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from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org>

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Overcoming Setbacks

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ztz"l

At first, Moses' mission seemed to be successful. He had feared that the people would not believe in him, but God had given him signs to perform, and his brother Aaron to speak on his behalf. Moses "performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped." (Ex. 4:30-31)

But then things start to go wrong, and continue going wrong. Moses' first appearance before Pharaoh is disastrous. Pharaoh refuses to recognize God and he rejects Moses' request to let the people travel into the wilderness. Then he makes life worse for the Israelites. They must still make the same quota of bricks, but now they must also gather their own straw. The people turn against Moses and Aaron: "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Ex. 5:21)

Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh to renew their request. They perform a miraculous act – they turn a staff into a snake – but Pharaoh is unimpressed. His own magicians can do likewise. Next they bring the first of the 10 Plagues, but again Pharaoh is unmoved. He will not let the Israelites go. And so it goes on, nine times. Moses does everything in his power to make Pharaoh relent and finds that nothing makes a difference. The Israelites are still slaves.

We sense the pressure Moses is under. After his first setback at the end of last week's parsha, he had turned to God and bitterly asked: "Why, Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all." (Ex. 5:22-23)

In this week's parsha of Vaera, even when God reassures him that he will eventually succeed, he replies, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why

would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?" (Ex. 6:12).

There is an enduring message here. Leadership, even of the very highest order, is often marked by failure. The first Impressionists had to arrange their own art exhibition because their work was rejected by the established Paris salons. The first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* caused a riot, with the audience booing throughout. Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime despite the fact that his brother, Theo, was an art dealer.

So it is with leaders. Lincoln faced countless setbacks during the Civil War. He was a deeply divisive figure, hated by many in his lifetime. Gandhi failed in his dream of uniting Muslims and Hindus together in a single nation. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison, accused of treason and regarded as a violent agitator. Winston Churchill was regarded as a spent force in politics by the 1930s, and even after his heroic leadership during the Second World War he was voted out of office at the first General Election once the war was over. Only in retrospect do heroes seem heroic and the many setbacks they faced reveal themselves as stepping-stones on the road to victory.

In our discussion of parshat Vayetse, we saw that in every field – high or low, sacred or secular – leaders are tested not by their successes but by their failures. It can sometimes be easy to succeed. The conditions may be favourable. The economic, political or personal climate is good. When there is an economic boom, most businesses flourish. In the first months after a general election, the successful leader carries with him or her the charisma of victory. In the first year, most marriages are happy. It takes no special skill to succeed in good times.

But then the climate changes. Eventually it always does. That is when many businesses, and politicians, and marriages fail. There are times when even the greatest people stumble. At such moments, character is tested. The great human beings are not those who never fail. They are those who survive failure, who keep on going, who refuse to be defeated, who never give up or give in. They keep trying. They learn from every mistake. They treat failure as a learning experience. And from every refusal to be defeated, they become stronger, wiser and more determined. That is the story of Moses' life in both parshat Shemot and parshat Vaera.

Jim Collins, one of the great writers on leadership, puts it well:

The signature of the truly great versus the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty, but the ability to come back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before ... The path out of darkness begins with those exasperatingly persistent individuals who are constitutionally incapable of capitulation. It's one thing to suffer a staggering defeat...and entirely another to give up on the values and aspirations that make the protracted struggle worthwhile. Failure is not so much a physical state as a state of mind; success is falling down, and getting up one more time, without end.[1]

Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner once wrote a powerful letter to a disciple who had become discouraged by his repeated failure to master Talmudic learning:

A failing many of us suffer is that when we focus on the high attainments of great people, we discuss how they are complete in this or that area, while omitting mention of the inner struggles that had previously raged within them. A listener would get the impression that these individuals sprang from the hand of their creator in a state of perfection... The result of this feeling is that when an ambitious young man of spirit and enthusiasm meets obstacles, falls and slumps, he imagines himself as unworthy of being "planted in the house of God" (Ps. 92:13)... Know, however, my dear friend, that your soul is rooted not in the tranquillity of the good inclination, but in the battle of the good inclination... The English expression, "Lose a battle and win the war," applies. Certainly you have stumbled and will stumble again, and in many battles you will fall lame. I promise you, though, that after those losing campaigns you will emerge from the war with laurels of victory on your head... The wisest of men said, "A righteous man falls seven times, but rises again." (Proverbs 24:16) Fools believe the intent of the verse is to teach us that the righteous man falls seven times and, despite this, he rises. But the knowledgeable are aware that the essence of the righteous man's rising again

is because of his seven falls.[2]

Rabbi Hutner's point is that greatness cannot be achieved without failure. There are heights you cannot climb without first having fallen.

For many years, I kept on my desk a quote from Calvin Coolidge, sent by a friend who knew how easy it is to be discouraged. It said:

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

I would only add, "And seyata diShmaya, the help of Heaven." God never loses faith in us, even if we sometimes lose faith in ourselves.

The supreme role model is Moses who, despite all the setbacks chronicled in last week's parsha and this week's, eventually became the man of whom it was said that he was "a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his energy unabated." (Deut. 34:7)

Defeats, delays and disappointments hurt. They hurt even for Moses. So if there are times when we, too, feel discouraged and demoralised, it is important to remember that even the greatest people failed. What made them great is that they kept going. The road to success passes through many valleys of failure. There is no other way. [1] Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In* (New York, Harper Collins, 2009), 123.

[2] Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, *Sefer Pachad Yitzchak: Iggerot u-Ketavim* (Gur Aryeh, 1981), no. 128, 217-18.

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Rav Frand

What Was the Kal V'Chomer?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1146 – Polling Place/AA Meeting in a Bais Avodah Zara – A Problem? Good Shabbos!

What Was the Kal V'Chomer?

Parshas Shemos ends with Moshe's complaint to the Almighty: "Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he made matters worse for Your nation, and You have not saved Your people." [Shemos 5:23]. In the pesukim at the beginning of Parshas Vayera, Hashem appears to Moshe and tells him to again speak to the Nation of Israel and tell them that they are on the verge of redemption. However, when Moshe does speak to Bnei Yisrael "they do not listen to him because of shortness of spirit and hard work" [Shemos 6:9].

At that point, Hashem tells Moshe to go back and speak to Pharaoh once more. Moshe responds with a Kal V'Chomer argument: "Behold the Children of Israel did not listen to me (even though this would be "good news" for them); how can I expect Pharaoh to listen to me (when this will be "bad news" for him) and I am of uncircumcised lips." [Shemos 6:12]. Rashi notes that this is one of ten places where we find a Kal v'Chomer argument in the Torah.

Many commentaries point out that this Kal V'Chomer apparently has flawed logic: The pasuk explicitly states why Klal Yisrael did not listen to Moshe Rabbeinu. They did not listen because of "kotzer ruach v'Avodah kashe" (because of their depression and oppression). Pharaoh was a free man sitting in his palace. He might well be in a state of mind to pay attention to what Moshe was going to tell him!

This is a famous question that everyone asks. The sefer Ohr HaYashar answers very logically that the Kal V'Chomer is a legitimate Kal V'Chomer. Why? The truth of the matter is that in Parshas Shemos, when Moshe Rabbeinu came to Klal Yisrael, they did believe him [Shemos 4:31]. The Ohr HaYashar interprets the Kal V'Chomer Moshe argued as follows: "If the people who at one time believed me and were willing to hear my message –

but now after my promises did not materialize and their situation has deteriorated, they no longer believe me, then certainly Pharaoh who never believed me in the first place, and on the contrary, was responsible for why it got worse – he certainly is not going to believe me now!

I saw a second interpretation in the sefer Darash Mordechai from Rav Mordechai Druk: He rejects the "pircha" (the question posed to destroy the logical argument). The "pircha" was – the Jews didn't believe Moshe because they were oppressed slaves, but Pharaoh was a free man – he might believe Moshe. Rav Druk observes that Pharaoh was not a free man. He was almost as oppressed as the people were. Why is that? Pharaoh was oppressed because he was forced to live up to the image that he created about himself that he was a deity!

Chazal say that Pharaoh had a major problem in trying to portray himself as a god. Gods do not need to go to the bathroom and that is one problem Pharaoh could not solve. What did he do? Once a day, in the early morning, before anyone else got up, he went down to the Nile and took care of his bodily needs. Imagine that – he could only go once a day and he had to ensure that nobody else saw him! Pharaoh was as oppressed as Klal Yisrael. This is not being facetious. He was so obsessed with his self-image and the image that he needed to maintain – that he literally drove himself to self-torture. He had to watch his every move! Pharaoh too was a slave. He was a slave to his own visions of grandeur. So, if Bnei Yisrael could not listen to Moshe because of their status as slaves – all the more so Pharaoh, who suffered a more intense force of slavery, would not be able to listen to Moshe!

Prayer Helps

After Pharaoh begged Moshe to remove the plague of Frogs from Egypt, "Moshe cried out (Va'Yitz'ak Moshe) to Hashem concerning the Frogs He sent to Pharaoh" [Shemos 8:8]. The Torah does not use this expression of Va'Yitz'ak by the other plagues. The Torah says that Moshe prayed (Va'Ye'etar) when requesting the cessation of the other makkos, but not this expression of "crying out" (tz'a'kah).

The Zohar explains that tz'a'kah is a more dramatic or more panicked form of prayer. Va'Yitz'ak shows an urgency. What was Moshe Rabbeinu's urgency in stopping the plague of Frogs? Why not let Pharaoh suffer a little longer?

In our minds, Hitler y'mach shmo (may his name be obliterated) is the personification of evil to Klal Yisrael. That is because the Nazi's atrocities are relatively fresh in our memories. Pharaoh was as big a Rasha as Hitler, if not worse. He bathed in Jewish blood. He took Jewish babies and squashed them into the walls of the pyramids. It was no less horrible than the Holocaust. So – Pharaoh is feeling the pressure of the Tzefardim – what is the problem? Why didn't Moshe take his time with a long leisurely Shmoneh Esrei when he prayed for cessation of the plague?

The Rebbe, Reb Bunim of Psische, asks this question. He answers that Moshe Rabbeinu was trying to prove another point. The whole purpose of the plagues was to demonstrate that there is a Ribono shel Olam that rules the world, and that He is the Master of the universe. He controls the world.

However, Moshe wanted to demonstrate here that there is another "Power" in the world as well, and that is the Power of Prayer (Koach haTefillah). Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to show that despite the fact that the Almighty wanted Pharaoh to suffer, there is something that – as it were – could stop the Will of the Ribono shel Olam. This is as much a fundamental of our faith as the fact that there is a Ribono shel Olam and that He runs the world and cares about what happens in the world. Another fundamental belief of our faith is the idea that prayer helps.

By employing the most intense form of Tefila – "Va'Yitz'ak," Moshe wanted to show the amazing power of prayer. I can stop a steaming locomotive in its tracks. Let the plague of Frogs end immediately!

A Novel Interpretation of an Ambiguous Pasuk

By the plague of Arov (Mixed Animals), the pasuk says "Behold if you do not send out My people I will incite against you, your servants, your people,

and your houses the mixture of wild beasts; and the houses of Egypt will be filled with the mixture of wild animals and even the ground upon which they are” [Shemos 8:17]. Egypt was invaded by an army of wild animals. But what is the pashut pshat (simple reading) of the above cited pasuk?

The Vilna Gaon offers an incredible explanation. The Bartenura on the Mishneh in Kilayim [8:5] mentions that there is a type of animal (referred to as Adnei haSadeh in the Mishna), which obviously no longer exist today, that had an umbilical cord which was attached to the ground. If someone cut the umbilical cord of this animal, the animal would die. The pasuk reads as follows: All the wild animals that existed in the world at that time attacked Egypt, including this unique animal. But how would this animal come – since it is attached to the ground in some far away location? The pasuk therefore states that this animal came – together with the land upon which it resided! This is a fantastic interpretation.

However, I would like to share an interpretation which is a little closer to the simple reading of the pasuk! Those who have an appreciation of Hebrew grammar should enjoy this interpretation immensely.

The sefer HaKesav v’Ha’Kabbalah – like the Malbim and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch – analyzes the linguistics of a pasuk. He asks – what is the simple interpretation of this pasuk? He says that the phrase “the ground upon which they are” refers to the land upon which the houses that will be inundated with wild animals stand. But he then adds that it could refer to something else entirely. He says the word “v’Gam” (which literally means ‘and also’) could be a form of the word Gamam. (There are certain words in Hebrew that have double letters in the second and third position of the shoresh (root) of the word. For instance, the word Balal (Beis Lamed Lamed) can also be written with the last letter dropped – as Bal (Beis Lamed). Such words are called “kefulim” (doubled words). There is a word in the Hebrew language called Gamam (Gimel Mem Mem), which means to cut up or to dissect. He cites places in Mishnayos and in the Book of Doniel where we have such a usage.

The HaKesav v’Ha’Kabbalah explains the expression “v’Gam ha’Adamah asher ale-ha” (and also the land upon which it was), not as “and also” (v’Gam) but as Gamam – meaning these wild animals would rip up the land of Egypt to the extent that it would no longer be possible to plant there. According to this explanation, the word v’Gam is not a conjunction – and also – but rather it is a verb. V’Gam – as if to say v’Gamam es ha’Adamah asher ale-ha.

So, the HaKesav v’Ha’Kabbalah writes that part of the plague was that the wild animals would dig up and make holes in the ground to the extent that it would no longer be fit for agriculture.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com
Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week’s write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. ...A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2020 by Torah.org. Do you have a question or comment? Feel free to contact us on our website. Join the Jewish Learning Revolution! Torah.org: The Judaism Site brings this and a host of other classes to you every week. Visit <http://torah.org> to get your own free copy of this mailing or subscribe to the series of your choice. Need to change or stop your subscription? Please visit our subscription center, <http://torah.org/subscribe/> -- see the links on that page. Permission is granted to redistribute, but please give proper attribution and copyright to the author and Torah.org. Both the author and Torah.org reserve certain rights. Email copyrights@torah.org for full information. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/learn@torah.org> (410) 602-1350

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Ha-Rav SHLOMO AVINER answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here’s a sample: Wedding Hall which also Davening with Earplugs

Q: Is it permissible to Daven the Shemoneh Esrei with earplugs in order to block out people who are Davening Shemoneh Esrei loudly?

A: Yes.

Ahavat Yisrael

Q: I have a friend who is filled with hatred of Yisrael, and says all the time: Resha'im (evil ones) and Erev Rav. What should I suggest for him to learn?

A: Mesilat Yesharim, especially Chapter 11 and the end of Chapter 19.

Yehoshua as Military Chief of Staff

Q: How was it that Yehoshua did not know what the noise was in the camp during the incident of the Golden Calf, and he thought it was the sound of war (Shemot 32:17-18)? After all, he was the military Chief of Staff!

A: Quite simply, he was far away and it was hard to hear. But the Meshech Chochma explains that it was Moshe Rabbenu's role to stop Am Yisrael from the sin of the Golden Calf and not Yehoshua's. Yehoshua therefore heard incorrectly. This is similar to the Gemara in Taanit (21a) about Rabbi Yochanan and Ilfa who left the Yeshiva to work because they had no money, and only Rabbi Yochanan heard a Divine voice to return to the Yeshiva. Since it was only meant for Rabbi Yochanan, Ilfa did not hear it.

Deceitful Declaration at Hotel

Q: We are ordering a hotel room, and although we have 4 children, we only need 3 beds for them. Is it permissible to say that we are only coming with 3 children?

A: Ask the hotel directly.

Paintball with the Rav

Q: May students play paintball with the Rav of their class?

A: No. It's disrespectful.

Prehistoric Man

Q: Is it true that prehistoric man existed before Adam?

A: Maran Ha-Rav Kook writes an affirmative response based on the Zohar.

Greeting a Non-Jew on Shabbat

Q: Is it permissible to greet a Non-Jew with Shabbat Shalom?

A: It's irrelevant. Shalom is sufficient.

Traveling Outside of Israel

Q: When my wife and I got married we were not religious and I promised to travel overseas with her. When we became religious we learned that leaving Israel is forbidden. Now I have work abroad but I don't agree to travel for leisure. My wife claims that my work takes priority and this causes a rift between us. Is there any loophole to permit sightseeing?

A: Your wife may accompany you to help you somewhat with your work. You won't be alone and you may also sightsee for a few days.

Neighbor's air-conditioner

Q: My neighbor regularly places the drainpipe of his air-conditioner in my garden. I approached him on a number of occasions, to no avail. What should I do?

A: Summon him to a Din Torah (Rabbinical court). If he refuses to appear, consult the municipal authorities.

Serving Non-Kosher Food

Q: May I serve non-Kosher food and beverages for people to taste at a supermarket?

A: Absolutely not.

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Pearls of Wisdom

Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser

It's All A Matter Of Will

By Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser - 2 Shevat 5781 – January 14, 2021

“Moshe spoke before Hashem saying: Bnei Yisrael have not listened to me,

how will Pharaoh listen to me? And I have closed lips” (Shemos 6:12).

Rashi states that this argument is one of 10 kal vachomers in the Torah. R’ Yitzchak of Volozhin says this kal vachomer needs clarification, though. After all, the Torah clearly states that the Jewish people didn’t listen to Moshe “because of shortness of breath and hard labor.” Pharaoh meanwhile lived in a palace, calmly ensconced on his throne. So it doesn’t follow that because Bnei Yisrael didn’t listen to Moshe, Pharaoh wouldn’t either.

R’ Yitzchok Volozhin offers the following explanation of this kal vachomer in his Sefer Peh Kadosh: If an individual with a severe speech impediment approached a prisoner who has been incarcerated for a very long time and offered to work on his release, the prisoner would patiently listen to him as he struggled to form his words because the person represents hope and freedom.

However, if that same individual tried to speak to the warden about the prisoner, the warden would have no patience for him at all. He would dismiss him and suggest he send someone else to speak on the prisoner’s behalf.

Moshe Rabbeinu was arguing that if the Jewish people wouldn’t listen to him even though he was offering them release from harsh servitude, why would Pharaoh listen to him?

It’s interesting to note that sometimes an individual has difficulty hearing, but when he is interested or sympathetic, he suddenly hears very well. Similarly, a person may think he is unable to accomplish a certain task, yet when he is strongly motivated, he suddenly finds himself able to harness the stamina and determination necessary to complete the undertaking. A similar situation: Someone may have an overwhelming fear of the dark, and refuse to enter a dark tunnel, for example. But if he is offered \$1,000 to go in for a minute, he will overcome his phobia.

All three individuals can do what was previously thought unachievable because their will and resolve unearth hidden strengths and embolden them to succeed.

This lesson brings to mind a depiction of the great Steipler Gaon by HaGaon Rav Eliezer Turk. Growing up in Hornesteipel, the Steipler suffered serious inflammations of the ear from the harsh cold weather. As the years passed, he began to lose his hearing. Petitioners who came to the great gaon would have to write their requests on a piece of paper, and he would respond to them in a loud voice.

Yet, curiously, if a talmid chacham came to the gaon to converse divrei Torah with him, there was no need for written communication. The Steipler would listen attentively and speak as if he could hear perfectly.

How is this possible? Since he was especially passionate about Torah, he exerted every effort to focus his heart, mind, and powers to listen.

Similarly, it is told of the Brisker Rav that when he was elderly, he was often distracted when people would engage in idle chatter. He would even doze off sometimes. But when they conversed in divrei Torah, he was alert and participated fully in the discussion.

Rav Yerachmiel Boyer related that when an ophthalmologist came to the home of HaGaon Rav Shach, the rosh yeshiva of Ponovezh, to check his vision, he took out the Sefer Ketzos HaChoshen (by R’ Aryeh Leib Heller) and asked him to read from it. He was astounded when Rav Shach began to read flawlessly and enthusiastically, without a moment’s hesitation.

He was sure Rav Shach was reciting it from memory because he knew that the rosh yeshiva required much stronger lenses than what he currently had. The ophthalmologist then took out the Sefer Shev Shmaitza (also by R’ Heller) and Rav Shach once again faultlessly read the lines. However, when the doctor took out a secular book, it was immediately obvious that the rosh yeshiva needed stronger lenses.

Rav Nosson Wachtfogel takes this concept a step further in commenting on the medrash in Vayikra Rabbah which states: If a person is meritorious – i.e., he is a tzaddik – he is told, “You preceded the creation of the world,” and if he is not – i.e., he is a rasha – he is told, “Even the lowly mosquito preceded you.” Rav Wachtfogel notes that there are many degrees of achievement between the two extremes of a tzaddik and a rasha. Why is reference only

made to these two?

Rav Wachtfogel explains that the medrash is referring to one’s spiritual aspirations in life. One either desires and yearns to achieve an ever loftier spiritual level – or the antithesis. And one has to be tenacious and mobilize his energies to succeed in his endeavors.

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פרשת וארא

Qassem Soleimani and the Ten Plagues

Simon Wolf

As we discussed last week, Parshat Shmot deals with the development of the leadership of the nascent nation of Yisrael. It also lays the foundation of God’s plan for the Jews and His expectations of their leaders. This week’s parsha continues the “building of a nation” by establishing God’s credentials and is a forceful response to Paraoh’s query and doubt (5,2), “who is God (יְקוֹק) that I should listen to his voice to send out the Jews; I do not know God (יְקוֹק) and I will not send out the Israelites.”

The mission or purpose of the plagues is to establish God’s unequivocal and irrefutable power and control over the world. In order to understand the plagues, one must first define what would demonstrate the “power” that God is trying to display. In the past, people would define super-powers or powerful countries by the fire power they could bring to bear in the battlefield. This approach culminates in WWII where the warring sides would bomb each other into submission. While some of the attacks were targeted, much of the war involved flattening whole cities and resulted in tremendous “collateral” damage in civilian casualties. In order to avoid a prolonged and costly land invasion of Japan, this reaches its climax with the American nuclear bombing of Japan which took a huge human toll, but finally forces the Japanese into submission. With the rise of the nuclear age and the nuclear arms race, the super-powers slowly began to realize that nuclear weapons are a means of deterrence, but not a vehicle for offensive or even defensive waging of war. This was only exacerbated by the advent of asymmetric warfare which led to a new definition of power. Power then became defined not only by raw strength, but by the ability and the knowledge of one to carry out precise and targeted attacks. This was on full display with the recent targeted elimination of Qassem Soleimani. In this week’s shiur, we will attempt to show that the ten plagues were an evolving and developing lesson in demonstrating God’s tremendous power, from the raw destruction unleashed by God on Egypt to the precision and knowledge demonstrated in the execution of the plagues that finally convert Paraoh and his people and the Jews into believers in God (יְקוֹק).

The initial plague of Dam (Blood) is a broad strike at the Nile River, the key to Egypt’s sustenance, the heart of Egypt’s economic success and the focal point of much of its religious worship. It is the initial salvo in God’s establishing his credentials by attacking and “shaming” the Egyptian’s god. The plague leaves a trail of dead fish and rotting in the Nile (7,21), but is little more than an inconvenience for the Egyptians (7,24). In addition, the sorcerers’ ability to replicate the plague only serves to further neuter the plagues potency (7,22). It lures Paraoh and his people into thinking that they are dealing with a great magician, but not a transcendental all powerful God.

The plague is the baseline from which we will slowly and progressively see God’s power and control unveiled as we move from plague to plague.

The plague of Tzfardeah (Frogs) is not much different than Dam in that the sorcerers are able to also replicate this plague (8,3). The plague unleashes an unbridled and uncontrolled frog infestation. It is slightly more potent than the plague of Dam since it creates a situation that is uncomfortable enough to precipitate Paraoh’s requesting of Moshe to remove the plague (8,4). At this point, we get our first glimpse at God’s unveiling of his precision and power when Moshe offers Paraoh the choice of when exactly to end the plague (8,5-6) and declares that upon the cessation of the plague, the frogs will only be found in the Nile (8,7). Paraoh takes the bait and asks that the frogs be removed the next day (8,6). Moshe immediately prays to God and God

acquiesces to Moshe's plea that He fulfill the wish of Paraoth that the plague subside on the subsequent day.

The plague of Kinim (Lice) begins the process of demonstrating God's unique abilities when the sorcerers are forced to admit to Paraoth that for the first time they are unable to replicate this plague. This leads them to the conclusion that the plague must be "a finger of God" (8,15). There is still a long way to go in convincing Paraoth and his followers of God's absolute dominion. Although some progress has been made, the sorcerers downplay and limit their acknowledgement of God by declaring the plague to be only a finger of God and not a hand of God (Ramban) or the result of a higher power (אֱלֹהִים, not יְיָ) that is not necessarily acting for the benefit of the Jews (Ibn Ezra).

The plague of Arov (Swarms of Animals – Rashi, Wolves – Rashbam, Smaller Animals – Ibn Ezra HaKatzar, Snakes and the like that emerge from the ground – Seforno, Gnats - Koren) takes a clear step-up in the precision with which it is carried out. For the first time (8,18) God declares that the land of Goshen, the dwelling place of the Jews will be free of the upcoming plague. This development not only sheds light on the plague of Arov, but possibly also on the preceding plagues as well. According to the Ramban, the reason God needed to specify this distinction by Arov was because the previous plagues were stationary (do not naturally spread), therefore it was not surprising that they were not found in Goshen, whereas the nature of the plague of Arov was to spread and move (Rashbam), therefore it was unique that it did not reach the land of Goshen. One could also suggest that the reason for the declared separation by Arov is either because the previous plagues were also found in Goshen (Malbim) or because the earlier plagues were not dangerous or life-threatening and, therefore, there was no reason to spare the land of Goshen or maybe even the Jews. Be that as it may, as opposed to the previous plagues, it is clear here that God is demonstrating his capabilities to not only bring punishing plagues, but to control and manage the extent of those plagues. Not only is there a powerful God (8,6), but He is also actively engaged in the world – ki ani Hashem b'kerev ha'aretz (8,18).

The plague of Dever (Pestilence) seems to follow the same pattern as Arov when God declares (9,4) that once again He will distinguish between the Jews and the Egyptians with the regards to the devastating impact of the Dever. If one looks closely, they will note that there is a nuanced difference in the nature of the distinction drawn by the two plagues. By Arov, the land of Goshen is indiscriminately spared from the plague, irrespective as to whether the inhabitant is an Egyptian or a Jew (see 8,18 and Malbim there). On the other hand, by Dever, the distinction is between the Jewish and Egyptian owned flocks, irrespective of their location (9,4). That means Jewish flocks in Egypt were spared and Egyptian flocks in Goshen were stricken by the plague. Once again, this demonstrates God's even finer control over nature and His ability to direct its impact on particular targets. The Egyptians are clearly impressed with this additional demonstration of power, because the Torah not only tells us that not a single Jewish animal died, but emphasizes that Paraoth specifically sent to check as to whether any Jewish animals had died in the plague (9,6-7).

The plague of Shechin (Boils and Blisters) continues the pattern of the previous two plagues. Only here instead of the distinction being between the land of Egypt and the land of Goshen or the animals of the Egyptians and the Jews, it now also distinguishes between the Jews and the Egyptians themselves. The "airborne" plague (9,8) miraculously only affects the Egyptians and their animals and not the Jews and their animals.

The plague of Barad (Hail) continues the pattern of drawing distinction between the land of Egypt and the land of Goshen (9,26), but here the task is all the more difficult. Each one of the plagues of Arov, Dever, Shechin and Barad are successively harder to control. Incrementally, it becomes harder in each plague to rationalize as to why the land of Goshen or the Jews should be spared the impact of the plague. There are no state lines or boundaries when it comes to weather or precipitation from the sky (Ramban) and there is no reason Goshen should have been spared the impact of the Barad unless

God was controlling the situation. In addition, God's ability to manipulate nature is on full display in this plague since this was no ordinary Barad. The Torah tells us (9,24) that there was fire inside the hail and that miraculously against their nature the fire and water were able to coexist in their mission to carry out God's will.

The next two plagues increasingly continue to demonstrate God's power by exhibiting his ability to exert control even over items that seem completely uncontrollable. The plague of Arbeh (Locust) is not only exceptional in the swiftness by which it is brought upon Egypt (10,13), the intensity of the plague (10,14-15), the utter destruction that it wrought (10,15) and the reaction of Paraoth (10,16), but also in the way that the plague is stopped. Anyone who has ever experienced a locust plague knows that even when the plague subsides, there is a large trail of dead locusts left in every location upon which the locust have visited their destruction. In this instance, the Torah tells us (10,19) that with the same expediency that the plague was brought upon Egypt, it was reversed and that not a single locust was left in the land of Egypt. The trail of the locust's devastating destruction was complete (10,15), but amazingly, lo nishar Arbeh echad, there was not a single trace of their presence (10,19).

The plague of Choshech (Darkness) takes this to the next step where God controls a completely intangible item. The Torah describes the darkness as being so absolute and pervasive that no one saw their fellow man for three days (10, 22-23). Whether it was simply the absence of daylight (Ibn Ezra) or a tangible darkness (Rashi, Ramban), it should have affected everyone in the vicinity. Yet, the Jews had light in their dwellings (10,23) and moreover even the more textually based commentators (Rashbam) add that even a Jew found in an Egyptians dwelling had light. In this penultimate plague, God successfully demonstrates His tremendous power and fine control over even the most amorphous and intangible of creations. At this point, much to Paraoth's chagrin, the establishing of God's credentials have been so convincing that Moshe, His representative, is now held in very high regard in Egypt (11,3). Though, it will still take one more plague to finally and irrefutably demonstrate who the true God is.

Of course, the ultimate demonstration and pinnacle of God's power is found in the final of the ten plagues. It is the climax of the progression of the plagues. The plague of Makat Bechorot (Killing of the First Born) is incredible not only in God's unleashing of death upon the Egyptians while sparing the Jews, but in His ability to kill only the eldest born child in each Egyptian family. No human being could be that precise, discerning or knowledgeable to carry out such a pinpoint attack. It is precisely this plague of death which finally convinces Paraoth and his people of the true God and causes them to accede to God's demand that the Jews be let out of Egypt to worship Him.

As an addendum, it is worthwhile to note that the midrashei chazal serve to reinforce the thesis we have established here, by superimposing it on all the plagues. For instance, the midrash (Shmot Rabbah Parsha 9) describes how when a Jew and an Egyptian shared the same water, when the Jew drank from the jug it was water while when the Egyptian drank from the jug it turned to blood. While in the Torah, the plague of Dam does not indicate any such distinction, Chazal are taking the realized conclusion from the culmination of the plagues, the demonstration of God's power and precision, and superimposing it on all the plagues. This serves to reinforce and emphasize the main purpose and theme of the plagues in every individual plague.

Shabbat Shalom

<https://www.torahweb.org/parsha/breishis/mikeitz.html>

Rabbi Hershel Schachter

The Proper Approach to Analysis

The Gemarah distinguishes between the Greek language and the Greek philosophy. The Greek language was considered very eloquent and, based on a possuk in Chumash, the chachomim permitted a sefer Torah to be written

in Greek. However, the chachomim frowned upon chochma Yevonis. The Gemarah has a comment that Olam Hazeh is compared to night time. The Mesilas Yesharim explains this Gemarah by pointing out that in the dark of the night people can make two typed of mistakes. Sometimes they can see a human being from a distance and think mistakenly that it is a lamppost; and sometimes they can see a lamppost from a distance and think that it is a human being. Similarly in this world, it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between right and wrong. Sometimes we will be facing a mitzvah and think that it is an aveira and sometimes the reverse. Dovid Ha'melech says in Tehillim that the words of the Torah are compared to a candle and a torch in that they give illumination. The Midrash explains that when one begins to learn, the Torah only illuminates like a candle but the more one learns, the gates of learning open up before him, one thing leads to another, until all of the gates will open up and the Torah will illuminate like a torch. Knowledge is compared to a light that illuminates the darkness. We daven to Hashem every day v'hoer eininu b'sorosecha, i.e. that we should succeed in Torah learning to illuminate our lives. When the possuk says in Parshas Bereishis that there was darkness all over the world, the Midrash has a comment that this is referring to the Greek philosophy. The Gemarah has a famous statement that there is much chochma to be found amongst all of the nations of the world but not Torah. Torah means knowledge that guides us to know the difference between right and wrong, between mitzvah and aveira.

It is said over in the name of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik that in addition to the thirteen principles that guide us in deriving halochos by reading in between the lines in the chumash, there is a fourteenth middah, namely sevara (logical analysis). However, it is also recorded in the name of Rav Caim Soloveitchik that he instructed his sons that they should not dare to suggest a sevara in learning before they complete all of Talmud Bavli with Rashi. Each discipline has its own self-contained logic. One cannot impose outside sevaras onto the Gemarah. The sevaras have to flow from within the sugya.

The Gemarah tells us that Avraham Avinu volunteered to observe all of the mitzvos on his own even though he was never commanded to do so., The midrash elaborates on this idea and says that Avraham Avinu was able to understand on his own, intuitively, what the mitzvos were. Where did this intuition come from? It is traditionally understood based on the midrashim in Parshas Bereishis which state that when Hashem created the world He looked into the Torah first and created the world accordingly. So in a certain sense, the Torah was the blueprint of the world, and therefore if one looks at the world he should be able to figure out what the blueprint was.

However, when looking at the world one has to take the correct approach to understanding it. The Greek philosophers did not believe in experimentation, since they felt that manual labor is only for slaves and free men should always be involved in thinking only. Instead of collecting the data from experimentation, they would philosophize about everything, even physical phenomena. But one cannot impose outside sevaras on science, and therefore this approach led them to incorrect understandings.

It is well known that Rav Chaim Soloveitchik developed a new analytic approach to Gemarah study. It is well known that in order to answer many apparent contradictions in the Gemarah Rav Chaim would explain that the two Gemarahs that seem to be contradictory are dealing with two different halochos. Many students of Gemarah today imitate this style of Rav Chaim even when there are no contradictory passages in the Gemarah and they always will be splitting hairs in distinguishing between two dinim that seem to be identical. The Malbim in his commentary in Parshas Miketz points out that Pharaoh had two different dreams and all of his advisors and scholars were explaining to him that the two dreams were "tzvei dinim" and contained two unrelated messages about the future. Yosef came and explained to Pharaoh that even though they were two different dreams, they actually comprised one big dream with one overall interpretation. Logical sevaras are certainly valuable but they all have to flow from within the sugya and not to be imposed from without.

More divrei Torah from Rabbi Schachter

More divrei Torah on Parshas Mikeitz

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Va'eira

פרשת וארא תשפ"א

ולא שמעו אל משה מקצר רוח ומעבודה קשה

But they didn't listen to Moshe from impatience of spirit and from hard labor. (6:9)

One would think that, if someone were to appear at the domicile of a down-trodden slave to inform him that the end of his bondage is near and he would soon be a free man, his immediate reaction would be joy – overwhelming joy. Instead, when Moshe *Rabbeinu* informed *Klal Yisrael* that Pharaoh would no longer be their Master, they seemed impatient and not really interested in hearing his message of liberation. The Torah explains that they were victims of *kotzer ruach*, which *Sforno* interprets as: *l'hisbonein*, to comprehend, think it over; in short, they were plagued with an inability to process Moshe's message. They were unable to believe that the end was near, and they would soon be leaving for the Promised Land. Thus, *Sforno* explains, unlike Avraham *Avinu* whose *emunah*, faith, in Hashem was impeccable, they just could not get it together. As a result, they did not enter the Land. In place of them, their children, who were raised on a steady diet of *emunah* and *bitachon*, trust in Hashem, believed in Hashem, and entered the Land.

What is the meaning of *kotzer ruach*, and why was this "affliction" so overpowering that it caused the members of that generation to ignore Moshe's wonderful news and continue with business as usual, as if nothing had changed? *Kli Yakar* explains: *Neshimassan ketzarah k'ish mevuhal*, "Their breathing was short, like a person who is anxious, terrified, unable to think properly. Furthermore, Moshe posited that the nation had no interest in leaving Egypt. Indeed, if the people did not indicate their desire to leave, why should Pharaoh extend himself? What prevented the nation from thinking properly; processing their predicament; having a strong desire to leave their misery?"

Denial. Refusing to acknowledge that something is wrong is a way of coping with adversity of all shapes and forms. Initially, short-term denial gives one time to adjust, to think, to accept, to prepare a coping mechanism. Long-term denial is dangerous. It does not allow one to acknowledge that he/she is confronting a difficult situation, thus downplaying the potentially devastating consequences. One can have a medical problem that requires a doctor's examination to diagnose the problem, severity and plan of treatment. When one denies the existence of the problem in the hope that it will vanish, he deprives himself of the appropriate action that might alleviate or cure the problem, until it is too late.

Klal Yisrael was having a difficult time accepting that they had plunged from honored status to wretched slaves. They entered Egypt as Yosef's family, and now Pharaoh no longer remembered Yosef. This was a difficult reality to accept. Their short-term denial became long-term, until they accepted this as their way of life. When Moshe came and informed them that Hashem would liberate them, their response was: "Why do we need liberation? We are not slaves."

This form of denial has been plaguing us throughout history. From those who refused to leave Egypt (and succumbed during the plague of darkness) because they denied that they were slaves, to the most recent denials of anti-Semitism (it just does not exist), we have allowed denial to assuage our consciousness, believing that if we say that we have no problem, it will go away. The consequence of denial can be devastating. If a person has an illness which he ignores, he will eventually succumb to it. If he acknowledges the illness and battles it head on, he has hope for survival.

Likewise, with the difficulties that present themselves throughout our lives – both personal and national. They are messages from Hashem, messages to which He wants us to respond. By ignoring them, the portent of the message will not go away. If we want to survive, we must listen, digest and respond to the message.

A well-known story relates the reaction of the *Klausenberger Rebbe* to the reading of the *Tochachah*, Rebuke. It was *Parshas Ki Savo*, and the custom is to read the ninety-eight maledictions quietly and quickly because we do not dwell on curses. We dwell on blessings. The entire future of *Klal Yisrael* is foretold in this *parsha*. Sadly, not all of it brings joy to our hearts. These curses represent punishments which we would receive for distancing ourselves from Hashem.

It was shortly after the *Rebbe* arrived in America, broken in body, but not in spirit, a survivor of the Nazi's diabolical plan to murder European Jewry. That *Shabbos*, the *Rebbe* was listening to the *baal korei*, Torah reader, follow the custom of reading the *Tochachah* in a quiet, somber tone, when he banged on the lectern and called out, "Louder!"

The *baal korei* raised his voice a few decibels, but it was not enough to satisfy the *Rebbe*, who once again called out, "Louder, even louder! Read it the way you read any other *parsha*." The *baal korei* followed the *Rebbe's* instructions and read the *Tochachah* in the same tenor as he read the rest of the *parsha*. After he concluded, he asked the *Rebbe* why he had insisted on him reading in his usual loud tone.

"Let me explain to you why, in past generations, the *Tochachah* was read in a low tone. To the people of those generations, these curses were distant, unimaginable, mere words which they wanted to run through quickly, without dwelling on them. Our generation has sadly lived through the curses. We experienced firsthand what no other generation experienced. We are entitled to read the *Tochachah* out loud."

The *Rebbe* did not live in denial. He affirmed what he had experienced. We neither run nor hide from the curses, regardless of their message. We acknowledge, accept and take responsibility upon ourselves to make the necessary changes demanded of us. Denial is equivalent to lacking faith.

ויעשו כן חרטומי מצרים בלטיהם

The necromancers of Egypt did the same by means of their incantations. (7:22)

Pharaoh did not heed Moshe *Rabbeinu's* warning. Hashem instructed Moshe to have Aharon strike the Nile and stretch out his hand to bring the plague of *dam*, blood, all over the land. The reaction of Pharaoh and his magicians defies comprehension: they also demonstrated the magical ability to transform the water into blood. Is this sane? Imagine a fire breaks out in a city inhabited primarily by imbeciles. So what do the imbeciles do in reaction to the fire that has broken out in one end of the city? They start another fire in the other end of the city! Is this not what happened in Egypt? Moshe turned the water into blood. Rather than attempt to counter Moshe's plague and somehow turn the blood back into water, the imbeciles create more blood! Totally ludicrous!

Let us first address the question that is on everyone's lips: Why blood? Ten plagues struck Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Why did Hashem select blood to be the first plague? Hashem does nothing without a reason that imparts a message. What is the message of the blood?

Horav Nachman Breslover, zl (Likutei MoHaran), explains that the primary concept of *teshuvah*, repentance/return, is achieved when a person hears his humiliation, accepts it silently, and, yet, *v'yidom v'yishtok*, remains mute and silent. The Egyptian Pharaoh and magicians could have altered the course of history by acquiescing to Moshe and Aharon's message of the blood.

Instead, like a bunch of fools, they made more blood. It was not the blood which Moshe was underscoring, but the *dam* related to *yidom*, mute, that he attempted to convey to them. Keep your mouth shut. Accept the humiliation with dignity and remain silent. This is your chance to make it good. Instead, they made more blood!

Are we any different? We reach out to those who are distant from Torah and *mitzvos*. They see clearly that the path they have chosen to live is doomed.

Yet, they make more blood and continue living the way they have – with absolutely nothing to show for it. All one has to do is ask: "What do you do that is remotely Jewish?" They have no answers, because the answer is "nothing."

Rav Lazar Brody calls attention to the word *chartum*, which is also translated as nose. A fool is someone who cannot see beyond his nose. His vision is myopic and stigmatized. The *chartumei Mitzrayim*, Egyptian magicians, looked at the truth, but refused to see it. They ignored its message, because it meant acquiescing and confessing to having wasted their lives believing in a worthless pagan. They were unable to transform the blood back into water. They could only make more blood.

The *baal teshuvah* transforms the passion/anger of blood (when he listens to his humiliation and remains silent) into water. *Ikar ha'teshuvah she'yishma bizyono v'yishtok*. Had Pharaoh kept his mouth shut, had he accepted Heavenly justice with acquiescence and love, he would have emerged a king who became a penitent, who transformed blood to water. As a result of his obstinacy, he was "awarded" nine more plagues, and he lived to see his nation devastated.

The *Pele Yoetz* writes, "A person who is humiliated should sit quietly alone and remain silent (in acceptance of his shame). Not only should he be quiet, he should not in any way manifest anger (of any sort) in response to his humiliation." This is a tall order. It is one thing to quietly reconcile to humiliation, it is totally another not to become angered by it. When one thinks about the reward that he will receive, however, it likely compensates for it.

Horav Chizkiyah Medini, zl, was a Torah scholar without peer. He is remembered for his extraordinary anthology on *halachah*, an 18 volume encyclopedia entitled, *Sdei Chemed*. Even in contemporary times, with computer search engines that have access to thousands of *sefarim*, the *Sdei Chemed* stands out as a work of sheer brilliance, representing a Torah scholar who had access to the entire corpus of Torah literature. This set of *sefarim* received widespread acclaim by a world of Torah scholars who were the greatest and most knowledgeable pundits of their respective generations. Rarely has a volume of Torah literature received such outstanding unanimous praise. The author attributed this unusual attention to an incident that happened to him when he was younger, and for which he felt the *Sdei Chemed* was his Heavenly reward.

Rav Chizkiyah was a member of a *kollel* comprised of prodigious young scholars, of which he was among the elite. His exceptional *hasmadah*, diligence in study, coupled with his uncanny scholarship, caused him to stand out among his peers. When *Chazal (Pirkei Avos 4:28)* teach that *kinaah, taavah* and *kavod*, "jealousy, desire and pursuit of honor drive a person from this world," they are not referring only to people of base character; even scholars who are devoted to Torah study are able to fall prey to these character flaws. Thus, we understand that another member of this *kollel* could have been consumed with envy over all the attention given to the young *Rav Chizkiyah*. Envy is a shameful character trait, and, when one is envious, he should swallow his pride and move on. Sadly, this tormented fellow could not live unless he succeeded in destroying *Rav Chizkiyah's* life. He bribed a young woman who cleaned the *kollel* premises to spread false rumors concerning an illicit relationship she had with *Rav Chizkiyah*. The community was in an uproar. (This was in a time when morality had meaning.) The *Sdei Chemed* did not respond at all to the charges, remaining mute as if nothing had occurred. He swallowed the shame and moved about with business as usual. Even after the woman confessed to accepting a bribe from his rival to set him up and destroy his reputation, *Rav Chizkiyah* said nothing. Furthermore, when the community ostracized her, depriving her of her livelihood, *Rav Chizkiyah* supported her. He never talked about the incident, never disparaged his rival who had attempted to destroy him. He did say one thing: From the day that the incident occurred (and he remained silent), his mind opened up to the wellsprings of Torah like never before. With this Divine intervention, he was able to work diligently and produce his landmark work.

וּשְׂרֵץ הַיָּאֵר צִפְרָדְעִים ... וּבֹאֵר בְּנֵיתָךְ ... וּבַעֲמֹךָ וּבַתְּנוּרֶיךָ וּבַמְשָׂאוֹתֶיךָ

The river shall swarm with frogs, and they shall ascend and come into your palace ... and of your people and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls. (7:28)

The frogs were a hardy bunch who swarmed all over Egypt. No place was considered off limits to them. Even the burning hot ovens did not prevent them from fulfilling Hashem's command. When the Almighty said, "Go," they went. It took enormous *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, for those frogs to enter the burning oven. For all intents and purposes, it spelled certain death. In the end, they were the only frogs who did not die. Whoever carries out Hashem's *mitzvah* comes to no harm. *Chazal* (*Yoma* 85:b) teach that years later Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah entered the fiery cauldron, motivated by a *kal v'chomer*, *a priori* argument, derived from the Egyptian frogs. They conjectured, "Frogs do not have a *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hashem*, to sanctify Hashem's Name; yet, the frogs entered the Egyptian ovens, knowing that they probably would not emerge. Certainly Jews, who have this *mitzvah*, are obligated to enter the fiery cauldron to demonstrate their inextricable, uncompromising devotion to Hashem."

The *Maharsha* presents a counter question to this *kal v'chomer*. Since frogs do not have the *mitzvah* of *V'chai bahem*, "And you shall live by them," which compels every Jew to live and not relinquish his life in the performance of a *mitzvah*, the frogs had nothing to cause them to refrain from expressing their devotion to Hashem – not even their lives. Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah had a very powerful reason for seeking life. Furthermore, the *tzelem*, image, that Nevuchadnezer placed before them was not really an idol. It did not represent a pagan deity, which is another reason why these holy men did not have to give up their lives. Thus, we return to our original question: What was the *kal v'chomer*?

Horav Avraham Kalmanowitz, zl (quoted by *Horav Elyahu Svei, zl*), explains that indeed they had no underlying obligation to sanctify their lives, because they had not been asked to bow down to an idol. Nonetheless, just because there is no *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hashem* does not detract from the fact that what they were being asked to do was a denigration of the *kavod*, glory, of *Shomayim*, Heaven. To bow down to this image at the behest of an evil gentile king, one who had earned his stripes murdering Jews, was a gross *chillul Hashem*, profanation of Hashem's Name. Thus, the general community was obligated to take action to preserve the glory of Heaven. Someone had to take a stand in defiance of Nevuchadnezer. Now, the question began: Agreed that someone has to give up his life, who says that it should be "me"? Let it be someone else. I would like to avail myself of the *mitzvah* of *V'chai ba'hem*; and live by them.

Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah ruminated over this question and ruled for themselves, based upon the *kal v'chomer* from the frogs. The frogs were given a general command: "Go all over Egypt." They, too, had a question: "Why should I be the one to enter the ovens? Let it be the next frog. I would rather lay on Pharaoh's soft pillow. This, too, is a *mitzvah*." Regrettably, there will always be the other fellow. "Let him be the one, not me." Certain frogs did not take this attitude. They understood that when action must be taken, we do not defer to someone else – we act! This was the lesson which Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah derived from the frogs. Thus, they entered the fire to demonstrate to Nevuchadnezer that the glory of Hashem is sacrosanct and supersedes everything.

הַנְּנִי מִמַּטֵּיר כֶּעֶת מִזֶּה בְּרֵד כֶּבֶד מֵאֵד ... שְׁלַח הֲעֵז אֶת מִקְוֶךָ ... כָּל הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר יִמְצָא בַשָּׂדֶה ... וַיֵּרֵד עֲלֵיהֶם הַבָּרָד וּמָתוּ ... הַיֵּרָא אֶת דְּבַר ד' ... הַנִּיֵּס אֶת עַבְדֶּיךָ אֶל הַבַּתִּים ... וְאֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׂם לִבּוֹ אֶל דְּבַר ד' וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת עַבְדֶּיךָ ...

Behold, at this time tomorrow, I shall rain a very heavy hail... and now send, gather in your livestock... All the people and the animals that are found in the field... the hail shall descend upon them and they shall die ... Whoever feared Hashem chased his servants to the houses. And whoever did not take the word of G-d to heart he left his servants. (9:18,19,20,21)

Makas Barad, the plague of hail, begs elucidation. *Horav Baruch Dov Povarsky, Shlita*, presents us with a number of questions concerning this

plague. *Moshe Rabbeinu* pinpointed to Pharaoh the exact time when the plague would commence by making a mark on the wall. He explained that when the sun would reach this mark, it would begin to hail. Afterwards, he told Pharaoh to have all his servants and possessions remanded indoors or else they would die or be destroyed. Why did Hashem warn them? The purpose of the plague was to punish the Egyptians. Why give them an exit strategy to save themselves? Furthermore, why did he tell them to immediately take in their slaves, if, in fact, he had told them that the plague would not begin until a specific time on the next day? What was their rush to seek shelter? The language of the *pesukim* is redundant. "Any man or animal who is in the field, who is not in the house." Obviously, if they were in the field, they were not in the house. The Torah refers to the Egyptian who protected his slaves and possessions as being G-d-fearing. What does protection have to do with the fear of G-d? It is common sense to remain indoors during a storm.

In order to respond to these questions and present a new understanding of this plague, the *Rosh Yeshivah* quotes a *chiddush*, novel idea, from the *Brisker Rav, zl*. Every other plague (except the smiting of the firstborn) lasted for one week. *Makas barad*, contends the *Brisker Rav*, fell every moment of the seven (allotted) days. Thus, whoever left the protection of his home/shelter was immediately "downed" by a hailstorm. Hail did not fall on the houses, only on people, animals and the open fields. Any protected edifice remained protected.

Having quoted this, *Rav Povarsky* advances this idea further, positing that the plague of hail had two distinct aspects to it. One aspect was identical with all the other plagues: it devastated the Egyptians. This is what it was meant to do, and it achieved its purpose. A second aspect to the plague was exclusive to *makas barad*: Hashem had given a command to the Egyptian people to remain in the shelter of their homes and to do likewise concerning their animals. The purpose of this component of the plague was to teach the Egyptians that whoever follows Hashem's command will not experience harm: *Shomer mitzvah lo yeida davar ra*, "He who obeys the commandment will know no evil" (*Koheles* 8:5). *Makas barad* had an educational component. The command to stay home and protect oneself and his possessions went into effect immediately. Although the hail would not begin until the morrow, today they were to stay home to demonstrate that they were obeying Hashem's command. The *yarei Shomayim*, G-d-fearing, Egyptian who obeyed Hashem's command was spared from harm, as were his home and his possessions. The one who (was) *lo sam libo*, "who did not take the word of G-d to heart," and did not immediately follow Hashem's command paid dearly the next day when, even in the protection of his own home, he experienced the devastation that resulted from the hail, as the hail came crashing through his home. He did not follow instructions; he waited too long. Indeed, those who listened, and, by chance, their animal wandered out the next day, were not affected by the hail. They obeyed, and those who obey do not suffer harm.

The Torah's use of *asher lo sam libo* as the opposite of *yarei es dvar Hashem* is interesting. One would think that the adverse of G-d-fearing is not G-d-fearing. Why does the Torah alter the description of the individual who disobeys? *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, derives from here that *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, is a natural instinct that is part and parcel of the psyche of every human being. A human being fears G-d. The reason that his innate fear of G-d remains dormant is that he does not apply it to his heart. The average human being does not take the time to think that a Divine Supreme Being guides and maintains the world. He goes through life with nary a care in the world until something goes wrong, and then he suddenly realizes that he has been ignoring Hashem. Any deficiency in *yiraas Shomayim* is self-imposed due to his lack of recognizing and acknowledging the *metzius*, reality/essence, of Hashem.

Va'ani Tefillah

שִׁים שְׁלוֹם וְטוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה חֵן וְחֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים

***Sim shalom, tovah u'vrachah, chein v'chesed v'rachamim* – Establish peace, goodness, blessing, graciousness, kindness and mercy.**

It seems as if we are presenting a tall order, asking for so much. However, as *Horav Shimon Schwab*, zl, explains, the peace that we are requesting is inner peace, tranquility of mind, lack of anxiety – basically to have it all together in such a manner that a person is at peace with himself. To some, this may seem to be unimportant, until they realize that they do not have it. Without peace of mind, one cannot function properly. Indeed, not only is it the highest form of peace, it is the most fundamental, without which nothing else really matters. In this *brachah*, blessing, we ask for more: goodness, blessing, graciousness, kindness and mercy. These are the attributes through which a person is able to realize that Hashem loves him. When a person is at peace with Hashem, i.e. he is the beneficiary of the above qualities, he realizes how truly fortunate he is. Thus, he is able to achieve tranquility of soul with Hashem. The person who is not at peace with himself will invariably not realize that Hashem loves him. It is a vicious cycle which can be avoided only once a person is willing to open his eyes and see how much goodness he has in his life. This will lead to the appreciation that is critical to the establishment of inner peace.

לזכר נשמת ר' משה יהודה ליב בן אשר אלתר חיים ז"ל

נפטר כ"ד טבת תשס"ט ת.ג.צ.ב.ה

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<http://www.5tjt.com/rabbi-yehuda-kelemer-ztl/>

Rabbi Yehuda Kelemer, zt'l

By David Feder

This past erev Shabbos, the West Hempstead community and Klal Yisrael at large lost a tremendous talmid chacham and tzaddik, HaRav Yehuda Kelemer, zt'l.

I would like to share some of Rav Kelemer's words of Torah as a small way to illustrate the greatness of the man and the depth of our loss.

In Parashas Vayeira, when the malachim tell Avraham that Sarah will finally have a child, they say, "והנה בן לשרה אשתך." This is in contrast to the haftarah where the prophet Elisha tells the Shunamite woman: "כעת חיה את חובקת בן." ("In a year from now you will be embracing a child.") Why doesn't Elisha also just say, "You will have a child?" What is the meaning of the dramatic characterization that she will be "cradling" a baby?

Rabbi Kelemer explained that in Parashas Vayeira, these were angels, not human beings, bringing the message, and therefore they could not comprehend what it means to have a child. But regarding the Shunamite woman, Elisha, while a prophet, was a human with human feelings. He understood her pain, and so when he gave her the good news he expressed it in sympathetic, comforting language. "You will cradle your baby in your arms and hold him tight as you care for him." An angel cannot transmit this compassion, only a fellow human being.

Anyone who knew our rabbi was familiar with his incredible compassion and sensitivity. He lived by these words. Rabbi Kelemer, zt'l, "cradled" each person who came to him for help and advice like a mother would her child. Everyone felt a personal connection to him.

One year during the Three Weeks he posed a question: Why do we refrain from making the berachah of Shehecheyanu during this time? As always, he proceeded to give over a profound and learned explanation so powerful that I can still say it over, almost verbatim, to this day.

He said that during this time of mourning for the destruction of our two Batei Mikdash we need to realize that this is not our natural way of existence. As a nation, we cannot accept our current situation without the Beis HaMikdash as status quo. It's not the way things should be.

Therefore, during this time, we do not have the presence of mind needed to recite Shehecheyanu with simcha.

As a proof to this theory he brought a Rebbe Akiva Eiger in Shulchan Aruch (O.C. siman 223) about the following halachah: If a father dies and leaves his son a large inheritance, the son makes the berachah of Shehecheyanu.

What about if a son dies, R'l, and leaves his father a large inheritance?

Although the father is left with a sizable inheritance from his son, he is

nonetheless bereft of his child. Would the mourning man say a Shehecheyanu on this sadly acquired yet tremendous newfound fortune? R' Akiva Eiger answers no! He explains, based on a Gemara in Bava Basra, that although the father has now gained a large sum of money, the natural life cycle has been broken. Children are supposed to inherit from their parents, not vice versa. There is no greater tragedy than a parent burying a child, and therefore, no matter how great the financial windfall, no berachah is recited. Rabbi Kelemer used this as a proof to his premise, saying that there is no greater national tragedy for Klal Yisrael than the loss of the Beis HaMikdash. The natural cycle is broken. The Jewish nation without a Beis HaMikdash is akin to parents left without their child.

For so many of us, hundreds of families and thousands of individuals, we never imagined an existence without our revered rav. He was our Beis HaMikdash, our connection to Hashem on this earth. We cannot imagine our community without his shiurim, leadership, and unparalleled concern for each and every one of us. No matter what life threw at us, Rabbi Kelemer was a calm and guiding presence in our midst who had the siyatta d'Shmaya and heavenly wisdom to navigate any storm. As a gentle giant in Torah and chesed, he carried us all on his shoulders.

Senator Todd Kaminsky remarked, "Rabbi Kelemer was the definition of a mensch, who always put the needs of others above himself. We will all miss his humility, piety, and dedication, but the legacy he left of community leadership will continue to live on for generations to come. His memory should be a blessing for us all."

Baruch Dayan ha'emes—Blessed is He who has taken from us what we can never replace. Woe to us who are bereft of our rav. May Hashem provide us with strength, renew us, and sustain us (שהחינו וקימנו), as we learn to navigate by the light left behind by our mara d'asra, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda ben Dov Ber, zt'l.

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Parsha Parables

Drasha Parshas Vaera - Sour Milk

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

This week Hashem tells Moshe to inform the B'nai Yisrael, that the good times will soon come. "I shall rescue you, I shall redeem you with an out stretched hand, I shall bring you to the land which I have promised your fathers, Abraham Isaac and Jacob" (cf. Exodus 6:6-8).

It did not mean much. "The Children of Israel did not listen to Moshe from shortness of breath and hard work" (ibid v.9).

Next Hashem tells Moshe to tell Pharaoh to let the Jews out. Moshe responds with a reply filled with deductive reasoning. "Behold the Children of Israel did not listen, so how will Pharaoh listen?" (ibid v.12).

Our sages explain that this is on of ten "kal v'chomer" instances in the Torah. It is an example of reasoning used to logically come to halachic conclusions. (eg. If a weightlifter can not lift the stone, surely a child can not!)

The problem is, that the reasoning seems flawed. "The Children of Israel did not listen to Moshe from shortness of breath and hard work." Pharaoh did not suffer from either of those shortcomings! If the weightlifter with a broken back, can't lift a stone, it plays no role in telling us whether or not a child can.)

So what was Moshe's logical refutation to G-d's command?

Last week, on Thursday 23 Teves, the great Gaon, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter zt'l passed away. As a student at the Telshe Yeshiva in Europe he developed a strong relationship with one Europe's foremost scholars of that era, Rav Mordechai Pogramanski zt'l. He used to relate on a story Rav Pogramanski would share with his students.

A disheveled man was touring the Louvre with a group of tourists. As they passed Rembrandt's works the man looked at everyone and yelled, "Sour milk!" Puzzled, everyone thought he was crazy. He repeated it again. "It looks like sour milk!"

They moved on and passed the Mona Lisa. Again he screamed, Sour milk!" This went on a few more times until a wise man looked at the fellow. "Let me see your glasses."

The critical man gave them to him. "What did you have for breakfast?" he asked.

"Why cereal and milk," he answered.

The wise man laughed. Look at your glasses! They are speckled with milk! No wonder everything you look at appears as sour milk!

Moshe knew that Jews inherently believe. However the suffering of hard work and the evil treatment of Egyptian masters tainted their faith. But hard work alone does not taint faith. It is only when it is exasperated by the torment of the taskmasters, and their cruel taunts. How much more so, he figured, would Pharaoh be inattentive of the command that Hashem is in charge, and the Jews should be let free. If hard work stains the thought process, blocking the beauty of Hashem's word to filter through, how much more so does the idolatry and heresy of Pharaoh impede them from penetrating! We look at Hashem's creation. We go to synagogue. We hear mussar. We read the prophets. But somehow it does not get through. The words are beautiful. Those who hear them can be inspired. But so many impediments block our vision and our hearing. Our lifestyles. Our desires. Even our work.

If we'd open our eyes we would see so much holiness! But only if their glasses are not tainted with sour milk.

Dedicated in memory of A. Milton Brown – Avraham Mordechai ben Benzion – Rosh Chodesh Shevat by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Brown

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The Fourth Brocha of Birkas Hamazon

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Parshas Va'eira opens with Moshe Rabbeinu receiving admonition from Hashem for not being appreciative of His Ways. Thus, this is certainly an excellent time to study the brocha of bensching called Hatov Vehameitiv, "He Who is good and does good."

Question #1: Why Beitar?

Why was a brocha created to commemorate the events that transpired in Beitar?

Question #2: Why in Birkas Hamazon?

Why was that brocha added to Birkas Hamazon?

Question #3: What a strange brocha!

Why does the brocha Hatov Vehameitiv have such an unusual structure?

Introduction:

The fourth brocha of bensching, which is called Hatov Vehameitiv, has little to do with the rest of the bensching. Whereas the first three brochos are to thank Hashem for our sustenance, the fourth brocha was created by Chazal for a completely unrelated reason. This brocha is called Hatov Vehameitiv because of the words it contains, "hamelech Hatov Vehameitiv lakol." This article will discuss some of the halachos and concepts of this unusual brocha.

Although in two different places (Brochos 46a; 49a) the Gemara quotes opinions that this fourth brocha is min haTorah, the consensus is that it is only rabbinic in origin. (We should note that the Midrash Shmuel [13:9] attributes the opinion that Hatov Vehameitiv is min haTorah to a very early authority, the tanna, Rabbi Yishmael.) To quote the Gemara:

Hatov Vehameitiv was established by the Sanhedrin when it was located in Yavneh, because of those who were killed in Beitar, as noted by Rav Masneh, "On the very day that those killed in Beitar were allowed to be buried, they established, in Yavneh, Hatov Vehameitiv. 'Hatov' is to acknowledge that their bodies did not decompose; 'Vehameitiv' is to acknowledge that permission was granted to bury them" (Brochos 48b; Taanis 31a; Bava Basra 121b; see also Yerushalmi, Taanis 4:5).

Hatov Vehameitiv

To avoid confusion, we must realize that there are two completely different brochos that Chazal call Hatov Vehameitiv. The other brocha, which is only eight words long, Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam Hatov Vehameitiv, is recited upon hearing certain special, wonderful events or when breaking out a new bottle of wine. The laws germane to the shorter brocha will be left for a future article.

What happened in Beitar?

The Mishnah in Taanis (26b) records the calamities that occurred on Shiva Asar beTamuz and on Tisha Be'Av. Regarding Tisha Be'Av, it states, "On the ninth of Av, it was decreed upon our forefathers that they would not enter Eretz Yisroel, both the first and the second Batei Mikdash were destroyed, the city of Beitar was conquered, and the city of Yerushalayim was plowed under." The Talmud Yerushalmi (Taanis 4:5), quoting the tanna, Rabbi Yosi, dates the destruction of Beitar as being 52 years after the churban of the second Beis Hamikdash, or, almost exactly 1900 years ago.

To understand the extent of the tragedy that happened in Beitar, let us quote some of the sources of Chazal.

A large city called Beitar, whose population was many tens of thousands of Jews, was ruled by a great Jewish king. All the Jews, including the greatest of the chachamim,

thought that this king was the Moshiach, until he fell in battle to the non-Jews and the entire city was slaughtered (Rambam, Hilchos Taanis 5:3).

The Roman emperor Hadrian owned a massive vineyard, twelve mil long and twelve mil wide (about fifty square miles). The Romans used the bodies of those who were killed when Beitar was destroyed as a wall, the height of a man, around the vineyard. Hadrian refused to allow the casualties of Beitar to be buried. Only with the succession of a new emperor was their burial permitted (Yerushalmi, Taanis 4:5).

The city of Beitar had 400 shuls, each of which had 400 cheder rabbei'im teaching in them, and each rebbe taught 400 children. When the Romans conquered the city, they wrapped all the students and all the teachers in their seforim (which, in their day, were rolled like scrolls) and set them ablaze (Gittin 58a).

Enough pairs of tefillin shel rosh were found from those who died in Beitar to fill a mikveh. According to a second opinion, enough pairs of tefillin shel rosh were found to fill three mikvaos (Gittin 57b).

For seven years, the non-Jews fertilized their vineyards, exclusively, with the Jewish blood of those who were martyred in Beitar (Gittin 57a).

Fifteenth of Av

We should also note the following passage of Gemara: "No festivals of the Jews were celebrated to a greater extent than were the Fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur. We understand why Yom Kippur has this unique quality – it is the day that forgiveness is granted – but why the fifteenth of Av?" Among the many answers the Gemara provides is "Rav Masneh explained, because that was the date when permission was granted to bury those killed in Beitar" (Taanis 30b-31a).

An unusual brocha

Now that we know a bit about the history behind this brocha, let us discuss the brocha itself, particularly, its structure. Of the many questions that we can ask, let us focus on the following three, which were our opening questions:

1. Why was a brocha created to commemorate this particular calamity?

2. Why was that brocha made part of Birkas Hamazon?

3. Why does this brocha have such an unusual structure?

1. Why a brocha?

Why was a brocha created to commemorate this particular calamity?

Unfortunately, there have been many catastrophes in Jewish history, which we have, thank G-d, survived, but we do not have extra brochos to commemorate them (Kenesses Hagedolah, Tur Orach Chayim 189). Most tragedies are commemorated with fast days and the recital of selichos, and most miraculous events are celebrated on their anniversary, but not with a brocha that we recite daily.

These questions are already asked by very early authorities, who suggest the following answers:

The tragedy of the destruction of Beitar was great and unique in the bizayon haTorah that resulted, when thousands and thousands of observant Jews lay unburied. When Hadrian died, and his successor permitted their burial, Chazal felt the need to demonstrate, significantly, that this chillul Hashem had ended and was, on the contrary, accompanied by a tremendous kiddush Hashem, that the bodies of the fallen had not deteriorated, notwithstanding that they had been exposed to the elements for many years.

In addition, the events of Beitar teach that, even when Hashem is angry at us, He still performs miracles. This is to teach us that Hashem never abandons us, even at times when we sin and deserve punishment (Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim 189:2)

2. Why in bensching?

Why did Chazal place this brocha in bensching (Rosh, quoted by Tur, Orach Chayim 189)? The rest of Birkas Hamazon is acknowledgement to Hashem for providing for us and for the wonderful land of Eretz Yisroel that He gave us. Why commemorate the tragedy of Beitar during Birkas Hamazon?

This brocha was instituted in Birkas Hamazon as a constant reminder (Shu"t Binyamin Ze'ev #351; Shu"t Mishpetei Shmuel #11). In addition, it was placed in Birkas Hamazon, which is, in its entirety, thanks to Hashem (Rosh, Brochos 7:22).

Furthermore, the Rosh notes that the Yerushalmi (see our version, Sukkah 5:1 at end) states that the loss that the Jews suffered at Beitar will not be restored until the Moshiach comes. It is unclear to which specific loss this Gemara is referring, but regardless, this is another reason why the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv was placed immediately following the brocha of Boneh Yerushalayim.

Several prominent gedolim provide an additional reason why this brocha was added specifically to bensching. After celebrating a joyous meal, people might lose sight of life's priorities. To prevent this from happening, Chazal instituted a brocha reminding people of the tragedy of Beitar (Rabbeinu Bachya, Kad Hakemach #60; Shu"t Binyamin Ze'ev #351). This is similar to the idea of breaking a glass at a wedding and mentioning the churban then, so as to keep our celebrations in a balanced perspective. We celebrate, but still need to remember that we are missing important aspects of life that we require as Jews.

Why not in Shemoneh Esrei?

The Binyamin Ze'ev, who lived in Greece and in Venice, Italy, during the first half of the sixteenth century, asks that, if Chazal wanted the association of this new brocha to be with the rebuilding of Yerushalayim, why was the brocha placed in Birkas Hamazon and not in the weekday Shemoneh Esrei, after Boneh Yerushalayim?

The answer is that inserting this brocha in the midst of the Shemoneh Esrei would be an interruption, whereas at the time that Chazal incorporated this fourth brocha into Birkas Hamazon, benschung included only the Torah required portions, which end with the words Boneh Yerushalayim (Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim 189:1). (The other requests that begin with the word Harachaman, the pesukim that we traditionally recite at the end of the benschung, and the blessing we recite for the household where we ate were all added to Birkas Hamazon after this time in history.)

Text of brocha

3. Why does this brocha have such an unusual structure?

Let me explain. The numerous brochos that we recite daily follow three specific structural patterns:

A. Either they are very short brochos, such as those that we recite prior to eating, performing mitzvos, seeing unusual sites, or enjoying other pleasures, which begin with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam and then close with the appropriate ending. These are called brochos ketzaros, short brochos.

B. A second structure of a brocha is the most common for a longer brocha. This type of brocha begins with the same words, Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, and ends the brocha by repeating the words Boruch Attah Hashem and closing with the theme of the brocha. These brochos are called brochos aruchos, long brochos.

Part of a series

C. The third type of brocha is one that follows another brocha in a series. Such a brocha does not begin with Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, but ends with Boruch Attah Hashem and closes with the theme of the brocha. This type is categorized as a brocha hasemucha lachaverta, literally, a brocha that follows another brocha; in other words, a brocha that is part of a series. For this reason, the brochos of Shemoneh Esrei, the brochos that surround the Kerias Shma, and the second and third brochos of Birkas Hamazon do not begin with Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam (except for the first brocha in the series). All begin by explaining the theme of the brocha and end with Boruch Attah Hashem and an appropriate conclusion.

The brochos of benschung

Now that we realize that all brochos fit into one of three categories, let us examine the four brochos of Birkas Hamazon and see under which category each brocha belongs.

The first brocha, Ha'zvon es ha'olam, begins with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam and closes with Boruch Attah Hashem hazan es hakol, "He who sustains all." This structure fits our rules nicely, as category B: It is a classic "long brocha."

The second and third brochos are part of a series and, therefore, do not begin with a brocha, but end either with the words Boruch Attah Hashem al ha'aretz ve'al hamazon, or with Boruch Attah Hashem boneh (berachamav) Yerushalayim. This follows the rule of brocha hasemucha lachaverta, a brocha that follows another brocha, which we called category C.

The unusual fourth

However, the fourth brocha of Birkas Hamazon does not seem to fit any of the above three categories. It begins with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, which means it is not considered part of a series. Although it is always recited as the fourth brocha of Birkas Hamazon, immediately after the brocha of Boneh Yerushalayim, and you would think that it should be considered part of a series (Tosafos, Brochos 46b s.v. Vehatov), our introduction can help explain why it is not. Since this brocha was not originally part of Birkas Hamazon, but was added for a completely unrelated reason, it is considered a beginning brocha and not a brocha hasemucha lachaverta.

Which remaining category?

The list above contains two categories of brocha that begin with the words Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam: category A, the short brochos, and category B, the long brochos. However, Hatov Vehameitiv does not seem to fit either category. It is too long to be considered a short brocha, nor does it follow the structure of a long brocha, since it does not end with Boruch Attah, Hashem and a closing.

As you can imagine, we are not the first to raise this question. The rishonim do, and provide three answers to resolve this conundrum. But first, we need to provide another introduction.

Chazal instituted that the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv should include three references to Hashem being King, a concept that Chazal call malchus (Brochos 47a). This we do, when we recite the following: (1) the word melech in the very beginning of the brocha, Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, (2) the next words of the brocha are ha'keil avinu malkeinu, (3) ro'einu ro'eih Yisroel hamelech hatov (Divrei Chamudos, Brochos 7:69).

Why three times? The Gemara (Brochos 49a) explains that since the third brocha of Birkas Hamazon (that ends with the words, Boneh Yerushalayim) mentions the kingdom and royal family of David, there should be mention of Hashem's monarchy in all four brochos of Birkas Hamazon. However, the mention of Hashem's malchus that should be in the second and third brochos of Birkas Hamazon are delayed until the fourth. (The first brocha of Birkas Hamazon, begins with Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, and therefore contains a reference to Hashem's monarchy.) Thus, in addition to the basic theme of acknowledgement and thanks to Hashem for His performing a miracle, Chazal added a theme to the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv, making sure that Hashem's malchus is mentioned three times.

Three hatavos

The rishonim quote a midrash that states that Chazal required adding to the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv three hatavos: We are to say three times that Hashem is beneficial to us. Although I was unable to locate this midrash, it definitely existed at the time of the rishonim but has been lost since their era.

Among the rishonim, I found several different texts for this concept. The standard nusach Ashkenaz says hu heitiv, hu meitiv, hu yeitiv lanu, "He has done good, He does good, and He will do good to us". The Rosh discusses the correct text, and concludes that the correct text should be hu heitiv lanu, hu meitiv lanu, hu yeitiv lanu, with the word lanu repeated each time ("He has done good to us, He does good to us, and He will do good to us."). The Shulchan Aruch rules that this is the correct practice, and this is the standard, accepted nusach used by eidot hamizrah and Sefardim. This is a very interesting point, because the Rosh is usually the source for minhagei Ashkenaz that differ from Sefardic practice, and here, he is the source for the Sefardic custom, and most Ashkenazim do not follow his approach.

Hu Gemalanu

In addition, the rishonim mention that we should also mention three times that Hashem grants us good, which we add with the words, hu gemalanu, hu gomleinu, hu yigmeleinu la'ad – "He granted us, He grants us and He will grant us forever..."

Why no ending?

Thus, we see that the brocha of Hatov Vehameitiv is a long brocha, and yet it does not end with the words Boruch Attah Hashem and a closing, as a long brocha normally does.

Why not?

Again, the rishonim raise this question and provide several differing approaches to answer it. Rabbeinu Yonah (Brochos 36a) quotes two reasons:

I. Notwithstanding that the brocha is somewhat lengthy, it is still considered a short brocha, because all the ideas included are simply different aspects of the same theme – that Hashem is Hatov Vehameitiv.

II. When the original brocha was created, Hatov Vehameitiv was a short brocha that did not warrant an ending. Although other parts were gradually added, the original structure of the brocha was not changed (see also Tosafos, Brochos 46b s.v. Vehatov).

III. The Rashba (Brochos 46a s.v. Teida) provides a third answer. Although this brocha should have been a long brocha, Chazal did not treat it as such, because they did not want this brocha, which is miderabbanan, to be more prominent than the two brochos that proceed it, which are min haTorah and which each have the words Boruch Attah Hashem only one time. Therefore, they decided to omit an ending to this brocha, making it an exception to the rule.

Conclusion

The most important message of Birkas Hamazon is our expressing thanks to Hashem for everything He provides for us. We see how Chazal also wanted us to remember to thank Hashem for kindnesses that He did for our people, thousands of years ago. It certainly behooves us to recite the Birkas Hamazon carefully and with kavanah, and to demonstrate at least a small expression to praise Hashem.