemicals – fears and anxieties, for instance – that are also part of the architecture of the brain. The more often we do so, the more myelin gets wrapped around the pathway, and the more rapid and instinctive the behaviour. So the more often we behave in certain ways, the harder it is to break the habit and create a new and different pathway. To do so requires the acquisition of new habits, acted on consistently for an extended period of time. Current scientific thinking suggests that a minimum of 66 days is needed to form a new habit.[8]

So we now have a scientific way of explaining the hardening taking place in Pharaoh’s heart. Having established a pattern of response to the first five plagues, he would find it progressively more difficult at every level – neuro-scientifically, psychologically and politically – to change. The same is true of every bad habit and political decision. Almost all our structures, mental and social, tend to reinforce previous patterns of behaviour. So our freedom diminishes every time we fail to exercise it.

If so, then today’s parsha and contemporary science tell the same story: that freedom is not a given, nor is it an absolute. We have to work for it. We acquire it slowly in stages, and we can lose it, as Pharaoh lost his, and as drug addicts, workaholics, and people addicted to computer games lose theirs. In one of the most famous opening lines in all literature, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, at the beginning of The Social Contract, that “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.” In fact, the opposite is true. Our early character is determined partly by DNA – the genetic heritage of our parents and theirs – partly by our home and upbringing, partly by our friends[9], and partly by the surrounding culture. We are not born free. We have to work hard to achieve freedom.

That takes rituals, whose repeated performance creates new neural pathways and new rapid-response behaviour. It requires a certain calibrated distance from the surrounding culture, if we are not to be swept away by social fads and fashions that seem liberating now but destructive in retrospect. It needs a mental mindset that pauses before any significant action and asks, “Should I do this? May I do this? What rules of conduct should I bring to bear?” It involves an internalised

narrative of identity, so that we can ask of any course of action, "Is this who I am and what I stand for?"

It is no accident that the elements listed in the previous paragraph are all prominent features of Judaism, which turns out to be an ongoing seminar in willpower and impulse control. Now that we are beginning to understand the plasticity of the brain, we know at least a little of the neuroscience that lies behind the ability to overcome bad habits and addictions. Keeping Shabbat, for example, has the power to liberate us and our children from smartphone addiction and all that goes with it. The religion whose first festival, Pesach, celebrates collective freedom, gives us, in its rituals, the skills we need for personal freedom.

Freedom is less a gift than an achievement. Even a Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the ancient world, could lose it. Even a nation of slaves could, with the help of God, acquire it. Never take freedom for granted. It needs a hundred small acts of self-control daily, which is what halakhah, Jewish law, is all about.

Freedom is a muscle that needs to be exercised: use it or lose it. That is a life-transforming idea.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Insights Parshas Va'eira

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim / Talmudic University

Parshas Va'eira - Tevet 5778

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Yentel Bas Avrohom. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

Close to You

And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be your God... (6:7)

This week's parsha opens with Hashem discussing with Moshe His plans for rescuing Bnei Yisroel from Egypt. Herein we find the well-known "arba leshonos shel geula - four iterations of salvation," i.e. four different words describing the process of Hashem taking Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt. The fourth word that the Torah uses is "velokachti" - generally translated as "I will take."

Yet, both Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonasan Ben Uziel translate the word "velokachti" as "ve'eskov" from the language of "kiruv" as in "I will draw near." This is odd; in general there are two Aramaic translations for taking: "ud'var," which is used when referring to taking people (see Bereishis 12:5 when Avraham took his wife Sarah), and "u'nesiv," which is used when referring to taking inanimate objects (see Bereishis 28:18 when Yaakov takes the rock and places it under his head). So why did both Targumim deviate from the usual translation of the word "to take" in this particular instance?

We find another place where the Torah uses the word "to take" and both Targumim translate it as "ve'eskov": When Hashem asks Moshe "to take" ("kach") Aharon and his children (Vayikra 8:2). Here too both Targumim translate the word "to take" as "karev - to draw near." In fact, when the Torah itself describes what Moshe did it says, "vayakrev Moshe es Aharon ve'es bonov - and Moshe drew near Aharon and his sons." Why does the Torah describe this "taking" in such a manner?

Moshe is asking Aharon and his children to take a position of responsibility within the Jewish people. This kind of responsibility has to be accepted as a matter of free will. The way to get someone to accept it is to draw them close and allow them to make their own decision. Ask any professional involved in "kiruv" and they'll tell you that the only effective manner of drawing someone near to Judaism is to be "mekarev - to bring them close," meaning to allow them to make their own decision to continue forward.

Chazal teach us that this fourth language of salvation ("velokachti") refers to Bnei Yisroel receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai (See Sforno

and Ibn Ezra ad loc). Thus, standing at Mount Sinai Hashem draws us near, but we must choose to move forward and accept the Torah. It is quite significant that the very act of accepting the Torah has to be done as an act of free will.

Maharal in the introduction to his work Tiferes Yisroel explains that this is the meaning of the verse "and this is the Torah that Moshe placed in front of Bnei Yisroel" (Devarim 4:24). We weren't forced to take the Torah, it was placed in front of us and we chose to come and take it. In other words, when you're trying to get someone to develop in a certain area you cannot force them to change, they need to choose to want to change and take positive steps in that direction.

Accepting the Torah as a way of life wasn't about getting Bnei Yisroel to act a certain way; it was about getting them to develop in a certain direction. This kind of "buy-in to the program" only happens if one completely accepts it of his or her own free will.

This is perhaps the most enduring message for both parents and educators; all too often we spend the majority of our efforts focusing on teaching our children and students how to act. This of course is the wrong approach to chinuch. We must focus on exposing our children and talmidim to the beauty and brilliance of the Jewish way of life. This in turn will cause them to be inspired and choose to lead a meaningful life of Torah and mitzvos. Only by guiding our children to choose properly for themselves can we ensure an enduring impact on the next generation.

In tribute to the tenth Yahrzeit of Binyamin (Barry) Ross OBM, and as continuing Zechus for R' Binyomin Yitzchak Ben Meir ZL, the Ross family is sponsoring a free class every week for the entire year.

In The Presence Of The King

And Moshe said to him, as soon as I am gone from the city, I will spread out my hands to Hashem... (9:29)

Towards the end of this week's parsha, the Torah recounts the events surrounding the seventh plague - the plague of hail. After being bombarded with the miraculous form of hail (the Torah tells us that the hail was a deadly combination of fire and ice, see 9:24 and Rashi ad loc), Pharaoh summons Moshe and begs him to daven to Hashem to remove the plague. Moshe informs him that he will leave the city and beseech Hashem to remove the plague.

Rashi (ad loc) explains that Moshe had to leave the city because it was full of idols. Presumably this means that Moshe wasn't permitted to daven in a city so rife with idols and idol worship. Ramban wonders why Moshe chose this time to go outside the city when previously he didn't feel compelled to leave to communicate with Hashem. Ramban answers that on prior occasions Moshe davened in his house, but this time he wanted to spread his hands towards the heavens and doing that in the city would be inappropriate.

There are several issues with this understanding of why Moshe chose this particular time to leave the city. First of all, the Torah doesn't say anything about spreading his hands towards the heavens. Second, the Gemara frowns strongly on someone who prays in an open area (Brachos 34b, see also Tur and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 90:5). If Moshe could have davened quietly in the privacy of his home, why did he venture out of the city?

There are different types of davening to Hashem. There are many prayers that are, for lack of a better term, like placing a phone call to Hashem. In other words, we reach out to Hashem in many different circumstances and for a variety of reasons. Many tefillos beseech Hashem for different needs, such as asking Hashem to heal a relative, and one can do these kinds of tefillos even while laying down in bed or while riding a bike. The same goes for all of the general things we wish to communicate with Hashem.

However, there is another kind of prayer, that of standing in Hashem's presence. This is typified by the shemoneh esrei. There are very specific rules about how a person must conduct himself in the presence of the King. Shemoneh esrei isn't like a phone call to Hashem, rather it's like standing directly in front of Him.

Moshe told Pharaoh that he needed to spread his palms toward Hashem. Holding up your hands with your palms open facing someone is an indication of surrender. One can only surrender to another in their presence, thus this prayer required the presence of Hashem. This is the first time that Moshe wanted to daven in this manner. Moshe was actually bringing the presence of Hashem down, and it would have been inappropriate to have the presence of Hashem in a city filled with idols. Therefore, Moshe had to leave the city.

Did You Know...

In this week's parsha, the Torah recounts the first seven of the ten makkos. These plagues were truly a measure for measure retribution for all the horrible things that the Egyptians did to Bnei Yisroel, and wrought great devastation on both the land of Egypt and its inhabitants. Though we know what happened because we have our holy and perfect Torah, we thought it would be interesting to see if we could find corroborating evidence from ancient Egypt as well.

First, we must understand that the world of archaeology, like many inexact sciences, is somewhat convoluted with "facts" often disputed, even among the leading minds in the field. So, while there isn't any substantial evidence for the plagues being in the year 1312 BCE (2448 in the Jewish calendar - the year we left Egypt), this could easily be due to a miscalculation in Egyptian history. There are experts who actually claim this very argument (that our version of history is far more reliable) and propose that the Egyptian timeline should be moved up quite a bit, by around 400 years. While this might seem strange, it is well-known that Egyptian history is famously unreliable and likely differs greatly from what we currently know (Gardiner, Alan. *Egypt of the Pharaohs*. Oxford University Press, London, UK, 1964. p.53).

However, if we look at the readjusted time frame, suddenly many details surrounding this time period start to make sense. The Pharaohs seem to fit in better with the Torah's accounting, and Egypt's position as a world power makes more sense. Moreover, we even have physical evidence from this time period. For example, in the British museum in London, there is a royal staff from this period in the form of a snake, and it's entirely possible that using this type of "snake staff" is related to the story of Moshe and the magicians of Pharaoh (Shemos 7:11).

But perhaps the most clear piece of evidence is the "Admonitions of Ipuwer" (Papyrus Leiden 334), an ancient Egyptian papyrus from the same time period. The papyrus contains a poem about tragedies that befell Egypt at the time, and certain details in the poem sound remarkably similar to the ten plagues: "Plague is throughout the land. Blood is everywhere [...] The river is blood [...] Gates, columns and walls are consumed by fire [...] Cattle moan [...] The land is not light." These tragedies seem eerily similar to the Torah's account and lead us to wonder if this is indeed a historical reference to the ten plagues. Of course, if it is this obvious, why hasn't the world paid attention? The answer is that while many leading archaeologists will not accept a poem as historical evidence (a literary work that may be fiction or exaggerated for dramatic effect), there are other scholars who simply refuse to give credence to anything that might indicate that the Torah is actually historically accurate. Nonetheless, we found it interesting.

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Chumash and the Fall of the Ghetto By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

This article is for the occasion of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's yahrzeit.

With the falling of the ghetto walls that had kept the Jews in central Europe isolated from the world around them, many Jews began to assimilate into the surrounding environment and distance themselves from Judaism. Although it was far more difficult for Jews in Eastern Europe to assimilate fully into non-Jewish society, different forces, the

haskalah, socialism, Communism and various other movements similarly severed many Jews from keeping mitzvos. Among those who abandoned Torah observance were Jews who felt that Chazal's interpretation of the mitzvos was not based on the Written Torah.

In response, several new and original commentaries on Chumash appeared. Among them, we find Hakesav Vehakabalah, by Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, the commentaries[i] of the Malbim to Tanach, the commentary of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, and the Ha'ameik Davar, the commentary of Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (also known as the Netziv). All four of these commentaries, although very different from each other in important ways, were written to explain the Written Torah in the spirit of Chazal.

Hakesav Vehakabalah

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg was a disciple of Rabbi Akiva Eiger and served as the rav of Koenigsberg, Prussia (today, Kaliningrad, Russia), for thirty-four years. Koenigsberg was in the far east of Germany, giving Rav Mecklenburg a clear view of the challenges posed by the rise of the Reform movement in Germany and the haskalah and other anti-religious movements in Eastern Europe. Hakesav Vehakabalah, first published in 1839 and followed by three more editions in the author's lifetime, was intended as a response to attacks on Chazal's understanding of the Torah.

Hakesav Vehakabalah carefully analyzes the root meanings and grammar of the words of the Chumash, using them to provide a clear interpretation of the pesukim. Although his approach is highly original, he also often cites the different approaches of the earlier commentaries, opting for the one that he demonstrates to be the most accurate.

The Malbim

Rav Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, known by his acronym, Malbim, served as the rav of many different Eastern European communities. A brilliant talmid chacham and a warrior against the haskalah, his magnum opus is his commentary to Tanach and accompanying essays. [ii] His first work, a commentary on Yeshayah, includes an introduction in which he elucidates the principles that form the basis for his commentary to Tanach as a whole.

Two such principles are that no two words in Tanachic Hebrew have precisely the same meaning, and that there are no repeated phrases or clauses -- each word in Tanach was chosen to provide a very specific nuance of meaning.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch held rabbinic positions in Oldenberg and Emden, Germany, and as Chief Rabbi of Moravia, before returning to Germany to establish a modern, Torah-committed community in Frankfurt. Toward the end of his life, he produced his commentaries to the Chumash, Tehillim and the Siddur.

The Netziv

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin married the daughter of Rav Yitzchak of Volozhin, the son and successor of the founder and Rosh Yeshivah of the famed yeshivah in that city, Rav Chayim of Volozhin, the esteemed disciple of the Vilna Gaon. The Netziv eventually became Rosh Yeshivah of the yeshivah in Volozhin, a position he held for almost forty years, until its closing in 1892. The Netziv authored many works, including responsa and commentaries on Chumash, Shas, the She'iltos of Rav Achai Gaon, the halachic midrashim.

Linking Torah shebiksav to Torah shebe'al peh

Both Hakesav Vehakabalah and Malbim write that a major purpose of their commentaries is to demonstrate the unity of Torah shebiksav and Torah shebe'al peh. In the introduction to the first volume of commentary he wrote on Chumash, Vayikra, the Malbim mentions specifically the tragedy of the Reform convention that had taken place in 1844 in Braunschweig (called Brunswick in English), a city in Germany about 40 miles southeast of Hanover. The Malbim writes that when he

heard of the disgraceful attitude toward Torah that had been demonstrated there, he realized that klal Yisroel required a new commentary on Tanach, written according to the mesorah. He notes many rules that he will be following in his commentaries, one of which is to show the unity of Torah shebiksav and Torah shebe'al peh.

Although Rav Hirsch's very brief introduction to his commentary does not emphasize this relationship between Torah shebiksav and Torah shebe'al peh, this foundation shows up literally hundreds of times in his commentary.[iii] Rav Hirsch, too, maintained that proper study of Torah shebiksav leads directly to the conclusions of Torah shebe'al peh. Among examples where he demonstrates this are when he explains that Chazal's understanding of "an eye for an eye" as financial remuneration (Shemos 21:24) is indeed the only proper way to understand the pasuk, and that no halachic requirement exists to name the firstborn child of a levirate marriage (yibum) for the deceased brother (see Devorim 25:6).

Rav Hirsch noted that the Torah shebe'al peh was actually taught to the Jews first.[iv] Moshe received all the laws of Torah shebe'al peh at Har Sinai and taught them to the Jewish people gradually. The completed Torah shebiksav, by contrast, was not received by the Jews until the very end of Moshe's life, immediately prior to the Jews' entering Eretz Yisroel, or forty years after they had received the Torah shebe'al peh. This explains numerous passages in the Torah, including the commandment to slaughter animals ka'asher tzivisicha "as you were instructed," meaning the sets of regulations that had been transmitted to Moshe at Har Sinai and previously taught to the Bnei Yisroel.

Uniqueness of Rav Hirsch's commentary

The most obvious difference between Rav Hirsch's commentary and the others is the language in which it was written. Whereas the other commentaries are written in traditional rabbinic Hebrew, Rav Hirsch published his commentary on Chumash and, indeed, all of his works, in German. Long before Rav Hirsch's time, many Torah works had been authored in the vernacular, such as all of Rav Saadiya Gaon's writings and those of the Rambam, with the exception of the Mishneh Torah.

Yet, sefarim in the vernacular had fallen into disuse in the hundreds of years since the era of the rishonim. As a young rabbi in Oldenberg, however, Rav Hirsch recognized the need to present Torah teachings in German, in order to reach his generation and impress upon them Torah's eternal relevance.

In Rav Hirsch's commentary, there are various instances in which he includes a comment in Hebrew. Invariably, these are the comments of a Torah scholar on a point in Talmudic discussion which was not appropriate to make for the general audience for whom his work was intended. Yet, he was concerned that posterity not lose the important halachic point he had realized. To accommodate this, he chose to write these points in scholarly, rabbinic Hebrew.

Aside from his use of the vernacular, there are many other novel features in Rav Hirsch's approach. Beyond being an interpretation of Chumash, Rav Hirsch uses his commentary to demonstrate how to use the Torah as the primary educational tool for man to grow as a human being. There is virtually not a comment of his on the Torah that does not provide a moral lesson, or musar haskeil.

Indeed, there are many occasions when he did not comment upon questions about pshat in a verse where it would appear appropriate for him to have done so. Clearly, he refrained from providing commentary where the conclusion would not provide any lesson one can utilize for personal growth.

Rav Hirsch called his Torah hashkafah by the term Torah im Derech Eretz, the details of which he developed in different places in his commentary.[v] Although the expression is often misunderstood, Rav Hirsch used it to mean that Torah and its observance must always be the primary focus of a Jew's life, and that this can and must pervade a Jew's behavior in all places, times and situations. Everything else that this world has to offer, including livelihood, education, culture, and social mores, must be subsumed within a Torah framework.

Reasons for mitzvos

One of Rav Hirsch's great innovations is his explanation of the ta'amei hamitzvos. The Sefer Hachinuch explains that the term ta'amei hamitzvah means the taste of a mitzvah, not its reason, and it is this taste that Rav Hirsch sought to provide.

The concept of deriving educational reasons for mitzvos was certainly not originated by Rav Hirsch. Rav Hirsch himself quotes dozens of places where Chazal discuss what lesson one can derive from the observance of the mitzvos, and rishonim like the Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim, Ramban in his commentary on the Torah, and the Sefer Hachinuch devote much space to this study.

However, Rav Hirsch added several dimensions to the concept of ta'amei hamitzvah. For Rav Hirsch, an explanation of a mitzvah must always fit in with every detail of the halachos of that mitzvah. For this reason, Rav Hirsch first develops and explains all the halachic details of the mitzvah and then weaves an explanation for the mitzvah that comports with all those details. At times, this required him to first resolve halachic details regarding the laws of the mitzvah.

Here is an example in which we see the difference between the approach of Rav Hirsch and that of his predecessors. The Ramban explains that the reason for the mitzvah not to mix meat and milk together is because cooking a newly slaughtered kid in the milk of its mother will create cruelty in the person who does this.[vi] However, this reason for the mitzvah has little to do with the halachos of this mitzvah, which prohibit any meat and any milk of two kosher species cooked together.

Rav Hirsch, on the other hand, first explains the laws of the mitzvah, and then demonstrates why the Torah's description of cooking a goat in the milk of its mother is the simplest way to express these ideas. He subsequently proceeds to explain a philosophic reason for the mitzvah that we can appreciate and that can teach us a moral lesson, while observing the mitzvah. In this instance, Rav Hirsch provides a brilliant and extensive seven-page essay presenting why this prohibition is limited to the meat and the milk of kosher, domesticated animal species, and why it includes not only the consumption, but also the cooking of and benefit from this mixture.[vii]

Here is another example. The Torah forbids planting any trees near the mizbei'ach.[viii] As an explanation of this mitzvah, the Ramban explains that even though one is planting a shade tree that will enhance the area of the Beis Hamikdash, this is still prohibited, since it was the custom of the idol worshippers to plant trees near the entrance to their temples.

Rav Hirsch is not satisfied with approaches like this to explain mitzvos. Instead he notes that the thriving of a tree near an idol was considered a sign of the influence of the god. This idea fits very appropriately to the heathen notion that gods are primarily forces of nature, whose rule manifests itself in the phenomena of the physical world. However, such notions are diametrically opposite to the Jewish concept of G-d. A Jew is obligated to subordinate all his aspirations, including his moral and spiritual world, to the sphere of G-d's sovereignty. Only through this can he expect to succeed in the physical world.[ix]

Frequently, Rav Hirsch presents highly original approaches to ta'amei hamitzvos, such as his explanations for the mitzvos of arayos, keifel, arachin, and tum'ah and taharah, and the disqualification of blemished animals and blemished kohanim from the service of korbanos. Regarding tum'ah, for example, he notes that the foundation of most religions is the fear of death, and it is at this time that the priest assumes his greatest role. The Torah, in contrast, bans the kohen from being involved with the dead, to demonstrate that the Torah's goal is that we grow and develop throughout life – when we are in our best health. To emphasize this, the kohen, whose role is to educate how to live as a Jew, is distanced from death.

Rav Hirsch uses the same concept to explain why a kohen with a physical blemish or injury is forbidden to serve in the Beis Hamikdash and why a similarly impaired animal is prohibited as a korban. This emphasis on physical beauty or selectivity seems to run counter to the Torah's idea of equal access for all to a relationship with Hashem.

Rav Hirsch explains that religions generally become the home of the marginalized and alienated in society. By prohibiting the physically impaired from performing the service in the holiest of places, the Torah emphasizes that its goal is to foster in all Jews the development of a relationship with Hashem, rather than to simply provide a refuge for the disenfranchised.

We will continue with this topic next week.

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Vaera
For the week ending 13 January 2018 / 26 Tevet 5778
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Insights

Nature and Nurture

“Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh — it will become a snake.” (7:9)

One of the hottest debates within psychology is nature vs. nurture: To what extent are the various aspects of our behavior a product of inherited (i.e. genetic) or acquired (i.e. learned) characteristics?

It has long been known that certain physical characteristics are biologically determined by genetic inheritance. Color of eyes, straight or curly hair, pigmentation of the skin and certain diseases (such as Huntington’s chorea, G-d forbid) are all a function of the genes we inherit. Other physical characteristics, if not exactly totally determined, appear to be at least strongly influenced by the genetic make-up of our biological parents.

These facts have led many to speculate as to whether psychological characteristics such as behavioral tendencies, personality attributes, and mental abilities are also “wired in” before we are even born.

Those who adopt an extreme hereditary position are known as nativists. Their basic assumption is that the characteristics of the human species as a whole are a product of evolution, and that individual differences are due to each person’s unique genetic code.

At the other end of the spectrum are the environmentalists — also known as empiricists (not to be confused with the other empirical/scientific approach). Their basic assumption is that at birth the human mind is a tabula rasa (a blank slate), and that this is gradually “filled” as a result of experience (e.g., behaviorism). From this point of view, psychological characteristics and behavioral differences that emerge through infancy and childhood are the results of learning. It is how you are brought up (nurture) that governs the psychologically significant aspects of child development, and the concept of maturation applies only to the biological aspects.

It is widely accepted now that heredity and the environment do not act independently. Both nature and nurture are essential for any behavior, and it cannot be said that a particular behavior is genetic and another is environmental. It is impossible to separate the two influences, as well as illogical, as nature and nurture do not operate in a separate way, but interact in a complex manner.

Judaism’s view has always been that the human being is a complex mix of both forces.

Our Sages teach that a Jew possesses the hereditary characteristics of modesty, mercy and kindness. So much so that a Jew who does not exhibit these qualities is of questionable lineage.

In this week’s Torah portion we see an allusion to the influence of nurture. Engraved on the staff that Aharon cast in front of Pharaoh was the Ineffable Divine Name of YKVK. It was this same “staff of G-d” that was used to perform the signs and wonders in the deliverance from Egypt. Nevertheless, when it came “in front of Pharaoh” it turned into a poisonous snake — the embodiment of evil. The lowly spiritual level of the Jewish People was only a result of their environment, and when removed from the miasma of Egypt they would return to their lofty stature, just as when the snake was returned to Moshe’s hand it became once again “the staff of G-d”.

The Jewish People would revert to their original nurture.

• Sources: Rabbi Meir Shapiro in *Mayana Shel Torah*; McLeod, S. A. (2015). *Nature vs nurture in psychology*. Retrieved from www.simplypsychology.org/naturevsnurture.html
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Weekly Wisdom - “Participating in the Communal Pain”

by Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week’s parasha, parashat Va’eira, marks the commencement of the redemption of the People of Israel from their bitter enslavement of Egypt. The Torah introduces the family of Moses and Aaron, and the first seven plagues are visited upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Exodus 6:14-28 identifies Moses and Aaron as G-d’s representatives who will lead the Israelites out of the slavery of Egypt. In order to trace the descent of Aaron and Moses, the Torah records the genealogy of Jacob’s eldest children until it reaches the tribe of Levi, from which Moses and Aaron are descended.

The Torah, in Exodus 6:14, begins by listing the families of the tribe of Reuben, and states, **אֵלֶּה רְאֵשֵׁי בֵּית אַבְרָהָם, בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן**, These are the heads of their father’s house, the sons of Reuben, and then lists the names of Reuben’s children: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron and Carmi. In Exodus 6:15, the Torah records the sons of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin and Zohar, and Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman (Vayigash 5767-2006).

When listing the names of the children of Levi, the Torah, Exodus 6:16 states, **וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי לֵוִי לְתַלְמִידָתָם, גֵּרְשׁוֹן וְקַהַת וּמֵרָרִי**, These are the names of the sons of Levi, according to the order of their birth, Gershon, Kehath and Merari.

Regarding the tribes of Reuben and Simeon, the Torah merely says, “The sons of,” without mentioning the word, **שְׁמוֹת** – “Shay’moht,” the names. However, when identifying the family of Levi the Torah specifically says, “These are the names (Shay’moht) of the sons of Levi.”

The Sh’la HaKodesh explains that the tribe of Levi was different from the other tribes of Israel, in that its members were not included in the decree of enslavement. But, because the Levites felt the pain of their brothers, they sought ways of sharing with their brothers’ plight and empathizing with them. Therefore, they gave their children names that reflected the bitter exile: Gershon, for they were strangers in the land [Egypt] which was not theirs; Kehath, because the Israelites’ teeth were blunted as a result of their slavery; and Merari, to be reminded that the Jews’ lives were “embittered” by the Egyptians.

The Sh’la declares that this important textual nuance teaches that no Jew should ever be left to suffer alone, and that it is essential that every Jew feel the pain of their fellow Jews, even though they themselves may not be suffering. That is why the Al-mighty G-d told Moses (Exodus 3:14) that His name is, **אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה**, “I will be what I will be” – meaning that I [G-d] will be with them [Israel] during this exile [Egypt] and I will be with them in future exiles.

The Talmud, in Taanit 11a, emphasizes that it is crucial for every individual Jew to participate in the pain of the community. Our rabbis taught, when Israel is in trouble and one individual separates himself from the communal pain, two ministering angels who accompany that person, place their hands upon his head and say, “May this person who abandoned the community, not behold the consolation of the community.” Similarly, when the community is in trouble, one should not say, “I will go home, eat and drink, and all will be well with me!”

Our rabbis say that Moses’ actions during Israel’s battle with Amalek recorded in Exodus 17:12, show that even those who are perfectly righteous must feel the pain of the community. The Torah notes that as the battle with Amalek wore on, Moses’ hands grew heavy. In order to assist the weary leader, Aaron and Hur took a stone and placed it under Moses, for him to sit on. They thus supported Moses’ hands, enabling Moses’ hands to remain in faithful prayer until sunset, when Israel was victorious.

Why was Moses standing during the battle? Couldn’t someone have found a chair for him to rest upon during the battle? Rather Moses said,

“If the people in battle are in pain, I will also be in pain. After all, those who experience the pain of the community will merit to see the redemption and consolation of the community.” (Talmud, Taanit 11a)

We see, that even though Moses grew up in the comfort of Pharaoh’s palace, he strongly identified with the Jewish people. The Torah confirms, that from the early years of Moses as a public figure, Exodus 2:11, וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶחָיו, וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם, that he went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. But he did not simply “observe,” he actually risked his own life to save the life of a Jew who was being beaten by an Egyptian.

Furthermore, from the names that Moses gives his children, in Exodus 18:3-4, we see his abundant empathy for his people. He calls his eldest son “Gershom,” גֵּרְשֹׁם, גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם, for he says, “I was a stranger in a strange land.” He named his second son “Eliezer,” אֱלִיעֶזֶר, כִּי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בָּעֲזָרָי, וַיִּצְלַנִי מִמָּוֶת, For the G-d of my father came to my aid and He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.

Moses really should have named his first child “Eliezer,” since his rescue from the sword of Pharaoh took place before Moses was exiled to Midian. Yet, even though Moses grew up in the comfort of Pharaoh’s palace, and never himself participated in either the exile of Egypt or the enslavement, still he was deeply concerned for the pain of the enslaved Israelites, rather than his own pain of having to flee to Midian. In fact, he refers to the land of Midian as, אֶרֶץ מִדְיָן, a foreign land, because it was so distant from his enslaved brethren in Egypt.

The greatness of Moses is clearly evident from the fact that at the moment of Moses’ highest joy, when his first child was born, he preoccupied himself with the pain of his brothers, the Jewish people.

It is reported that the great Jewish leader, Rabbi Elazar Shach would never eat breakfast until late in the morning because he was pained that so many Jewish children in Israel were not getting a religious education. He did not want to eat while secular children were hungry for Torah.

May you be blessed.

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Rabbi Yissochar Frand - Parshas Vaera

Suffering Sivlos with Savlanus

The pasuk in Parshas Vaera says, “I shall take you to Me for a people, and I shall be a G-d to you; and you shall know that I am Hashem your G-d, Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt (mi’tachas sivlos Mitzrayim).” [Shemos 6:7] I saw an interesting insight into the expression “Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt,” brought in the name of a sefer called Tiferes Shlomo [by Shlomo Hakohen Rabinowicz, the first Rebbe of the Radomsk Chasidic dynasty; 1801-1866]. He writes that this pasuk contains the segulah [key] by which Klal Yisrael was able to exist in Egypt, and by which they were able to come out of Egypt. The segulah is alluded to in the word “sivlos.” Sivlos means torture, suffering, burdens, etc. There is another familiar related word in Hebrew that has an entirely different connotation. The word is savlanus, which means patience.

The Tiferes Shlomo suggests that the reason Klal Yisrael was able to exist, and eventually to be redeemed from Mitzrayim, was they had the attribute of savlanus. They never lost faith that what was happening to them was not mere happenstance, but was in fact part of a Grand Plan. They could endure the suffering (sivlos) because they knew that may’ays Hashem haysa zos (this was coming from Hashem).

When a person is going through a tortuous ordeal and cannot imagine “why is this happening to me?” it is very difficult to survive that experience. But if a person can perceive that the Ribono shel Olam is doing this to me, and He knows what he is doing, and I therefore accept it — that is what can give a person the ability to survive a terrible, terrible ordeal. The Tiferes Shlomo provides a synopsis of this idea with the following sentence: “For if in His Eyes it is right, then by us it is alright as well.”

The Emunah to suffer (be sovel), and yet have the patience (savlanus), forbearance, and fortitude to realize that may’ays Hashem haysa zos — that was the segulah by which our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt.

The sefer Bei Chiya references, in this vein, an interesting Gemara in Maseches Berachos [60a]: The Elder Hillel was returning home from a journey and heard screaming coming from the direction of his home. He remarked, “I am confident that this screaming is not coming from my house.” The Gemara cites, regarding Hillel the Elder, the verse “From bad tidings he does not fear, his heart has confidence in Hashem.” [Tehillim 112:7] Since he had such amazing bitachon in Hashem, he was sure that these sounds of commotion were not emanating from his house.

Bei Chiya explains that someone who knows anything about the attribute of bitachon knows that this is NOT the correct definition of bitachon. This is a fallacy in people’s minds. Bitachon does not mean having confidence that things that occur will be “good” in the way that a person is hoping they will occur. If a person needs to go through a serious operation and he says, “I have bitachon that it will be alright,” he is misusing the term bitachon. That is not what it means.

True bitachon means that I have full confidence that what is going to happen is ultimately best for me. Now, I might think that “best for me” is that the operation should be successful, etc. However, maybe that is not what Hashem has in mind. Bitachon means that whatever the decree is, I accept it, because even though I may not understand it, I have confidence that it is ultimately for my good.

So, when the Gemara says that Hillel the Elder came into the city, heard screams, and said, “I know for sure it is not coming from my house,” it was not necessarily because nothing wrong was going on in his house. It could be his house was on fire. It could be that there was a terrible misfortune that just happened in his house. However, whatever it was, Hillel said, “My family would not be screaming about it.” Hillel was confident that he had been able to instill in his family this emunah and bitachon that whatever happens in life is part of Hashem’s Grand Plan. Perhaps there was a tragedy in his house, perhaps his roof collapsed. But he was confident that his family would not panic and cry out in distress. He taught them the attribute of savlanus, the concept of sivlos Mitzrayim.

Again, to quote the words of the Tiferes Shlomo “If in His eyes it is right; then in my eyes it is alright as well.”

Bei Chiya points out that this story of Hillel the Elder actually correlates fully with another opinion that Hillel expresses elsewhere. Every year at our Pesach Seder, we eat matzah and then we eat marror. Finally, after consuming the two mitzvah items independently, we form a sandwich made of matzah and marror and recite the statement, “This is what Hillel used to do when the Beis HaMikdash was standing. He would wrap matzah and marror and eat them together, as it is written, ‘upon matzahs and marror you shall eat them.’ [Bamidbar 9:11]” This ritual eating of the “matzah-marror sandwich” is performed “as a commemoration of the practice in the bais hamikdash, according to Hillel’s opinion” (zecher l’Mikdash k’Hillel).

Bei Chiya makes the fascinating connection between this practice of Hillel regarding the consumption of matzah and marror, and the philosophy of Hillel that “the screams I hear coming from the city are not coming from my house.”

Matzah is the symbol of redemption. Marror is the symbol of enslavement. It would thus make sense that the two symbolic foods should be eaten separately. However, that was not Hillel’s attitude. Hillel would wrap matzah and marror and eat them together. He knew that there is exile and that there is redemption, and that they are both part of a single Grand Plan. It is thus appropriate to eat foods representing exile and redemption together, to show that they form part of a unified master design stemming from the same Source.

I am hesitant to dwell on this point, because to have such an attitude sincerely is a tremendous spiritual achievement. It is much easier said than done, and maybe we are not holding by such a level of spiritual greatness. It is tempting to say that Klal Yisrael in Egypt was on such a madreigah [spiritual level]; but it is beyond our grasp.

However, I want to read a brief piece of prose that someone showed me recently. This is something he heard from his aunt. His aunt, who is already an old woman, survived the concentration camps of World War II. This item was written in Yiddish, and it will be lost somewhat in the translation, but I will translate every line. This is what people sang when they were being marched to their deaths. At that stage, everybody knew about the “showers”. They knew that people did not come back from the “showers,” and yet, this is what they sang:

G-t in Zein Mishpat is gerecht (G-d in His Judgment is correct)

Keiner ken nisht zогgen G-t iz schlecht (No one can say that G-d is bad)

G-t veis voz Ehr tut (G-d knows what He does)

Um recht tut Ehr keimol nisht (He never does evil)

G-t in Zein Mishpat is gerecht (G-d in His Judgment is correct)

These people did not live three thousand years ago. These people lived 70-plus years ago. Some of them are still alive today. Some of them had this capacity of, “And I took you out from beneath the sivlos of Egypt.” These people not only “talked the talk,” but they also “walked the walk.” These people believed with every sinew

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Drasha - Parshas Vaera
Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky
Hail to the Chief

Some people just never learn. For almost a year Pharaoh was literally plagued by every conceivable misfortune, yet he refused to let the Jewish people leave his land. Of course, he pleaded with Moshe during every plague to stop the great inconvenience, pain, and disaster that were befalling his country. He would even promise to let the Jews go, yet he never admitted guilt. He would beseech Moshe to stop the various plagues. “Pray for me and remove the frogs! I will let you serve your G-d in the desert (Exodus 8:4).” Sometimes he would offer unrestricted freedom, only to renege when the plagues ceased. Never, except on one occasion, did Pharaoh admit that G-d was correct and he was corrupt.

That exception was the plague of hail. In fact, the plague of hail was so powerful that even Hashem Himself categorized it in a unique way. Moshe quoted Hashem to Pharaoh: “This time I shall send all my plagues against your heart, upon your servants, and your people so that you shall know that there is none like Me in the world” (Exodus 9:14). Why did Hashem consider the hail a more powerful act than His turning water into blood, or delivering pestilence, or wild animals or frogs? True, the hail did miraculously contain a fire ensconced in the ice, but all the plagues had miraculous attributes to them. Turning the Nile into blood is not an everyday occurrence either! What characteristic did the hail have to label it “all my plagues?”

Even more troubling is Pharaoh’s response. After the plague strikes Egypt he calls Moshe and Ahron and he tells them “this time I have sinned, Hashem is righteous and I and my people are the wicked ones” (Exodus 9:27) What caused Pharaoh to utter those submissive words at this particular time? Didn’t he already see blood, frogs, pestilence, boils, wild animals, and a host of different miraculous misfortunes that befell his people? What was so special about the fire and ice that fell from the heavens that charred even this man’s cruel temper?

Radio commentator, Paul Harvey, relates the following story: William and his Aunt Caroline were constantly feuding. Actually, William was jealous of his aunt’s popularity and social status in the New York of the late 1890’s. Compared to her, he was considered a social outcast, and was never invited to any of her lavish parties. That would have been bad enough. Having to live next door to her was too much for William to bear. The sight of elegant carriages arriving and departing made him seethe. Yet he could do nothing. At least he did nothing until the family fortune was distributed and he received 100 million dollars. Then he knew what to do. He decided to rip down his mansion and build a monstrosity. It had 530 rooms, 350 baths, and a whopping 970

employees. It would be the grandest, most elegant guest house of it’s kind. More carriages would pull up to his home in a day than to his aunt’s mansion in a month! Her home would pale in comparison, and the tumult of it all would force her to move.

William was right. Aunt Caroline moved way north of the shadow of her nephew’s hotel. And then she ripped down her old home. With the mere 50 million that she received, she too, decided to build a hotel on the site of her old mansion! It would be even more elegant, with nicer rooms and better service than her nephew’s. Two adjacent, competing hotels would have been built right next to each other if not for the wisdom of William’s own hotel manager. He got the two feuding relatives together and explained that hostility is not the way to success.

“If you two could just work together and adjoin the two hotels as one, it would become the most outstanding and influential accommodation on earth,” he explained. They listened and followed his instructions. He even advised them to make sure that every opening between the structures could be sealed again in case of a renewed falling-out. But in the end, William Waldorf and his aunt, Caroline Astor decided to bury the hatchet and replace it with a hyphen. And the world’s most luxurious accommodation was built — The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

There are many opposing forces in the world. However, when they work in tandem, they are the most powerful force possible. During this plague, fire and ice, two opposing forces in the world of nature disregarded their differences all in the service of the Supreme Commander. When Hashem announced that He will send all of His plagues, he was referring to conflicting forces that work harmoniously. After that, even Pharaoh was sensible enough, albeit for a short moment, to see his frailty and delusions. When even the worst of men see fire and ice dance together on one mission, there is nothing he can do but watch in amazement and admit, “Hashem is the righteous one and I and my people are the wicked ones.” When opposing opinions gather for one objective – to do the will of Hashem – they are as unstoppable as the hail that brought Pharaoh to his knees.

Dedicated by Ben and Beth Heller in memory of Sidney Turkel

Good Shabbos!

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The Times of Israel
The Blogs :: Ben-Tzion Spitz
Vaera: God’s Finger

When I was young, I said to God, god, tell me the mystery of the universe. But God answered, that knowledge is for me alone. So I said, god, tell me the mystery of the peanut. Then God said, well, George, that’s more nearly your size. — George Washington Carver

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In the third of what would be the ten plagues to hit Egypt, Pharaoh’s sorcerers insightfully declare “this is God’s finger.” They understood from the third plague, the plague of lice, that this was not some sleight of hand or some conjurers trick. This was direct divine intervention. They would learn, to the point of destruction, that there is an active, involved God who feels free to direct matters and phenomena in a more “personal” fashion and not always leave things up to “nature” or probability.

Rabbeinu Bechaye on Exodus 8:15 (Vaera) quotes Rabbi Saadia Gaon who highlights that there are only two other events in the Hebrew Bible where the finger of God is mentioned. One is when it describes the writing of the Ten Commandments upon the tablets of the law. The second is in a description of the creation of the celestial spheres (Psalms 8:4). This limited and exclusive use of God’s Finger in the biblical text comes to teach a deeper lesson, namely that God is ultimately responsible for everything in our world, big, little, sacred or mundane.

From the largest creations known to man, the planets and the stars, to the smallest visible creature, a gnat; God is the Creator of the massive, the

minuscule, and everything in between. However, He is also the scribe of the Tablets of the Law, the material of which was merely the lowly rock, but no earthly item ever possessed such divine radiance.

The reason the term Finger of God is used in all three wildly different aspects is to relay that God is capable of everything. It is all within His capacity. The infinitely large and the infinitely small are equally within His purview. God is involved behind the scenes in creating, overseeing and enabling our reality. His preference is, as with the commandments, that we use the material reality that He provides and sustains to reach for the sacred, the holy and the divine. Then we may have a chance to grasp a part of God.

May we see the finger of God in our reality and appreciate it.

Shabbat Shalom

Dedication - To the memory of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, Father of Modern Hebrew, on his 160th anniversary.

Shabbat Shalom

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Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Forget Me Not

The wise King Solomon notes (Koheles 7:14) that Hashem always presents us with choice and sharp contrast. For example, the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah (Men of the Great Assembly) prayed for His Divine assistance to remove the attraction and addiction to idolatry and their prayer was answered in the affirmative, therefore we don't have that attraction and ask ourselves how it was possible for intelligent people to subscribe to idolatry. Why was the yetzer hara for idolatry created to begin with? An answer is that when the first Beis Hamikdash was in existence, where one saw the presence of Hashem daily (see Avos 5:8), the lure of idolatry was necessary to give man choice and free will.

Similarly, we encounter in Parshas Vaera a phenomenon whereby Pharaoh experiences the plague of blood and all its severe consequences and yet, "V'lo shos libo" (Shemos 7:23) - he is able to ignore it and suspend the natural instinct of self-preservation such that it did not override his personal defiance of Hashem. Pharaoh has the ability to blot out the past and ignore its consequences.

In sharp contrast to Pharaoh is the leader of the Jewish people, Amram (Rambam Hilchos Melachim 9:1). The Shalah in this week's parsha tells us to note the difference in how the Torah presents the genealogy of the tribes of Reuven and Shimon in contrast to that of Levi. The former is listed (6:14) by the heads of their tribes. Regarding Levi the Torah calls attention to the names of his progeny - "Note the names of the descendants of Levi" (6:16). The tribe of Levi was not included in the Egyptian servitude. Levi foresaw with Divine inspiration the impending oppressive exile and named his three sons, Gershon, Kehas, and Merari to be ever mindful of the dangers facing the Jewish nation. Amram and Yocheved lived during this horrific era, and to always remember the plight of the rest of the tribes they named their daughter Miriam - bitter. They were "shos libo", they remembered constantly by articulating and calling their daughter's name; they shared the pain and suffering of others.

The Torah, by presenting Pharaoh's "lo shos" and Amram's usage of a constant reminder, teaches us how easy it is for man to forget. Therefore the Torah builds into the very fabric of our lives the antidote to forgetting, by legislating and implementing constant reminders. Even Moshe Rabbeinu was afraid of forgetting. The Ramban (Shemos 4:10) teaches that since the origin of Moshe's speech defect came about in a miraculous way, i.e. from the angel moving baby Moshe's hand from the gold to the coals (Shemos Rabbah 1:26), Moshe did not ask Hashem to cure him of this deficiency so that he would always remember Hashem's kindness. The Sefer haChinuch (420) in discussing the mitzvah to recite the Shemah, our pledge of allegiance, twice daily, explains that fragile man who is easily swayed from his spiritual pursuits needs the twice daily reminder of Hashem's sovereignty. In addition, in mitzvah 421 in explaining the mitzvah of Tefillin he again writes that man in all times is

drawn to satisfy his bodily pleasures and needs, and therefore requires the daily reminder of donning Tefillin that protects the soul from defilement.

The Torah alludes to the Exodus from Egypt no less than fifty times to literally engrain in the Jewish nation the thirteen principles of faith as articulated by the Rambam, each of which is found in the Exodus. Every morning and night we are reminded of His being the Creator, as exhibited by His manipulation of nature during the Exodus. We are reminded of His love for His people Israel, demonstrated by endowing millions of people with prophecy, and giving us His Torah at Sinai.

Man was created needy. Interestingly, in the beracha of Boreh Nefashos that we often recite daily, we thank Hashem for creating man and his being needy, "v'chesronon." The beracha continues, "for You sustain all living beings, blessed is the Life of Worlds". The Aruch haShulchan explains the closing words of the beracha, "blessed is the Sustainer of the worlds", to mean that He provides us in this world by giving us nourishment, and our recognition of the fact that this nourishment comes from Him acquires for us a share in the next world, hence the last word ("worlds") being plural.

Among the needs of man is the need for constant reminders. Hashem endowed man with the gift of both memory and forgetfulness. On the one hand, forgetting is oftentimes a blessing. One who experiences a tragedy, such as the loss of a child, Rachmana litzlan, or a spouse, could not continue their lives without the ability to somewhat forget. On the other hand, man forgets too often what is to be his focus and concern in this world. The Dubner Maggid highlights this idea when commenting on the verse (Devarim 32:18), "you forget the G-d that formed you." He notes that Hashem gives man the gift of forgetfulness and man misuses this gift by forgetting Hashem and His laws.

Each and every generation faces its own unique challenges. Our extremely open liberal society generates its crises. Just as one can appreciate the probation of yichud and how it safeguards Jewish moral values, one must realize that there can be an isur yichud with a computer. One's self control today provides no assurance for the future. "Who is the wise one? - the one that can see the future" (Avos 4:1). The wise one today is he who insures that the forbidden will not be seen in the future.

Finally, it is very considerate that one put their cell phone on vibrate when davening in Shul since they are respecting the needs of those around them and refraining from disturbing them. But what about themselves? As much as one wishes to ignore the vibrate, the momentary reflection of who might that be is a forbidden intrusion on our tefillah (see Orach Chaim 90.)

Hashem promises (Vayikra 26:42) that He will always remember His covenant and the land of Israel. We owe it to Him to reciprocate in kind and always be mindful of Him.

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - יארא

Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

וידבר ד' אל משה ואל אהרן ויצום אל בני ישראל ואל פרעה מלך מצרים להוציא את בני ישראל מארץ מצרים

Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded them regarding Bnei Yisrael and regarding Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. (6:13)

Easier said than done. Hashem commanded Moshe and Aharon to take the Jews out of Egyptian bondage. Two problems surfaced: Pharaoh has to agree, and the Jews have to want to -- and believe that they actually can -- leave. Moshe Rabbeinu had earlier voiced his concerns, but Hashem told him not to worry. The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains how this played out. Hashem told Moshe, "I have appointed you to be their ruler." That is wonderful. Who says that the nation that had been enslaved body and soul, for 210 years, was prepared to accept Moshe's leadership? How did Hashem allay Moshe's concern? How could Moshe convey to the people that he was their new

ruler in a way that would ensure their acceptance of him? Words have very little power (unless they are humiliating someone). How could Moshe's mere words of introduction as their new leader cement a relationship of respect that they would follow? Perhaps, had Moshe been imbued with a heavy dose of supernatural powers, it might have had greater impact.

Furthermore, if Hashem had wanted the people to accept Moshe and Aharon as their leaders, should He not have conveyed this message directly to the people— not simply to Moshe and Aharon? *Horav Nissan Alpert, zl*, compares this to the well-known story of the *chassid* who told his *Rebbe* that he had just received a Heavenly Revelation via a dream that he (the *chassid*) was to become the next *Rebbe*. The holy *Rebbe* replied, "As long as the only one having this dream is you, it will not receive much positive response. Had it been the *chassidim* who had this dream, rather than just yourself, you might be in a more acceptable position." In other words, it is not enough that one believes that he should be the leader. His people must believe it, if he is to be accepted. A leader who is not on the same page as his followers is not much of a leader – since no one is following him. What is meant by Hashem's "assurance" to Moshe that He has appointed him to be *Klal Yisrael's* ruler?

Rav Alpert explains that Hashem imparted an important lesson in leadership (in reality, in education) to Moshe. In order for the people to listen to Moshe, it was vital that Moshe make himself into a king. To the extent that Moshe succeeded in the presentation and implementation of this role – to that degree would the people listen. In other words, people look up to a leader, but the leader must act like a leader and be worthy of his leadership role.

How was this transformation to occur? How did Moshe, the holy person who previously had been an individual, become *Klal Yisrael's* ruler? First and foremost, a slave does not understand the concept of royalty. Someone who descends from monarchy, who has royalty in his blood, has a greater ability to appreciate the significance of the power and leadership ability that a king manifests. Aristocracy understands aristocracy.

Having said this, we understand the approach that Moshe had to take in order to inspire the people to listen to him. If we look at the *pesukim* that follow, the Torah records the heads of the Jewish households and their lineage. *Klal Yisrael* was not a nation comprised of ordinary slaves. They were descendants of the Patriarchs. The heart and soul of the *Avos* rests squarely within the DNA of each and every Jew. We are royalty! The sons of kings, the descendants of believers, we are different. It was up to Moshe to teach the nation its lineage, its history. He had to teach them to believe in themselves, to realize that they were *bnei melachim*, sons of kings. Once they recognized their own royal heritage, they could acknowledge Moshe as the ruler of the nation.

The student of true Jewish history is taught a perspective on the panorama of events through the lens of Torah, which will infuse him with a sense of pride in our heritage. Without such a perspective, he ends up focusing on the events themselves, rather than the lessons that they impart. It has been specifically this narrow sweep of events that has given rise to the revisionist approach to history, evinced by the secularists who pick apart events to suit their spiritually distorted fancy. Indeed, the secular streams that have infected Judaism have robbed the unknowing Jew of his/her pride in their heritage.

The secular historian, whose bias against traditional and spiritual leadership is quite evident, has, over time, spawned a school of history that totally ignores G-d's "involvement." We study "events," "people," "issues," but never the guiding Hand of the Creator in catalyzing these events. We refuse to "connect the dots" for fear of having to acknowledge the clear fact that it did not just "all happen." There is purpose, mission and destiny in everything and everyone. To ignore this verity is selfishly to undermine history and deceive oneself.

When we study our history, we develop a sense of pride in our heritage. The ability to connect to the glorious culture that preceded us is invaluable. Conversely, our inability to relate to history, to look back with deep pride, to place people in their correct time frame and perspective, engenders within us a certain naiveté and outlook that is counter-productive to living a full life according to Torah. Torah gives us a total blueprint from where we hail, so that we can embrace that blueprint with confidence. Thus, the false accusations leveled against us by our enemies will not sway us, nor will we be compelled to live a life of apologetic acquiescence. This is what happened to our secular co-religionists. Their break with the past created a distortion in their self-esteem and severed their identity with the historical continuum of our nation. Tragedy and revival have always been aspects of our historical continuum. We look forward with great anticipation to that glorious day when we will no longer suffer tragedy, when challenges and adversity

will be a thing of the past, when revival will be our constant motif and everlasting companion.

In order for Moshe *Rabbeinu* to succeed as ruler over the nation, he had to explain to the people who they were. When the people would be able to perceive themselves as royalty, then they could respect Moshe as king. When a teacher or *rebbe* enters the classroom, he is immediately on a stage. Long gone are the days when a teacher's presence alone demanded respect – from students as well as their parents. Today, a *rebbe* or teacher receives respect the hard way – by earning it. I was reading a thesis by a highly acclaimed motivational educator who posits that one of the best ways to earn a student's respect is by being the kind of person your students want to become. Another perspective is that, if your students do not want to replicate your success, then you really do not need to be there. We promote success by first modeling it. Our students should want what we possess. (This does not mean material success. I refer to *middos tovos*, character refinement. This obviously applies to parents as well.)

When a student sizes up a teacher, he looks at the outward presentation of his self – how he walks, dresses, acts, speaks, responds. The student who learns best is the one who says, "I want that. I want to be like him/her."

How we act makes the difference in how we ultimately become accepted. If we do not have "it," it will be very difficult to impart "it." A student of the *Chasam Sofer* came to him requesting *semichah*, rabbinical ordination. The *Chasam Sofer* noticed that when he entered the room, he did not kiss the *mezuzah*. The sage reasoned that, due to his nervousness in anticipation of the upcoming examination, he had forgotten to kiss the *mezuzah*. The *Chasam Sofer* told him to return the next day. He wanted to see if he would kiss the *mezuzah* upon his return.

On the next day, the student failed to kiss the *mezuzah*. This already served as sufficient reason for the *Chasam Sofer* to disqualify him from the rabbinate. Simply, a *rav* must instill *yiraa Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, in his congregation. If he has a deficiency, the people will eventually notice it, precluding his ability to lead. When the people lack the respect they should have for their leader, he has lost his ability to lead.

ואלה שמות בני לוי לתלדתם גרשון וקהת ומרי

These were the sons of Levi in order of their birth: Gershon, Kehas and Merari. (6:16)

Shevet Levi was the one tribe that was excluded from the Egyptian bondage. They studied Torah all day, while their brethren slaved for Pharaoh. One should not think for a moment that they had it "easy," since they did not work. Pharaoh was no fool. He knew that, as long as a segment of the Jewish People maintained its bond with the Torah, the nation would survive. In order to break Levi's bond with the Torah, Pharaoh decreed that only those who worked were entitled to food: no work; no food. He thought that he could starve the *Leviim* into breaking with the Torah. He did not know the Jewish People. They might themselves not learn, but they knew quite well that their survival was based upon the learning of *Shevet Levi*. Thus, they brought a part of their meager portion to the Levi. This is how and why they all survived.

The members of *Shevet Levi* were troubled over the fact that they were not performing the same back-breaking labor as their brethren. They empathized with their toil, their pain, their misery. Thus, Levi, the *rosh ha'mishpachah*, head of the Levite family, gave his three sons names which alluded to the exile: Gershon – they were sojourners in a land that was not theirs; Kehas – their teeth were blunted from the slavery (*Keihos*); Merari – their lives were embittered. This, explains the *Shlah HaKadosh*, teaches us to empathize with another Jew's pain – even if the pain is distant from you. Another Jew's pain is your pain.

During World War I, when many Jews were displaced and suffering, the *Chafetz Chaim, zl*, refused to sleep comfortably in a bed. He slept in his chair. The *Chazon Ish, zl*, would receive letters from all corners of the world: letters petitioning his blessing; letters from people who were in dire straits, suffering immeasurable pain, who needed his sage advice or, simply, a shoulder to cry on. He responded to each letter, addressing every concern and giving his blessing when needed. He saved each and every letter. When the *Chazon Ish* was *niftar*, passed away, the question was raised concerning the many thousands of letters that filled boxes and boxes. Indeed, someone asked why he had saved those letters.

Horav Dov Yoffe, zl, explains that he had once asked this question of the *Chazon Ish*. The response indicates the greatness of the *Chazon Ish* and the extraordinary thoughtfulness and empathy he had for

all Jews. "When a Jew writes a letter to me," the *Chazon Ish* explained, "he imbues it with all of the pain and misery that he is experiencing. The tears that seem non-existent soak every page. The pain and suffering -- every bit of emotion that is coursing through his body -- are very much a part of the letter. If so, how can I simply discard such an emotion-laden letter?"

We have just given the reader a tiny glimpse of the empathy evoked by two of the *gedolim*, Torah leaders, of the previous generation. What about Jews that are not *gedolim*: *amcha*, Your people, *Yidden*, to whom *chesed*, lovingkindness, in all its forms, is an inherent part of their lives? We perform *chesed* not simply because we are compassionate. We feel for the other fellow; we perform *chesed* because their pain is our pain; we feel their pain. We empathize for them because they are us!

Let us take this a bit further -- two steps further. What about the non-practicing Jew, the Jew who basically identifies as a Jew, but observes nothing? Does he empathize with his brethren? If *chesed* is a part of our DNA, then it should cross the lines -- applying equally to the non-observant as well. Last, what about empathy toward someone who is gone -- who has passed from the world? The *Chazon Ish* saved letters, because they represented a Jew's pain. How far does empathy reach?

Clearly, different levels of *chesed* exist, and various personalities are involved in its execution. Some follow the Torah's guidelines; others follow their hearts. For some, Jew and non-Jew are alike; for others, they reach out to everyone -- for varied reasons. The following story moved me. It is not the traditional story about a devout Jew who went out of his comfort zone to help his brother. In fact, this story is about a Jew, who, although he did very much for his people, emerged from the Holocaust a changed person. He sought revenge for what happened to his collective Jewish family. He felt the pain and anguish experienced by his brothers and sisters, but he was not prepared to accept Hashem as part of his life, at least not to the point of religious observance. We are not the ones to judge a Jew who suffered through those years. The story gives us a new perspective on Jewish empathy.

Simon Weisenthal was an Austrian Holocaust survivor, who, following the war, became the premier Nazi hunter. While he was sitting in his office in Vienna one day in 1965, a woman, Mrs. Rawicz from the city of Rabka, came by on her way to testify at a war crimes trial. She related to him the story of Sammy Rosenbaum, describing him as "a frail boy with a pale, gaunt face and big, dark eyes, who appeared to be much older than his nine years of age." But, then, many children during the Holocaust aged quickly and showed it.

Sammy's father was a tailor who lived with his wife, young son and daughter in two musty rooms and a tiny kitchen in an old house. They were a happy family. Sammy accompanied his father to the synagogue every Friday night after his mother and sister lit the *Shabbos* candles. Everything changed in 1940 when the SS set up a training center in a former Polish army barracks outside of Rabka. It was the early phase of the war, so the SS platoons would shoot their victims, anywhere from fifty to one hundred and fifty daily. This was the way the SS trained their troops to become hardened and insensitive to what they would soon be doing. They wanted speed, no fuss, and maximum efficiency.

The school's commander was a cynical and brutal hardened SS man. Untersturmführer Wilhelm Rosenbaum walked around with a riding crop. His very presence inspired spine-chilling fear in the inmates of the "training center."

In early 1942, all of Rabka's Jews were ordered to present themselves at the local school to "register." As would happen throughout Poland, the sick and elderly were deported, and the others would labor for the Wehrmacht. As they were going through the names, Rosenbaum noticed the names of the Rosenbaum family. He went berserk, beating his riding crop on the table and screaming insanely, "How dare a Jew have my good German name!" He immediately threw the list of names on the table and stormed out of the room. Everyone knew what this beastly outrage meant: it would only be a matter of time before the Rosenbaums would be murdered.

The SS training center "students" practiced executions in a clearing in the forest. Rosenbaum watched with a careful, almost clinical, eye, to see if a soldier demonstrated any semblance of emotion as he shot the hapless Jews. Mrs. Rawicz (who was testifying) worked in the training center as a charwoman, cleaning off the blood from the boots of the SS, and then polishing them. One Friday morning in June, 1942, as she stood bent over cleaning, she saw the Rosenbaum family -- father, mother and fifteen year old daughter -- being led by two SS men to the clearing place. Behind them, walked Rosenbaum. The witness related that the mother and daughter were immediately shot. Then Rosenbaum took out his anger on the father because, after all, he was the one who had introduced the Rosenbaum name to his family. With his

riding crop swinging, he mercilessly beat the father senseless -- for what? For having the same name as he. Then he emptied his revolver into the martyr.

Rosenbaum was still enraged. Where was the boy? Without Sammy, his vengeance would not be complete. There still remained a Jew who bore his name. When he discovered that Sammy had gone with a work detail to the quarry, he immediately dispatched an unarmed Jewish kapo to bring Sammy to him.

The kapo went by horse drawn cart to the quarry, and when he saw Sammy, he waved. Everyone stopped working. The Jews all knew the meaning of that wave. Apparently, Sammy's time had come.

Sammy looked up at the kapo and asked, "Father, Mother and Paula -- where are they?" The kapo just shook his head. Sammy knew. They were dead. Sammy spoke matter of factly, "Our name is Rosenbaum, and now you have come for me." He alighted the wagon and sat down next to the kapo. Sammy did not run into the woods. He did not cry. He knew what must have transpired. He knew that he was next. There was no running. These creatures were fiends of the lowest order. Sammy asked the kapo if he could stop -- one last time -- at his house. The kapo said yes.

On the way, the kapo related to Sammy what had taken place earlier that morning. They arrived at Sammy's house, went in and noticed the partially eaten breakfast. By now his parents and Paula were already buried, and no one had lit a candle in their memory. Sammy cleared the dishes of half-eaten food off the table and placed candlesticks on it. Sammy put on his *yarmulke* and lit the candles: two for his father; two for his mother; and two for his sister. He began to pray, then he recited *Kaddish*, the prayer recited for the dead, for them. Sammy remembered that his father always recited *Kaddish* for his parents. Now that he was the surviving member of his family, it was his turn to say *Kaddish*.

Sammy began to walk toward the door, suddenly stopped, shook his head -- and returned to the table. Sammy had remembered something. He took out two more candles, placed them on the table, lit them and prayed. (Later on, when it was all over, the kapo said, "He lit those candles and said *Kaddish* for himself.") Sammy came out of the house and sat down on the wagon next to the hardened kapo, who was now crying. The kapo wiped his tears, and they rode back in silence to the camp. The boy did not speak. He touched the older man's hand to comfort him -- to forgive him for taking him to his death.

They arrived at the clearing in the woods, where the accursed SS Untersturmführer was waiting with his students. The abominable creature screamed out, "It's about time!" He raised his revolver and shot the child.

Simon Wiesenthal concluded the story, "No tombstone bears Sammy Rosenbaum's name. Quite possibly, had the woman from Rabka not come to my office, no one would have remembered him. But every year, one day in June, I light the candles for Sammy and recite *Kaddish* for him."

Jewish empathy transcends observance and the possibility of receiving gratitude. We are all family. It is who we are. It is what we do.

**ואלעזר בן אהרן לקח לו מאבות פוטאל לו לאשה ותלד לו את פנחס
Elazar, a son of Aharon, took for himself from the daughters of Putiel
as a wife, and she bore to him Pinchas. (6:25)**

Rashi comments that the name Putiel refers to two ancestors of the wife of Elazar: Yisro and Yosef. Putiel was a name given to Yisro, because he fattened calves for idol worship. (Putiel is a contraction of Putim, fatten, and *l'Kail*, to G-d, for idol-worship -- not Hashem.) Yosef *HaTzaddik* is also called Putiel (Putiel being derived from *pitpet b'yitzro*), because he disparaged or toyed with his *yetzer hora*). This was not Yisro's only other name. He had seven names. Why is it that with regard to Elazar's wife, mother of Pinchas, the name of Yisro which is used is one that has a derogatory connotation?

Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, explains that, while at first blush Putiel does seem to signify negativity, if we were to look "outside the box," beyond surface appearances, we realize that the consequences of Yisro's fattening calves for *avodah zarah* were not that negative. Yisro's idol worship was purposeful. He was looking for the real thing. Thus, he served every religion under the sun until he found the true religion, the one true G-d, Creator and Master of the world. So, while fattening calves for idol worship is certainly not a laudatory endeavor, it may be viewed in an acceptable manner. Yisro searched for the truth. As a result of his fattening calves, he found it! Thus, Putiel is far from derogatory. It was his *modus operandi* for finding the truth -- for finding Hashem!

The *Rosh Yeshivah* observes that character traits are transferred hereditarily through the family lineage. Yisro made searching for the truth, an inexorable intolerance for anything that smacked of falsehood, a part of his essence; to a degree – it was his life’s mission. This quality was inherited by his descendants, of whom Pinchas stood out. Years later, when the leader of the tribe of Shimon, Zimri *ben Salu*, flagrantly and in complete abandon of Torah law and the nations’ rabbinic leadership, challenged Hashem with an act of public moral desecration, Pinchas was the one who saw through the darkness and ambiguity and took action. The Torah teaches us that when Zimri came before Moshe *Rabbeinu* and the Elders, “the Elders wept at the entrance of the *Ohel Moed*” (*Bamidbar*25:1-7). *Chazal* (*Sanhedrin* 82a) explain that they wept because they had forgotten the law of *kanaim pogin bo*, the zealous one should take action and kill the perpetrator who had liasoned with the gentile woman. Pinchas was imbued with the ability to uncover the truth, to see the through the forces of darkness, recalled the *halachah* and saved the day. Thus, Putiel is far from disgraceful.

Rivkah *Imeinu* grew up in an environment that was clearly not conducive to positive spiritual growth. Yet, she rose above her murky roots and became the second Matriarch, the woman who successfully filled the void in Yitzchak’s life left by the passing of his mother, Sarah *Imeinu*. Growing up with a father such as Besuel and a brother like Lavan, she developed a perception of the destructive forces of evil. She was surrounded by it, and she was able to transcend it. In the long run, she sort of benefitted from this arrangement, since she was now able to see through Eisav’s ruse, his smokescreen of false piety. She saw him for who he was and did not fall prey to his sham. She clearly perceived the hollowness of his life, the falseness and hypocrisy. In her situation, like that of Pinchas, the murky background from which she emerged served a positive purpose.

Va’ani Tefillah

גדול להריחב תקע בשופר גדול להריחב – *Teka b’shofar gadol l’cheiruseinu. Sound the great shofar for our freedom.*

In referencing the return of the exiles to our Holy Land, we underscore that our homeland has maintained its overwhelming loyalty to us. When we were gone from the Land and it was overrun with our conquerors, the Land did not produce for our enemies. *Eretz Yisrael* is in mourning over the loss of its children. It is only when we will return, with the advent of the Final Redemption, that the blessings which relate to *Eretz Yisrael’s* fertility and sustenance-giving nature will be fulfilled. Thus, we petition Hashem thrice daily that He return His children to His Land. This will be heralded by the clarion call of the **great shofar**.

Why **great shofar**? We think also of the *shofar* blast that heralds the great Judgment Day, the *Yom HaDin* when we will all be judged. When the Torah was given to us, we trembled to the sound of the *shofar* that accompanied it. Thus, when we think of *shofar*, we think of two *shofros*, two purposes of the *shofar* – judgment and freedom. The *shofar* blast engenders excitement when it heralds the *Yovel*, Jubilee Year, the excitement mounting as we think about the ingathering of the exiles; it is then tempered when we realize that the *shofar* call is also a reminder of the Day of Judgment from which no one escapes. We think about all of this as we recite the tenth *brachah* of *Shemoneh Esrai*.

לזכר נשמת

משה יהודה ליב בן אשר אלתר חיים ז"ל ר'

נפטר כ"ד טבת תשע"ז

ת.צ.ג.ה.

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Ohr Somayach :: Talmud Tips :: Shavuot 37 – 43

For the week ending 13 January 2018 / 26 Tevet 5778

Rabbi Moshe Newman

Shaking the World’s Foundation - Shavuot 38b-39a

“Know that the entire world trembled when the Holy One, blessed is He, said at Mount Sinai: Do not take the Name of the L-rd, your G-d, in vain (*Shemot* 20:7)....”

The beraita on our daf teaches that this is the beginning of the warning that the Beit Din gives a person prior to his taking an oath stating that he is exempt from further payment. The court wants the defendant to be aware of the serious repercussions of making a false oath, and hopefully he will decide to confess to his monetary obligation — if in fact he is liable — rather than swear falsely that he has no obligation.

The beraita continues with the wording of this warning as follows: “Regarding all other transgressions of Torah law, the Torah states that G-d will ‘cleanse’ (the person who transgresses and atones — *Shemot* 34:7), but here (for a vain or false oath) the Torah states that G-d will ‘not cleanse’ the person.” (*Shemot* 20:7) In addition, there are other severe consequences regarding the unique nature of the punishment for a false oath that are explained to the person prior to his making the oath, as taught in the continuation of the beraita.

The Maharsha explains that G-d created all of existence with the Name of G-d and with the letters of the Name of G-d, and therefore the existence of the world and its foundation depend on His Name being spoken only in truth. But if one who speaks G-d’s Name in a manner of falsehood — i.e., “non-existence” — he weakens and “shakes” the very existence of the world, causing the world to tremble, as it were, and brings down upon himself unusually severe retribution.

When a Denial is an Admission - Shavuot 39a

Rava said, “One who claims that he did not borrow is, in essence, claiming that he did not pay back the loan.”

This is the ruling of Rava, who disputes the ruling of Abayei in the following case presented in our sugya:

A person — let’s call him Reuven — claims that another person — let’s call him Shimon — borrowed a hundred from him and did not pay it back. Shimon’s counterclaim is that, “Nothing ever happened (meaning, I never borrowed that money from you.)”

Then Reuven brings two witnesses to the court who testify that Shimon did indeed borrow a hundred, but they also say that they saw Reuven repay that loan.

What should be the ruling of the court? Abayei contends that since the witnesses testify that the loan was paid back, Shimon is exempt from needing to pay. Rava disagrees and states that Shimon is obligated to pay for the loan that Reuven claims was made, as proven by Reuven’s witnesses, despite the fact that these same witnesses say that Shimon already repaid this loan. Why? Rava’s explanation: “One who claims that he did not borrow is, in essence, claiming that he did not pay back the loan.”

But how is a person believed to obligate himself in the face of witnesses who say he is exempt, having repaid the loan? Testimony of witnesses has the power of credibility in court even to convict a defendant in a capital case!

One approach is that the defendant is not actually believed more than the witnesses, but since he has the ability to create a new obligation on himself, we say that this is what he is doing, and is therefore obligated to pay. Another approach is that although normally a person is not believed in matters that relate to himself (i.e., he cannot testify about himself since he is a relative of himself), here, where we are dealing with an admission of financial obligation, he is believed, due to a special Torah decree. The verse (*Shemot* 22:8) states: “When a person (defendant) claims (admits) that this amount is it (what I am obligated)...” — which teaches that he is believed to assume this financial obligation. (See *Ketzot Hachoshen*, *Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat* 34:4, for further discussion of these approaches.)

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לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה