Vaeira 2007
by Rabbi Berel Wein

Stubbornness can be a virtue or a terrible character defect. When it is a virtue, we call it tenacity. When it is a defec,t it is just plain foolish and counter productive. Pharaoh's stubbornness, as exhibited in this week's parsha, is an example. His advisers inform him that Egypt is headed for disaster because of his stubbornness, but he refuses to give in to the reality of the series of plagues that threaten to decimate Egyptian society.

The Torah tells us that his tenacity was reinforced by the fact that God hardened his heart. The commentators, especially Maimonides, judge that to mean that the Lord gave him the courage of his convictions not to be influenced by the events transpiring in his country but to continue on his evil path to enslave the Jewish people.

Hardening his heart did not influence Pharaoh's choices in the matter. It merely allowed him to transform what previously appeared to be tenacity into ultimate foolishness and disaster. Hitler, Stalin, Mao and other such leaders displayed this same reckless stubbornness over the past century, resulting in the destruction of societies and the deaths of tens of millions of people.

Because of his behavior, Pharaoh becomes the paradigm for the self-destructive trait of foolish stubbornness. The Jewish people are also characterized as being a stubborn people. This trait has served us as well when we were and are tenacious in preserving our values and traditions. It is a foolish trait when we continue the policies and misbegotten certainties that have always led to our tragedies and misfortunes. Rashi and Midrash teach us the source of Pharaoh's suicidal stubbornness. It lay in his belief in himself as a god – arrogant and convinced of his own infallibility. People who are never wrong never have to change their policies, beliefs or behavior.

I am reminded of a sign that I once saw on the desk of a prominent public figure that said: "Don't confuse me with the facts; my mind is already made up!" He was joking about it (I think) but that danger lurks in all of us. Once we are convinced of the absolute rectitude of our position, we not only are tenacious in maintaining it, we become downright blindly stubborn. Moshe meets Pharaoh at the river's edge where he went to perform his bodily functions. Pharaoh is exposed there - not as a god but only as a mortal man. Moshe means to teach Pharaoh that the justification for his stubbornness – his sham sense of infallibility – is itself false. A little humility on the part of Pharaoh would have saved himself and Egypt a great deal of grief. That is why the Torah stresses that the desired quality for true leadership is humility.

Moshe becomes the paradigm for humility just as Pharaoh – his arch-nemesis – is the paradigm for arrogant stubbornness. This lesson of wise tenacity versus foolish stubbornness exists in all areas of human life and society – family, community, national policy and personal development. May we be tenacious enough in life to avoid foolish moments of harmful stubbornness.

Shabat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

[CS – late breaking dvar torah added:
from: Rabbi Yissocher Frand <ryfrand@torah.org>
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date: Jan 15, 2026, 2:49 PM
subject: **Rav Frand - Learning Kovod Shamayim from the Tzfardeia**

Learning Kovod Shamayim from the Tzfardeia

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1365 – Giving the Benefit of the Doubt – Does it Apply to Everyone? Good Shabbos!

Learning Kovod Shamayim from the Tzfardeia

The pasuk in Parshas Vayera says, "And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Say to Aharon 'Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals, and over the reservoirs, v'ha'al es hatzefardiim (and raise up the frogs) over the land of Egypt.'" (Shemos 8:1)

The Baal Haturim, in a classic comment, notes that the word v'ha'al appears exactly twice in Chumash. Once here – "v'ha'al es hatzefardiim" – and again in connection with the death of Aharon: "Take Aharon and Elazar his son, v'ha'al osam (and bring them up) to Hor Hahor." (Bamidbar 20:25).

Like many comments of the Baal Haturim, this observation is a riddle. If there are only two times in the Torah that the word v'ha'al appears – once regarding the tzefardiim (frogs) and once when Aharon died – there must be some kind of connection between the two. Here the Baal Haturim does us the favor of explaining himself (which he doesn't always do).

The Baal Haturim cites the famous Gemara (Pesachim 53b): "What did Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya see that motivated them to be willing to give up their lives by allowing themselves to be thrown into a fiery furnace? They made a kal v'chomer for themselves from the tzefardiim. The pasuk says, "…they shall ascend and come into your house and your bedroom and your bed, and into the house of your servants and of your people, and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls." (Shemos 7:28) Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya reasoned: If the tzefardiim, who were not commanded to make a kiddush Hashem (sanctify G-d's name), nevertheless (assuming that they jumped into heated ovens) they allowed themselves to die, giving up their lives to fulfill the word of Hashem, then we, who are commanded in the mitzva of kiddush Hashem, must certainly be prepared to give up our lives.

This was the kal v'chomer that Chananya, Mishael and Azarya made for themselves: If the tzefardiim jumped into the oven when they had the option of jumping elsewhere (the house, the bedroom, the beds, etc.), we certainly must be prepared to jump into Nevuchadnezzar's furnace!

The Baal Haturim explains the relationship between the two occurrences of the word v'ha'al in Chumah as follows: The Medrash says that all the tzefardiim from the second plague died (Shemos 8:9-10) except for the tzefardiim who jumped into the ovens. They survived. The Baal Haturim says: Moshe and Aharon who had the opportunity to make a Kiddush Hashem (by speaking to the rock at Mei Meriva) and did not do so, died. This is what the two v'ha'als have to do with each other.

The truth is that Tosfos asks the following question in Maseches Pesachim: Why does the Gemara say that Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya decided to give up their lives based on learning a kal v'chomer from the tzefardiim? This is Hilchos Kiddush Hashem 101: There are three cardinal sins for which a person is required to give up his life rather than transgress those aveiros. They are Avodah Zarah, giluy arayos, and shefichas domim (idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder). This is basic halacha which does not require a logical kal v'chomer derivation from tzefardiim!

Tosfos answers that this wasn't really Avodah Zarah. The statue they were asked to bow down to was not really an idol. It was merely a statue Nevuchadnezzar made of himself for his own honor. Strictly speaking, it was not Avodah Zarah so there was no ye'hareg v'al ya'vor (martyrdom) requirement. Why then were they prepared to give up their lives if there was no halachic requirement to do so? The Gemara explains that it was because they made a kal v'chomer from the action of the tzefardiim: The tzefardiim also had the option of jumping into the beds or bathtubs, but they chose to jump into the ovens, risking death, so we will do the same!

Rav Avrohom Kalmanowitz (1887-1964) was the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn. He was responsible for bringing over the Mir from Europe. He once made an interesting observation: The truth of the matter is that people should have given their lives to not bow down to the statue of Nevuchadnezzar for the simple reason that albeit it wasn't Avodah Zarah, bowing down to a human statue still reflects a lack of kavod Shamayim (honor of Heaven). If all the Jews would bow down to the statue of this midget (which is how the Gemara refers to

Nevuchadnezzar) and no one would make a statement and stand up for kavod Shamayim, that itself is a chilul Hashem!

Everyone should have asked themselves, "Hey, at least one of us needs to object to this brazen offense to kavod Shamayim!" Someone needs to make a statement. But everyone could say: Yes. SOMEONE needs to make a statement but it doesn't need to be ME that makes that statement. I don't need to give up MY life. No one wanted to be the person who made that statement.

However, Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya said to themselves: Remember the tzefardiim. They also had options: The Ribono shel Olam said: Jump into the houses, and into the bedrooms, and into the beds. And also jump into the ovens. Each tzfardeia could have argued: "Let some other tzfardeia jump into the oven! Why do I need to jump into the oven?" Said Rav Kalmanowitz – this is the lesson over here. There is always someone else that can do anything. Everyone else can always say "Let that other fellow do it." But Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya learned from the tzefardiim that you grab the opportunity to be mekadesh shem Shamayim. The person who decides to do it receives eternal reward. That is what we learn from the tzefardiim.

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Parshat Va'era: What Is a Fitting Legacy for My Children and Grandchildren?

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone"And I will bring you unto the land concerning which I raised My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage (morasha): I am God." (Exodus 6:8)

Every parent would like to leave an inheritance to their children and grandchildren; some even work their entire lives, denying themselves vacations and little luxuries, in order to amass some sort of nest-egg as an inheritance. And others live in disappointed frustration because they fear they will not have the wherewithal to leave behind a sizeable "will and testament." What does our Torah have to say about a proper bequest for future generations?

The Bible has two cognate words which relate to bequest: morasha and yerusha. Morasha – which appears for the first time in the Torah in the portion of Va'era with regard to the Land of Israel and only once again, with regard to Torah itself, "Moses prescribed the Torah to us, an eternal heritage (morasha) for the congregation of Jacob" (Deut. 33:4) – is generally translated as "heritage"; yerusha is translated as "inheritance" and is the frequently found form for everything except Torah and Israel.

It is interesting to note that in Webster's Dictionary, the words "heritage" and "inheritance" are virtually synonymous. The lead definition for heritage is "property that is or can be inherited." The Hebrew of the Bible, however, is precise and exact. The use of different words clearly suggests a difference in meaning. The different contexts in which the two words "morasha" and "yerusha" appear can be very revealing about different kinds of bequests – and even different kinds of relationships between parents and children, different priorities handed down from generation to generation, which these bequests engender. Let us explore four different possible distinctions in meaning between yerusha and morasha, inheritance and heritage, which should provide important instruction to parents in determining their bequests to their children.

First, the Jerusalem Talmud speaks of yerusha as something that comes easily. A person dies, leaving an inheritance, and the heir is not required to do anything except receive the gift. But just being there is not enough when it comes to morasha. The added mem in this term, suggests the Jerusalem Talmud, is a grammatical sign of intensity, the pi'el form in Hebrew grammar. In order for an individual to come into possession of a morasha they have to work for it. An inheritance is what you get from the previous generation, without your particular input; a heritage requires your active involvement and participation. A yerusha is a check your father left you; a morasha is a business which your parents may have started, but into which you must put much sweat, blood and tears.

This will certainly explain why morasha is used only with regard to Torah and the Land of Israel. The sages remark that there are three gifts which God gave the Jewish people that can only be acquired through commitment and suffering: "Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come" (Berakhot 5a). We understand that neither Torah nor the Land of Israel is acquired easily, passively. The Babylonian Talmud, confirming our earlier citation from the Jerusalem Talmud, specifically teaches that "Torah is not an inheritance," a yerusha, which comes automatically to the child of the Torah scholar. All achievement in Torah depends on an individual's own efforts. A student of Torah must be willing to suffer privation. Maimonides writes that on the path of Torah acquisition a person must be willing to eat only bread and drink only water, even snatching momentary sleep on the ground rather than in a comfortable bed (Laws of Torah Study 3:6). Indeed, no one can merit the crown of Torah unless they are willing to destroy their desire for material blandishments while in pursuit of Torah expertise (ibid. 12). Similarly, the Land of Israel cannot be acquired without sacrifice and suffering. The final test in the life of Abraham and the source of Jewish claim to Jerusalem is the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah; the message conveyed by the Bible is that we can only acquire our Holy Land if we are willing to place the lives of our children on the line. Nothing is more apparent in modern Israel today. A heritage comes hard, not easily, and our national heritage is Torah and Israel.

The second distinction between the terms is not how the gift is acquired but rather how it may or must be dispersed. Even the largest amount of money inherited (yerusha) can be squandered, or legitimately lost. In contrast, a morasha must be given over intact to the next generation. Its grammatical form is hif 'il, and it literally means "to hand over to someone else." Silver is an inheritance, and can be invested, lent out, or melted down or used in whatever way the heir desires; silver Shabbat candlesticks are a heritage, meant to be passed down from parent to child and used from generation to generation.

Third, one must have the physical and objective inheritance in one's possession in order to give it to one's heir; that is not necessarily the case with regard to a heritage, or morasha. Jewish parents bequeathed the ideals of Torah and Israel to their children for four thousand years, even when they were living in exile far from the Promised Land and even if poverty and oppression made it impossible for them to be Torah scholars. Jewish mothers in Poland and Morocco sang their children to sleep with lullabies about the beauty of the Land of Israel and the paramount importance of Torah scholarship, singing "Torah is the best merchandise" and Jerusalem the most beautiful city. Paradoxically, one can pass on a morasha (heritage) even if one doesn't have it oneself!

And finally, a yerusha is a substantive object whereas a morasha may be an abstract idea or ideal. There is a charming Yiddish folk song in which the singer "laments" that while his friends' wealthy parents gave them automobiles, his parents could only give him good wishes: "Go with God." While his friends' parents gave them cash, his parents gave him aphorisms: "Zai a mentsch – be a good person." However, whereas the automobiles and cash were quickly dissipated, the words remained – and were passed on to the next generation.

The truth is that an inheritance pales in comparison to a heritage. The real question must be: Will you only have a transitory inheritance to leave your children, or will you merit bequeathing an eternal heritage?

Shabbat Shalom

The Separation Fence: The Prohibition of Participating in an Intermarriage Wedding, and the Obligation to Reprove

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Revivim

An intermarriage wedding is a forbidden event, and one may not participate in it * The Torah commands us to protest someone committing a transgression, and to rebuke him * Conversion judges must be Torah scholars, to ensure that the conversion procedures are carried out according to halakha * A foreign worker may place tefillin on a paralyzed person * The mitzvah is not to tie the tefillin, but that the tefillin be bound upon his arm and head * Out of respect for the tefillin, it is forbidden to enter a bathroom or bathhouse with them

Participation in An Intermarriage Wedding

Q: "Shalom honored Rabbi… I request practical guidance on an issue that troubles me, and gives me no rest. A friend from reserve duty is getting married. A good man. He was wounded in military activity, and is struggling to return to life. He is the son of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. He identifies himself as Israeli, but as he said, the conversion process weighs heavily upon him; it is difficult for him to learn the blessings by heart and to commit before a rabbinical court to keep Shabbat, and therefore, he does not intend to convert. According to him, he feels Jewish even without conversion, and he even underwent circumcision when he was born.

He is engaged to a girl of… origin; her grandfather, of blessed memory, was among the rabbis of the community. His fiancée is traditional, and says that in her eyes, he is Jewish. They were careful to schedule the wedding at a place that serves kosher food.

The wedding is in about a month. My friend invited me, and very much expects me to come to his wedding, and I do not know what to do. I fear that if I do not come, he will notice my absence, and be hurt. Is it better to make an excuse and say that it doesn't work out for me to come, or to attend?

In truth, the event is a distressing case of intermarriage. On the other hand, in the couple's consciousness, the marriage is not intermarriage, and they are unintentional sinners because of their mistaken understanding. Moreover, perhaps the event itself is not entirely negative, since their children will be Jewish, and the problem of mixed marriage will not continue into the next generation. With blessing that Hashem give you, honored Rabbi, the strength to continue clarifying serious halachic matters truthfully, and that your words spoken with fear of Heaven, and seeking truth, be heard."

It is Forbidden to Participate — But Suggest Conversion

A: Since this wedding involves an intermarriage, which is a prohibited event, one may not participate in it. The Torah commands us to protest against one who transgresses, and to rebuke him, as it is said (Leviticus 19:17), "You shall surely rebuke your fellow, and you shall not bear sin because of him." All the more so, it is forbidden to participate.

Explain to him that despite your love for him, you will not come to his wedding, because it is forbidden according to the Jewish faith. But together with this, since you are a Talmid Chacham (Torah scholar) — and presumably in your unit there are additional Torah scholars — suggest to him that you, together with two other Torah scholars from your unit, convert him before the wedding. As I explained in my book "Masoret HaGiyur", many rabbis ruled in such a situation to convert him, since the groom possesses a Jewish identity, and through conversion, one prevents intermarriage. All the more so when, as a family, they will keep Jewish tradition. According to halakha, any three Torah scholars are authorized to perform a conversion. If he agrees, study the laws of conversion and convert him before his wedding, and you will find a rabbi who, based on that conversion, will agree to perform for them chuppah and kiddushin according to the law of Moshe and Israel.

Who is Halachically Qualified to Perform Conversions?

Q: Who is permitted to perform a conversion? Any Torah scholar?

A: Some poskim (Jewish law arbiters) say that any Jew who observes Torah and mitzvot is fit to serve as a conversion judge (Rambam, Issurei Bi'ah 14:6; Sefer Mitzvot Gadol; Orḥot Chaim; Yam shel Shlomo; Binyamin Ze'ev; Shulchan Aruch 268:3). The opinion of most halachic authorities, however, is that conversion judges must be Torah scholars in order to ensure that they carry out the procedures of conversion properly, and adequately evaluate whether to accept the convert (Behag, Rif, Ra'avan, Ri, Riaz, Rokeach, Rosh, Rabbeinu Yerucham, Agudah; Tur 268:2; Rama 268:2). This is also the ruling of many later authorities (Levush 268:2; Aruch HaShulchan 8; Rabbi Chaim Palaggi, Lev Chaim III:28, and others).

However, be-di'avad (after the fact), all poskim agree that if the conversion judges were valid witnesses, and were not known to deliberately violate commandments, the conversion is valid.

For this purpose, the definition of "Torah scholars" is: one who knows how to study Torah and has significant Torah knowledge and, of course, has studied the laws of conversion. Certainly, ramim (yeshiva teachers) in religious high schools, are considered Torah scholars.

Nevertheless, Jewish custom is that the local rabbis bear responsibility for conversion, so that acceptance of converts will be broadly agreed upon by the community. But in a pressing situation, in order to prevent intermarriage, and to avoid terrible rifts and great pain in a Jewish family, one should follow the halakha that any three Torah scholars are permitted le-chatchila (from the outset) to convert (see Peninei Halakha: Laws of Conversion 4:2:3).

The Guidance of the Rayatz Lubavitcher Rebbe

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, one of the leaders of the ultra-Orthodox world, gave similar guidance on this matter. In 5708 (1948), while in New York, his disciple, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Feldman, wrote to him about the spiritually low state of the community he served, due to the harmful influence of Reform rabbis. He also related that he had turned away a non-Jewish woman who wished to convert in order to marry the son of a community member, and they went instead to convert under the Reform.

In his response, dated 4 Menachem Av 5708 (Igrot, vol. 9, p. 713), the Rayatz wrote regarding conversion: "Concerning his community member… who came to him upset and worried, revealing his great anguish that his son had joined with a non-Jewish woman and wanted to marry her, and that he, the father, could influence them so that she would convert — and my dear friend (the Rebbe writes to his disciple) avoided involvement and pushed him off with various excuses, and they went to the Reform — "this was not good, and it is a great error on his part that must, if possible, even retroactively, be corrected. And in the future, he must involve himself in such matters, and study the laws at their source, the laws of converts in the Tur and Beit Yosef, and afterwards in the Shulchan Aruch with its commentaries, and he should be proficient to carry this out practically, and he should choose two Jews who keep Shabbat and mitzvot, from whom he will form a beit din, and study the book Tiv Gittin, so that he may arrange divorces properly."

The matter of converting the non-Jewish woman was important to the Rayatz, and fourteen days later he sent another letter (ibid., p. 714): "I am interested to know whether you have taken any steps to repair the omission of not converting the non-Jewish woman, and if not — perhaps you can find some pretext and method to correct the matter according to the Torah." The same is evident from additional letters. As I showed in my book "Masoret HaGiyur" 26:31 (p. 757), it is evident that these converts did not intend to observe a fully religious lifestyle but, at most, to be traditional. Nevertheless, the Rayatz's consistent stance was that if they wish to convert, they should be converted in order to prevent assimilation.

The Conduct of the Emissary Rabbi Feldman

It is worthy of note that Rabbi Kalman Davidson transmitted a written testimony from a Haredi American rabbi who immigrated to Israel and asked to remain anonymous, who knew Rabbi Menachem Mendel Feldman well (the Rabbi whom the Rayatz directed in the above letters). He testified that Rabbi Feldman told him: "He, the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, encouraged his emissaries to convert all who came to them, with minimal demands and inquiry consisting only of ensuring that the candidate for conversion rejects Christianity." He further testified: "When I was in Baltimore, Rabbi Feldman asked me to participate with him in a conversion that was conducted according to the process I described."

May a Foreign Worker Put Tefillin on a Disabled Person?

Q: Our father suffered a stroke and became paralyzed in his hands, and cannot put on tefillin himself, but his mind is completely lucid. He wishes to pray, and put on tefillin, and asks whether specifically a Jewish man, obligated in tefillin, must put them on him, or whether his wife may do so, or even a foreign worker.

A: Even a foreign worker may put tefillin on him, because the mitzvah is not the act of tying the tefillin, but that the tefillin be bound upon his arm and head, as it is stated: "And it shall be for you as a sign upon your hand and as a remembrance between your eyes" (Exodus 13:9). And what is said, "You shall bind them as a sign," means that through the tying the tefillin will be a sign — not that the tying itself constitutes the mitzvah (so wrote Maharshal Gaon, vol. 1, Orach Chaim 9). Of course, a woman may also place tefillin on him (based on Avodah Zarah 39a; Mahari Assad Orach Chaim 19, and others).

Entering a Restroom with Tefillin in a Handbag

Q: When I am traveling with tefillin in a bag, may I enter the restroom with the bag?

Answer: Out of respect for the tefillin, it is forbidden to enter with them into a restroom or bathhouse, whether one is wearing them, or holding them in his hand. However, in times when it was customary to wear tefillin all day, they were sometimes forced to be lenient due to concern that the tefillin might be stolen, but when at home, they were careful not to enter the restroom or bathhouse with tefillin (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 43:7; Mishnah Berurah 24).

One who is on the road and has tefillin in his hand, or in his bag, and needs to enter the restroom — if possible, it is preferable to leave them with a friend, and then enter the restroom. If not, he should enter with the bag into the restroom, because the tefillin are concealed in a pouch within a pouch, and the second pouch is not their regular pouch (Machtzit HaShekel; Mishnah Berurah 43:24). That is: the first pouch is the tefillin bag itself, and the travel bag is the second pouch, which is not their usual pouch. One may also place the tefillin in an additional plastic bag, and then enter the restroom.

Respect for Tefillin Placed in a Bag or Suitcase

One who places tefillin in a bag should place them above the clothes and items there, but if his intention is to protect them, he may place them among the clothes and items. One who places tefillin in a suitcase should place them in the most protected and respectful manner. One may place the bag or suitcase containing the tefillin on the ground, but should not sit on it, or rest his feet on it — unless the bag or suitcase is large, and he knows that the tefillin are on the other side (Shulchan Aruch 40:3, 5; see Mishnah Berurah 13).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Of Lice and Men

Vaera

The dust of the earth was turned to lice all across Egypt. The magicians tried to produce lice with their sorcery, but they could not. Meanwhile the lice still infested people and animals alike.

"This," the magicians told Pharaoh, "is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was toughened, and – as the Lord had predicted – he would not listen to them.

Exodus 8:12-15

Too little attention has been paid to the use of humour in the Torah. Its most important form is the use of satire to mock the pretensions of human beings who think they can emulate God. One thing makes God laugh – the sight of humanity attempting to defy heaven:

The kings of the earth take their stand,
And the rulers gather together against the Lord and His anointed one.
"Let us break our chains," they say,
"and throw off their fetters."
He who sits in heaven laughs,
God scoffs at them.

Psalm 2:2-4

There is a marvellous example in the story of the Tower of Babel. The people in the plain of Shinar decide to build a city with a tower that "will reach heaven." This is an act of defiance against the Divinely given order of nature ("The heavens are the heavens of God: the earth He has given to the children of men"). The Torah then says, "But God came down to see the city and the tower . . ." (Gen. 11:5). Down on earth, the builders thought their tower would reach heaven. From the vantage point of heaven, however, it was so minuscule that God had to "come down" to see it.

Satire is essential in order to understand at least some of the plagues. The Egyptians worshipped a multiplicity of gods, most of whom represented forces of nature. By their "secret arts" the magicians believed that they could control these forces. Magic is the equivalent in an era of myth to technology in an age of science. A civilisation that believes it can manipulate the gods, believes likewise that it can exercise coercion over human beings. In such a culture, the concept of freedom is unknown.

The plagues were not merely intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed ("I will perform acts of judgement against all the gods of Egypt: I am God", Ex. 12:12). This explains the first and last of the nine plagues prior to the killing of the firstborn. The first involved the Nile. The ninth was the plague of darkness. The Nile was worshipped as the source of fertility in an otherwise desert region. The sun was seen as the greatest of the gods, Re (and Pharaoh was considered to be his child). Darkness meant the eclipse of the sun, showing that even the greatest of the Egyptian gods could do nothing in the face of the true God.

What is at stake in this confrontation is the difference between myth – in which the gods are mere powers, to be tamed, propitiated or manipulated – and biblical monotheism in which ethics (justice, compassion, human dignity) constitute the meeting-point of God and humankind. That is the key to the first two plagues, both of which refer back to the beginning of Egyptian persecution of the Israelites: the killing of male children at birth, first through the midwives (though, thanks to Shifra and Puah's moral sense, this was foiled) then by throwing them into the Nile to drown.

That is why, in the first plague, the river waters turn to blood. The significance of the second, frogs, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. Heqet, the frog-goddess, represented the midwife who assisted women in labour. Both plagues are coded messages meaning: "If you use the river and midwives – both normally associated with life – to bring about death, those same forces will turn against you." An immensely significant message is taking shape: Reality has an ethical structure. If used for evil ends, the powers of nature will turn against man, so that what he does will be done to him in turn. There is justice in history.

The response of the Egyptians to these first two plagues is to see them within their own frame of reference. Plagues, for them, are forms of magic, not miracles. To Pharaoh's magicians, Moses and Aaron are people like themselves who practice "secret arts". So they replicate them: they show that they too can turn water into blood and generate a horde of frogs. The irony here is very close to the surface. So intent are the Egyptian magicians on proving that they can do what Moses and Aaron have done, that they entirely fail to realise that far from making matters better for the Egyptians, they are making them worse: more blood, more frogs.

This brings us to the third plague, lice. One of the purposes of this plague is to produce an effect which the magicians cannot replicate. They try. They fail. Immediately they conclude, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:15).

This is the first appearance in the Torah of an idea, surprisingly persistent in religious thinking even today, called "the god of the gaps". This holds that a miracle is something for which we cannot yet find a scientific explanation. Science is natural; religion is supernatural.

An "act of God" is something we cannot account for rationally. What magicians (or technocrats) cannot reproduce must be the result of Divine intervention. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that religion and science are opposed. The more we can explain scientifically or control

technologically, the less need we have for faith. As the scope of science expands, the place of God progressively diminishes to vanishing point.

What the Torah is intimating is that this is a pagan mode of thought, not a Jewish one. The Egyptians admitted that Moses and Aaron were genuine prophets when they performed wonders beyond the scope of their own magic. But this is not why we believe in Moses and Aaron. On this, Maimonides is unequivocal:

Israel did not believe in Moses our teacher because of the signs he performed. When faith is predicated on signs, a lurking doubt always remains that these signs may have been performed with the aid of occult arts and witchcraft. All the signs Moses performed in the Wilderness, he did because they were necessary, not to authenticate his status as a prophet . . . When we needed food, he brought down manna. When the people were thirsty, he cleaved the rock. When Korach's supporters denied his authority, the earth swallowed them up. So too with all the other signs. What then were our grounds for believing in him? The Revelation at Sinai, which we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears . . .

Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 8:1

The primary way in which we encounter God is not through miracles but through His word – the Revelation – Torah – which is the Jewish people's constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God. To be sure, God is in the events which, seeming to defy nature, we call miracles. But He is also in nature itself. Science does not displace God: it reveals, in ever more intricate and wondrous ways, the design within nature itself. Far from diminishing our religious sense, science (rightly understood) should enlarge it, teaching us to see "How great are Your works, O God; You have made them all with wisdom." Above all, God is to be found in the Voice heard at Sinai, teaching us how to construct a society that will be the opposite of Egypt: in which the few do not enslave the many, nor are strangers mistreated.

The best argument against the world of Ancient Egypt was Divine humour. The cultic priests and magicians who thought they could control the sun and the Nile discovered that they could not even produce a louse. Pharaohs like Ramses II demonstrated their godlike status by creating monumental architecture: the great temples, palaces, and pyramids whose immensity seemed to betoken Divine grandeur (the Gemara explains that Egyptian magic could not function on very small things). God mocks them by revealing His Presence in the tiniest of creatures. "I will show you fear in a handful of dust", writes the poet, T. S. Eliot.

What the Egyptian magicians (and their latter-day successors) did not understand is that power over nature is not an end in and of itself, but solely the means to ethical ends. The lice were God's joke at the expense of the magicians who believed that because they controlled the forces of nature, they were the masters of human destiny. They were wrong. Faith is not merely belief in the supernatural. It is the ability to hear the call of the Author of Being, to be free in such a way as to respect the freedom and dignity of others.

Where Does my Shemoneh Esrei End?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Slow on the draw

"The other day, I was finishing Shemoneh Esrei as the chazzan began Kedushah, but I had not yet recited the sentence beginning with the words Yi'he'yu Leratzon when the tzibur was already reciting Kodosh, kodosh, kodosh. Should I have answered Kedushah without having first said Yi'he'yu Leratzon?"

Question #2: A proper ending

"Someone told me that I am not required to say the prayer Elokai, netzor leshoni meira at the end of Shemoneh Esrei. Is this a legitimate practice? Why don't the printers tell us this?"

Question #3: Responding in kind

"If I am reciting the Elokai Netzor at the end of Shemoneh Esrei while the chazzan is already beginning the repetition, should I be reciting Amein to his Berachos?"

Answer: Historical introduction

To help us fulfill our daily obligation of praying, the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah, the great leaders of the Jewish people at the beginning of the Second Beis Hamikdash period (who included Ezra, Mordechai, and Daniel), authored what we call the "Shemoneh Esrei" or the "amidah," which consisted, originally, of eighteen blessings. A nineteenth beracha, which begins with the word velamalshinim (or, in the Edot Hamizrah version, velaminim), was added later by the Sanhedrin when it was located in Yavneh, after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, about 400 years after the original Shemoneh Esrei had been written (Berachos 28b).

Standardized versus subjective prayer

People sometimes ask why our prayers are so highly structured. One of the answers to this question is that it is far more meaningful to pray using a text that was written by prophets and great Torah scholars than one's own text. The Anshei Keneses Hagedolah, who authored the Shemoneh Esrei, included among its membership some of the greatest spiritual leaders of all history and also the last prophets of the Jewish people, Chaggai, Zecharyah and Malachi.

Others note that most individuals have difficulty in structuring prayer properly, and therefore the Shemoneh Esrei facilitates the individual's fulfilling the Torah's mitzvah of prayer by providing him with a beautifully structured prayer (Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 1:4).

In addition, our prayers are fixed, rather than individualized, out of concern that someone may request something that is harmful to a different individual or community, something that we definitely do not want in our prayer (Kuzari 3:19). The Shemoneh Esrei is written in a way that it protects, and beseeches on behalf of, the entire Jewish community. We thus link ourselves to the Jewish past, present and future each time that we pray.

In addition, the halachos and etiquette of prayer require that one not supplicate without first praising Hashem, and that the prayer conclude with acknowledgement and thanks (Brachos 32a; Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 1:2). When Moshe Rabbeinu begged Hashem to allow him to enter the Chosen Land, he introduced his entreaty with praise of Hashem. From this we derive that all prayer must be introduced with praise. We also learn that after one makes his requests, he should close his prayer with thanks to Hashem. All these aspects of prayer are incorporated into the Shemoneh Esrei and may be forgotten by someone composing his own prayer.

When may I entreat?

There are numerous places in the organized prayer where one may include personal entreaties, such as during the beracha that begins with the words Shema koleinu (Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 1:9). In addition to the fact that one may include personal supplications in many different places in the Shemoneh Esrei, after the Shemoneh Esrei -- meaning after one has completed Hamevarech es amo Yisroel bashalom -- is an ideal place to add one's own personal prayer requests. The Gemara (Berachos 16b-17a) lists many tefillos that different tanna'im and amora'im added after their daily Shemoneh Esrei. Several of these prayers have been incorporated into our davening – for example, the Yehi ratzon prayer recited by Ashkenazim as the beginning of Rosh Chodesh bensching was originally the prayer that the amora Rav recited at the conclusion of his daily prayer. Two of the prayers quoted in the Gemara Berachos form the basis of the prayer that begins with the words Elokai, netzor leshoni meira, "My G-d, protect my tongue from evil," which has now become a standard part of our daily prayer. This prayer, customarily recited after Hamevarech es amo Yisrael bashalom and before taking three steps back to end the prayer, was not introduced by the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah, and, indeed, is not even halachically required. This prayer contains voluntary, personal entreaties that became standard practice. One is free to add to them, delete them, or recite other supplications instead.

The questions quoted as the introduction to our article relate to the laws that apply to the end of our daily prayer, the Shemoneh Esrei. As we are all aware, Chazal established rules governing when we are permitted to interrupt our davening and for what purposes. However, the status and laws of the end of our Shemoneh Esrei are not mentioned explicitly by

Chazal, and are based on interpretations of halachic authorities. This article will provide background information that explains which rules are applied here, when they are applied and why.

Introducing and concluding our prayer

The Gemara (Berachos 4b and 9b) teaches that the Shemoneh Esrei must be introduced by quoting the following verse, Hashem, sefasei tiftach ufi yagid tehilasecha, "G-d, open my lips so that my voice can recite Your praise" (Tehillim 51:17), and that it should be concluded with the verse Yi'he'yu leratzon imfrei fi vehegyon libi lifanecha, Hashem tzuri vego'ali, "The words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart should be acceptable before You, G-d, Who is my Rock and my Redeemer" (Tehillim 19:15). These two verses are considered an extension of the Shemoneh Esrei (tefillah arichta), a status that affects several halachos, some of which we will soon see.

Before or after Yi'he'yu Leratzon

The first question we need to discuss is whether personal supplications recited after the completion of the Shemoneh Esrei should be included before one recites Yi'he'yu Leratzon or afterwards. When the Gemara ruled that one should recite Yi'he'yu Leratzon after completing the Shemoneh Esrei, does this mean that one may not insert personal requests before saying Yi'he'yu Leratzon?

This matter is debated by the Rishonim. The Raavad prohibits uttering anything between the closing of the beracha Hamevarech es amo Yisroel bashalom and the recital of the verse Yi'he'yu Leratzon. In his opinion, reciting any supplication or praise at this point is a violation of the Gemara's ruling that one must immediately recite Yi'he'yu Leratzon. This approach is quoted and accepted by the Rashba (Berachos 17a).

On the other hand, Rabbeinu Yonah (page 20a of the Rif, Berachos) notes that one may insert personal supplications even in the middle of the Shemoneh Esrei.– Therefore, inserting personal requests before Yi'he'yu Leratzon is also not a hefsek, an unacceptable interruption.

What about Kedushah?

The later authorities discuss the following issue: According to the conclusion of Rabbeinu Yonah, who permits reciting personal supplications before one has recited Yi'he'yu Leratzon, may one also answer the responses to Kedushah, Kaddish, and Borchu before one has said this verse?

The Rema (Orach Chayim 122:1) rules that since one may insert personal requests before Yi'he'yu Leratzon, one may also answer Kedushah or Kaddish. Many disagree with the Rema concerning this point, contending that although inserting a prayer prior to reciting Yi'he'yu Leratzon does not constitute a hefsek, one may not insert praise at this point (Divrei Chamudos, Berachos 1:54; Pri Chadash 122:1). Their position is that one may insert entreaties at many places in the Shemoneh Esrei, but adding anything else that is unauthorized, even praise, constitutes a hefsek. It is for this reason that someone in the middle of the Shemoneh Esrei may not answer Kedushah or the other important responses of the prayer.

The plain reading of the Tur agrees with the Rema's understanding of the topic (Maamar Mordechai; Aruch Hashulchan 122:6; although we should note that the Bach does not understand the Tur this way).

To sum up

Thus far, I have mentioned three approaches regarding what one may recite after having completed Hamevarech es amo Yisrael bashalom, but before one has said Yi'he'yu Leratzon.

(1) One may not insert anything (Raavad and Rashba).

(2) One may insert a personal supplication, but one may not answer Kaddish or Kedushah (Rabbeinu Yonah, as understood by Divrei Chamudos and Pri Chadash).

(3) One may even answer Kaddish or Kedushah (Rabbeinu Yonah, as understood by Rema).

How do we rule?

Among the early codifiers we find all three approaches quoted:

(1) The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 122:1, 2) and the Bach conclude, like the Rashba and Raavad, that one may not insert or recite anything prior to saying Yi'he'yu Leratzon.

(2) The Divrei Chamudos rules that one may recite personal supplications before one says Yi'he'yu Leratzon, but one may not answer Kedushah or Kaddish.

(3) The Rema permits even answering Kedushah or Kaddish before saying Yi'he'yu Leratzon. This is the approach that the Mishnah Berurah (122:6) considers to be the primary one and is also the way the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (18:15) rules. The Rema mentions that some communities had the custom of not reciting Yi'he'yu Leratzon until after they completed saying Elokai Netzor and whatever other personal supplications the individual chose to recite.

Notwithstanding this custom, many authorities suggest reciting Yi'he'yu Leratzon immediately after completing the words Hamevarech es amo Yisrael bashalom, since this procedure allows someone to answer Kedushah according to all opinions and avoids any halachic controversy (Divrei Chamudos; Magen Avraham).

At this point, we can address the first question asked above:

"The other day, I was finishing Shemoneh Esrei as the chazzan began Kedushah, but I had not yet said the words Yi'he'yu Leratzon when the tzibur was already reciting Kodosh, kodosh, kodosh. Should I have answered Kedushah without having first said Yi'he'yu Leratzon?"

Most Ashkenazic authorities conclude that one who has not yet recited Yi'he'yu Leratzon may answer the first two responses of Kedushah, that is, Kodosh, kodosh, kodosh and Baruch kevod Hashem mimkomo. Sefardic authorities, who follow the ruling of the Rashba and the Shulchan Aruch, prohibit responding before saying Yi'he'yu Leratzon.

After saying Yi'he'yu Leratzon

Thus far, we have discussed what one should do prior to reciting the verse Yi'he'yu Leratzon. Now we will begin discussing the laws that are effective after one recites this verse.

All authorities agree that once a person has recited the verse Yi'he'yu Leratzon, he may add personal prayers to the extent that he wishes. Many authorities hold that it is preferable not to recite supplications when, as a result, one will be required to respond to Kedushah or Kaddish while praying (Rashba and Shulchan Aruch, as explained by Maamar Mordechai). This idea will be explained shortly.

Amein during Elokai Netzor

At this point, we will address one of the other questions asked in our introduction:

"If I am reciting the Elokai Netzor at the end of Shemoneh Esrei while the chazzan is already beginning the repetition, should I be reciting Amein to his Berachos?"

If this person was following the custom mentioned by the Rema and had as yet not recited Yi'he'yu Leratzon, he may not respond amein to someone else's beracha. Even if he has recited Yi'he'yu Leratzon, it is unclear whether he may respond amein to Berachos, as I will explain.

First, an introduction: In general, the different parts of the davening have varying status regarding which responses are permitted. For example, it is prohibited to interrupt in the middle of the Shemoneh Esrei, even to respond to Kaddish or Kedushah. On the other hand, the birchos keri'as shema have less sanctity than does the Shemoneh Esrei, and therefore, someone in the middle of reciting birchos keri'as shema may respond to Borchu, and to some of the responses of Kaddish and Kedushah. Specifically, he may answer amein, yehei shemei rabba… and the amein of da'amiran be'alma in Kaddish, and may answer Kodosh, kodosh, kodosh… and Baruch kevod Hashem mimkomo of Kedushah. In addition, he may answer amein to the Berachos of Hakeil hakodosh and Shomei'a tefillah, but he may not answer amein to any other beracha, to the other responses of Kaddish, or to say Yimloch of Kedushah.

The question at hand is: What is the status of davening after one has recited Yi'he'yu Leratzon? May one answer Kedushah or say amein at this point? There are no allusions in Chazal to direct us what to do, but there is a somewhat oblique allusion in a different context that may impact on this topic:

"If he erred and did not mention Rosh Chodesh [i.e., he neglected to say the passage of Yaaleh Veyavo, or neglected to mention Rosh Chodesh while reciting Yaaleh Veyavo] while reciting Avodah [i.e., the beracha of Shemoneh Esrei that begins with the word Retzei], then he returns to

the beracha of Avodah. If he remembers during hodaah [i.e., the beracha that begins with the word Modim], then he returns to the beracha of Avodah. If he remembers during Sim Shalom, then he returns to the beracha of Avodah. If he completed Sim Shalom [i.e., recited the closing beracha], then he returns to the beginning [of the Shemoneh Esrei] (Berachos 29b).

The Gemara teaches that someone who forgot to say Yaaleh Veyavo at the appropriate place in Shemoneh Esrei must return to the words Retzei in order to say Yaaleh Veyavo. However, if he completed reciting the Shemoneh Esrei, then he repeats the entire Shemoneh Esrei. What is the definition of "completing the Shemoneh Esrei?

The Gemara presents three rules:

(1) If he took three paces back, he has completed the Shemoneh Esrei, and must begin from the beginning.

(2) If he finished Shemoneh Esrei and whatever supplication he recites, he must begin from the beginning.

(3) If he is still reciting his supplications, he goes back only to Retzei (Berachos 29b).

We see from this Gemara that reciting the supplications at the end of davening is still considered to be part of the prayer. Does this mean that it has the same rules as being in the middle of the Shemoneh Esrei itself? The Rishonim discuss the issue. The Rashba (Shu"t 1:807; 7:405) rules that once one said Yi'he'yu Leratzon, the laws of hefsek follow the rules of someone who is in the middle of reciting the birchos keri'as shema. Therefore, he may answer amein, yehei shemei rabba… and amein to da'amiran be'alma in Kaddish, and may answer Kodosh, kodosh, kodosh… and Baruch kevod Hashem mimkomo of Kedushah. In addition, he may answer amein to the Berachos of Hakeil Hakodosh and Shomei'a Tefillah.

Answering Amein

May one answer amein to a "regular" beracha, once one has recited the verse Yi'he'yu Leratzon? The Taz (122:1) notes what appears to be an inconsistency in the position of the Shulchan Aruch on this matter. To resolve this concern, he explains that there is a difference between someone who usually recites supplications after completing his Shemoneh Esrei, who should not recite amein, and someone who does so only occasionally, who should. Someone who recites supplications only occasionally may interrupt for other matters once he says Yi'he'yu Leratzon, since for him reciting Yi'he'yu Leratzon is considered the end of his formal prayer. Since today it is common practice to include Elokai Netzor or other supplications at the end of our daily tefillos, we should not respond amein at this point (Mishnah Berurah 122:1). However, other authorities rule that once one has said Yi'he'yu Leratzon, one may answer amein to all berachos (Aruch Hashulchan; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch).

After completing his supplications

Once someone has completed reciting his supplications and recited yi'he'yu leratzon, he is considered to have finished davening completely, and he may now answer any responses that one usually recites, including even to answer Boruch Hu uvaruch Shemo when hearing a beracha (Maamar Mordechai; Mishnah Berurah). This is true, even though he has not yet taken three steps backward.

Conclusion

Rav Hirsch, in his commentary to the story of Kayin and Hevel in Parshas Bereishis (4:3), makes the following observation: "Two people can bring identical offerings and recite the same prayers and yet appear unequal in the eyes of G-d. This is made clear in connection with the offerings of these brothers. Scripture does not say: "G-d turned to the offering by Hevel, but to the offering by Kayin He did not turn." Rather, it says: "G-d turned to Hevel and his offering, but to Kayin and his offering He did not turn." The difference lay in the personalities of the offerers, not in their offerings. Kayin was unacceptable, hence his offering was unacceptable. Hevel, on the other hand, was pleasing, hence his offering was pleasing."

The same is true regarding prayer: the Shemoneh Esrei itself, the Netzor leshoni addition, and the personal supplications that different people recite may appear identical in words, but they are to be recited with emotion, devotion and commitment. Tefillah should be with total devotion in order to improve ourselves, to enable us to fulfill our role in Hashem's world.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vaera

Lost in Egypt

Negotiating redemption is not a simple process. You must deal with two different sides and send two different messages to opposite parties. First, you must speak to the oppressors. You must be demanding and firm. You can not show weakness or a willingness to compromise. Then you have to inform to the oppressed. That should be easy: in a soft and soothing manner you gently break the news that they are about to be liberated. They will surely rejoice at the slightest hint that their time has finally come. That is why I am struck by a verse in this week's portion that directs Moshe to send the exact same message to Pharoh and the Jewish people, as if Pharoh and the Jews were of one mind, working in tandem. Exodus 6:13 "Hashem spoke to Moshe and Ahron and commanded them to speak to the children of Israel and to Pharoh the King of Egypt, to let the children of Israel leave Egypt" I was always perplexed by this verse. How is it possible to encompass the message to the Jews and Pharoh in one fell swoop? How can you compare the strong demand to Pharoh to the soft, cajoling message necessary for the Jews? Pharoh, who does not to want to hear of liberation, has to be warned and chastised and even plagued. The Jews should jump at the mention of redemption! Why, then, are the two combined in one verse and with one declaration? There are those who answer that the Jews in this verse actually refer to the Jewish taskmasters who were appointed by Pharoh as kapos to oppress their brethren. Thus the equation is clearly justified. However, I would like to offer a more homiletic explanation:

There is a wonderful story of a poor farmer who lived under the rule of a miserable poritz (landowner) in medieval Europe. The evil landowner provided minimal shelter in exchange for a large portion of the farmer's profits. The farmer and his wife toiled under the most severe conditions to support their family with a few chickens that laid eggs and a cow that gave milk. Ultimately, time took its toll and hardship became the norm. The farmer and his wife had their bitter routine and never hoped for better. One day the farmer came back from the market quite upset. "What's the matter?" cried his wife, "you look as if the worst calamity has happened." "It has," sighed the anxious farmer. "They say in the market that the Moshiach is coming. He will take us all to the land of Israel. What will be of our cow and our chickens? Where will we live? Who will provide shelter for us? Oy! What is going to be?" His wife, who was steeped with faith in the Almighty, answered calmly. "Don't worry my dear husband. The Good Lord always protects His people. He saved us from Pharoh in Egypt, He redeemed us from the evil Haman and has protected us from harsh decrees throughout our exile. No doubt he will protect us from this Moshiach too!"

Hashem understood that the Jewish people were mired in exile for 210 years. They had decided to endure slavery rather than abandon it. Moshe had to be as forceful with those he was planning to redeem as he was with those who had enslaved them. Often in life, whether by choice or by chance, we enter into situations that we ought not be in. As time progresses, however, we get accustomed to the situation, and our worst enemy becomes change. We must tell the Pharoh within each of us, "let my people go!" Let us not continue on the comfortable path but rather get on the correct one. That message must be told to the victim in us with the same force and intensity as it is told to the complacent. Good Shabbos c1996 Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

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Chief Rabbi Mirvis

Va'era

Who Are The Most Important People?

In Parshat Va'era, on the eve of the redemption of our people from Egypt, the Torah provides us with a genealogical account of the tribes of

Israel - starting with Reuven the first born, and then Shimon, and then Levi. Then the Torah stops. The other nine tribes are left out. How can we understand this?

Rashi gives two great peirushim. In his first commentary, Rashi says that this entire passage comes to provide context for the birth and leadership of our two great leaders, Moshe and Aaron. Seeing as they came from the tribe of Levi, once we reach the tribe of Levi, that's where the Torah stops. If that is the case, I sense there's a weakness possibly in Rashi's peirush here. Because why then must the Torah tell us about Reuven and Shimon?

It could just speak about Levi. And that's perhaps why Rashi himself offers a different peirush to us. He says as follows: there are three tribes that people may expect to be left out, because they might think they're not important enough: Reuven and Shimon and Levi. Why?

Their ancestors were criticised by Yaakov on his deathbed at the end of the Book of Bereishit - because Reuven took one of his concubines and because of what Shimon and Levi did in the city of Shechem. So, we might think that these tribes are tainted, that they're not important enough. Rashi says, "מִפְּנֵי שֶׁחֲשׁוּבִים הֵם" because these three tribes are also important.

That's why they are the ones to be listed. Let no one ever think that there are those within the people of Israel who are not important enough. What is interesting is that the Hebrew word "חָשׁוּב" "important" comes from the term "חָשַׁב" which means "to think" - indicating that importance is a figment of our imagination.

Throughout Tanach, the whole Bible, Hashem gives descriptive terms, adjectives to people: צַדִּיק: righteous. רָשָׁע: evil. רַע: bad. טוֹב: good. On no single occasion does Hashem use the term "חָשׁוּב" "important" for a person. That's a term that we use. Because in our mindset, often it's important to know who the important people are. But let's never forget the teaching that comes from Rashi's second peirush: and that is that in truth, every single person is important.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rav Kook Torah

Va'eira: Priceless Jewels on Tattered Clothes

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 portrays a striking paradox. The Israelites had become large and numerous, yet at the same time, impoverished and barren. Physically, Jacob's family of seventy had developed into a nation. Despite persecution and oppression, they multiplied. Morally and spiritually, however, they were "naked and bare."

What, then, are the "great adornments" the verse mentions? What were these "jewels" of Israel?

Two Special Jewels

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

The second is an even greater gift, beyond the natural realm. It is the unique collective spirit of Israel, which aspires toward 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 to the threadbare garments of a 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 worn next to the body.

Without a fundamental level of morality and proper conduct, their lofty aspirations 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."

The Cost of Being First

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

While returning to school from a class trip, a third-grade student from Yeshivat Noam in Paramus was severely injured when a rock was thrown at her school bus on the New Jersey Turnpike. As the buses traveled near the Teaneck Road exit, a large rock shattered a window and struck the young girl in the head. What initially appeared to be a minor injury quickly turned into a nightmare. A CAT scan revealed bleeding on the brain and the child now required surgery. Baruch Hashem the surgery was successful and she is recovering.

It was frightening. It was horrifying. And it understandably shook our community to its core.

Almost immediately, social media erupted. Though the school and law enforcement explicitly stated that they did not yet know the nature or motive of the incident (and there were no external markings on the bus that identified it as a bus with Jewish students), many online rushed to label it a horrific antisemitic attack. Predictably, the declarations followed. This is the end of Jewish life in America. Jews are no longer safe. History is repeating itself before our eyes.

Two days later, an arrest was made.

Authorities announced that the suspect, already charged in a series of rock-throwing incidents across Bergen County, was not motivated by antisemitism. He was mentally unstable. State police revealed that he had been awaiting trial for similar acts, including an aggravated assault in Bogota that had already landed him in jail. Court records showed multiple additional charges after his release, including alleged assaults on law enforcement officers, criminal mischief, and trespassing.

This was not a hate crime. It was a tragic act of violence committed by someone deeply unwell.

Just a few months earlier, a remarkably similar story unfolded. In October, a rabbi in New Jersey was attacked outside his home. Surveillance footage showed bystanders rushing to help as the rabbi and a good Samaritan suffered minor injuries. Within minutes, the internet declared with certainty that a rabbi putting up his sukkah was attacked in broad daylight by an antisemite.

Strong statements followed. Dire warnings were issued. Fear spread.

But once again, the facts told a different story. Police stated clearly, "This was a random act of violence. No words were exchanged prior to the assault, and there is no indication that this attack was motivated by race, religion, or ethnicity." The suspect had a criminal record. There was no evidence of a hate crime. The rabbi was not putting up his sukkah. And yet the online verdict had already been rendered.

I do not share these stories to minimize or dismiss the very real and deeply disturbing rise in antisemitism. The statistics are undeniable. The threats are real. The actual, horrific acts of violence that have occurred are too painful and numerous to count. We must remain vigilant, courageous, and vocal. We must call out hatred, confront it, and fight it legally, morally, and spiritually.

The rush to assume motive is understandable. After October 7th (and the response to it), comedian Jim Gaffigan captured a feeling many Jews recognized when he quipped, "Does anyone else feel the need to call all their Jewish friends and say, 'Okay, you weren't being paranoid'?"

And yet, Torah does not ask us only to feel. It asks us to think. To pause. To reflect.

Our rabbis begin Pirkei Avos with the teaching: hevei mesunim b'din, be slow to judgment. Rabbeinu Yonah explains that one who is quick to judge is called a sinner. Even if he believes he is speaking truth, his error is not considered accidental. It is closer to willful wrongdoing, because he failed to reflect. A hasty mind, Rabbeinu Yonah teaches, lacks the depth required to truly know.

Technology has reshaped how we process reality. Information travels instantly. Opinions spread faster than facts. There is a cultural race to be first, to alert, to alarm, to analyze, to advise, often without the patience to gather, to listen, to learn. This is dangerous for the content creator and the content consumer alike. And despite repeated examples, we seem unwilling to slow down.

We are watching this same phenomenon play out now as the public rushes to conclusions about the incident involving the death of Renee Nicole Good at the hands of an ICE agent in Minneapolis. Before full video evidence emerged, before facts were established, before investigations concluded (or were even conducted!), each side hurried to condemn or defend, to accuse or absolve, filtered entirely through preconceived narratives. We saw not events, but reflections of our own assumptions.

Hevei mesunim b'din.

This teaching is not about passivity. It is about discipline. It is not a call to ignore injustice, but a demand to pursue truth responsibly. A Torah-guided life insists that moral clarity must be built on factual clarity. Outrage untethered from truth does not heal the world. It fractures it further.

The Torah's insistence on deliberation is not antiquated wisdom. It is desperately needed guidance for a hyperconnected, emotionally charged age. Being slow to judgment does not make us naive. It makes us trustworthy. It makes our voices credible when real hatred appears, when genuine threats emerge, when antisemitism unmistakably reveals itself.

If we cry wolf every time, if we speak with certainty before we know, then when the wolf truly comes, our warnings lose their force.

We owe it to the victims of real hate. We owe it to our community. And we owe it to the Torah that demands integrity not only in what we believe, but in how we arrive there.

Hevei mesunim b'din. In a world rushing to conclusions, have the courage to pause.

Parshas Va'eira

Rav Yochanan Zweig

Group Therapy

And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and gave them a charge to Bnei Yisroel […] (6:13).

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashana 3:5) derives from this possuk a fascinating teaching: R' Shmuel son of R' Yitzchak asked, "With what did he charge Bnei Yisroel? He charged with the mitzvah of shiluach avadim (freeing one's slaves)." Remarkably, according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, the very first mitzvah that Hashem asked Moshe to command the Jewish people was to free their slaves.

At a glance, this can be difficult to comprehend: Why would the mitzvah of freeing one's slaves have the importance of being the first mitzvah given to the nation as a whole? One would expect that perhaps the mitzvah of Shabbos or keeping kosher or family purity laws would take precedence.

Furthermore, none of the Jews had any slaves at this point nor could the law even be observed until they settled in their homeland of Eretz Yisroel! Why charge them with a mitzvah that cannot be fulfilled at that time and why give it the importance of being the first mitzvah they are commanded to do?

Psychological studies show that those who were abused as children have a tendency to become abusers themselves. Obviously, not everyone abused as a child becomes an abuser; but studies show that there is a threefold higher risk for abused children to become abusers later in life. Psychologists have offered a few possible reasons for this link. One of the prevailing theories is that children rationalize this abuse by thinking that abuse is normal behavior. So as they mature they don't fully understand that abusive behavior is wrong, and therefore don't have the same barriers in place to prevent such behavior.

This is problematic for a few reasons: 1) if someone experienced something difficult or painful he should be more sensitive to it, and thereby take extraordinary measure to ensure that he does not cause the same pain to another, particularly a child and 2) this reasoning doesn't explain why they would have a stronger tendency toward deviant behavior. At some point in their lives they would certainly learn that society considers such abuse wrong. Why shouldn't that be enough to stop them?

A much more compelling theory is that an adult who has unresolved issues from being abused as a child acts out as a way of coping with the feelings of helplessness experienced as a child. In other words, those abused become abusers to prove to themselves that they are no longer helpless victims. By becoming abusers, they psychologically reinforce within themselves that they are no longer the ones abused.

We see this in many other instances as well. Smokers who are finally able to quit for good often become crusaders and feel compelled to lecture others to quit smoking; overweight individuals who manage to lose weight are suddenly weight loss experts and have no problem sharing their opinions about how much you should weigh; religious leaders struggling with their own demons become virulent anti-smut and lascivious behavior crusaders, yet nobody is surprised when scandals about them emerge. These "crusades" are merely a coping mechanism for their unresolved issues.

This is exactly what Hashem is telling Bnei Yisroel. He is saying, you have been slaves now in Egypt for close to two hundred years. You need to emotionally deal with the fact that you are now truly free and no longer slaves. One of the ways to emotionally get past one's own slavery would be to have and hold on to slaves of your own. But this is why you must observe the mitzvah of freeing slaves. The ability to no longer need slaves of your own is the ultimate proof that you have internalized your freedom and are in a healthy emotional place. At that point, you will be truly free.

It's All About Me

These are the heads of their fathers' houses; The sons of Reuven the firstborn of Yisroel; Hanoch, and Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi; these are the families of Reuven […] (6:14).

Rashi (ad loc) is bothered by why the Torah suddenly finds it necessary to record the genealogy of Yaakov's family right in the middle of the story of the Exodus. Rashi goes on to explain that the Torah wanted to record the yichus (lineage) of Moshe and Aharon; and once it mentioned Moshe and Aharon, it begins from the firstborn of the family – Reuven.

This is unusual for a few reasons. Generally, when the Torah records the lineage of an individual, the Torah begins with the individual and works its way backwards (e.g. Pinchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aharon the Kohen). So why did the Torah begin with Yaakov? Moreover, why does the Torah mention the families of Reuven and Shimon at all?

Sometimes during the speeches at a simcha, the attendees are subjected to a detailed recollection and description of all the prominent antecedents in the family. While it is true that a family's yichus does add, at least somewhat, to that individual and family's prominence – as the possuk says, "the glory of children are their fathers" (Mishlei 17:6) – most people tend to forget the beginning of that very same possuk: "the crown of grandfathers are their grandchildren."

In other words, the crowning achievement of one's family isn't in the past, it's in the future. We have to develop ourselves into people who our forbearers would be proud of and become their crowning achievement. This means that all they did in their lives, their sacrifices, their own accomplishments, etc. are for naught if we fail to fulfill our own mission in life. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah – Toldos) says that the only reason Avraham was saved from the fiery furnace was because he would have a grandson named Yaakov. In essence, we can and must justify the lives of our ancestors.

This is an awesome responsibility to fulfill. While all of us are descended from a glorious past – that of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov – our personal obligation is to fulfill their mission. If we, God forbid, fail to live up to that responsibility then all is for naught. As great as our forefathers (and all our forbearers throughout history) were, theyneed us in order for the world to come to its final culmination and fulfill the destiny of why all of us were created.

That is what the Torah is telling us here. Moshe was supposed to lead Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt and into Eretz Yisroel to the final purpose of why the world was created. Therefore, this is the story of Yaakov's family. That is why the lineage begins with him. Continuing with his first born Reuven and then Shimon, great as they were, they didn't succeed in fulfilling the family's mission. But Levi, through Moshe and

Aharon, justified the entire family and their purpose in fulfilling Avraham's vision of bringing Hashem down to this world, and on to the final redemption.

https://oukosher.org/blog/consumer-kosher/aged-cheese-list/

Refua Sheleima שלום יהודה הלוי בן חנה חדוה
לע״נ
יוחנן בן יקותיאל יודא ע״ה
שרה משא בת ר׳ יעקב אליעזר ע״ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע״ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל