

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI ARI WEISS

Natural Occurrences

I was watching my children play with my cell phone and was struck by the fact that to them there was nothing extraordinary about what they were holding. The idea of a device that can communicate with anyone from anywhere at the touch of a button, can get television reception, and can take and display pictures and video was the stuff of science fiction when I was growing up. And yet here it is, and my children play with it as though it is nothing out of the ordinary. To me it's miraculous. To them it's commonplace.

In this week's Parsha, G-d confronts Pharaoh with plague after plague of the most supernatural and bizarre occurrences imaginable, in an effort to make him admit to G-d's existence and then release the Jews from bondage. As we know, after every plague Pharaoh "hardens his heart" and refuses to set the Jews free. Interestingly, after the sixth plague, Pharaoh no longer hardens his heart, but rather G-d does it for him. The commentators notice the change and offer some explanations. One, most famous explanation is that Pharaoh had his opportunity to repent during the first six plagues. Since he did not take advantage and repent then, he now has to suffer through the "long haul" as the last four plagues are to be meted out upon him and his country. In other words, Pharaoh's heart was hardened for him so that he would not repent.

The Seforno, in his commentary on the Torah, suggests exactly the opposite. He explains that Pharaoh needed to come to a realization of G-d's supreme authority on his own and to only then release the Jews from slavery, thereby expressing his choice to believe in the existence of the Jewish G-d. However, there was no way he would have been able to do so given the fear and wonder he was experiencing because of the plagues. Only by seeing the plagues as part of the natural order and not as being caused by G-d could Pharaoh choose on his own to believe in G-d, and not have the choice "made for him", so to speak. Therefore, in order to allow Pharaoh the ability to make his own choice, G-d had to harden his heart to not be swayed by his fear or wonder. In other words, Pharaoh's heart was hardened so that he'd be able to repent.

The lesson to us is that there are miracles that are happening around us constantly, but we take no

notice of them because we see it as commonplace or simply as nature. G-d will always portray His miracles in a fashion allowing us to pass them off as "natural occurrences" if we choose to. To those who choose to see them as events caused by Hashem, which they are, they become opportunities through which we can see G-d's existence based on our own choices. Just as I try to explain to my children the miracle of the technological wonder they are casually playing with, so too our sages point us in the direction of realizing G-d's hand in the natural order of creation, and thereby help us choose to see G-d in our otherwise mundane world. © 2013 Rabbi A. Weiss

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Throughout all Egypt the dust turned into lice. But when the magicians tried to produce lice by their secret arts, they could not. The lice attacked men



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and animals alike. The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of G-d.' But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen. (Ex. 8:13-15)

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 G-d. One thing makes G-d 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, / G-d 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 G-d: the earth He has given to the children of men"). The Torah then says, "But G-d came down to see the city and the tower..." Down on earth, the builders thought their tower would reach heaven. From the vantage point of heaven, however, it was so miniscule that G-d had to "come down" to see it.

Satire is essential to understanding 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 civilization 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 G-d", 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, whose child Pharaoh was considered to be. 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 G-d.

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 G-d and mankind. 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. Heqt, 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 G-d".

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 G-d" 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 G-d 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, in which we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears..." (Hilkhos Yesodei haTorah 8:1).

The primary way in which we encounter G-d 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 G-d. To be sure, G-d is in the events which, seeming to defy nature, we call miracles. But He is also in nature itself. Science does not displace G-d: 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 G-d; You have made them all with wisdom." Above all, G-d 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). G-d mocks them by revealing His presence in the tiniest of creatures (T. S. Eliot: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust").

What the Egyptian magicians (and their latter-day successors) did not understand is that power over nature is not an end in itself but solely the means to ethical ends. The lice were G-d'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. © 2013 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them a charge to the Israelites and to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. The Lord commanded Moses and Aaron to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt.” (Exodus 6:13)

This is one of the most difficult texts to understand in all of the Pentateuch. Perhaps G-d is attempting to compel the reluctant Moses to command Pharaoh (in G-d's name) to release the Israelites from Egyptian servitude; Pharaoh probably will not listen, just as he has not listened before, but eventually G-d will triumph - herein lies the significance of G-d's command. But is it not strange for G-d to command Moses to command the Israelites to leave Egypt?

There are two major responses to this question. The first is provided by the midrash and cited by Rashi: "[G-d] said to them [Moses and Aaron], 'You must know that they [the Israelites] are given to refusing and complaining. [You will only succeed in leading them] if you accept that they will curse you and pelt you with stones.'" Hence, the Lord is telling them that they must learn to be most patient with the Hebrews.

If this is the intent of the command, it is certainly prophetic; Moses enjoyed little satisfaction and even less honor from his position of leadership. To cite but two examples, When Korah arrogantly challenged Moses after the latter miraculously succeeded in liberating the Hebrew slaves, not one Israelite stood up in his defense. Dathan and Abiram remain hell-bent on returning to Egypt even after the Exodus. They become the ringleaders of a significant number of like-minded Hebrews in the desert after the hapless report of the scouts, brazenly refusing to discuss the matter with the greatest prophet who ever lived (Numbers 16:4,5,12).

Accepting this interpretation would necessitate taking verse 13 to mean "He commanded them about the children of Israel," rather than "to the children of Israel" which is a leap, since the conjunction in question is *el* (to) rather than *al* (about).

There is a second interpretation that suggests Moses was commanded to give a precept to the children of Israel: the command to free their own slaves (Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashana 3, 5). The Israelites could not expect Pharaoh to free them if they were keeping slaves themselves. This fascinating idea, which emanates from Jeremiah 34:12-17, posits that there were some Israelites who were close enough to Pharaoh to have been allowed to maintain slaves even during the Egyptian enslavement.

Despite these interesting suggestions, I would prefer to return to the simplest meaning of the verse: that G-d spoke to Moses and Aaron and "commanded

them to command the children of Israel and Pharaoh to take the children of Israel out of Egypt."

In order to understand how such a command could apply to the Israelite slaves, I would like to refer to Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*. This book maintains that the majority of the world has consistently rejected freedom and the responsibilities that come with it; the difficult and even fateful choices that a free person must often make. It is far easier for people to subject themselves to a totalitarian political or religious regime that will make all the choices - economic, social and even existential - for them.

Virtually all the revolutionary uprisings, from the French Revolution to the Communist Revolution to the Iranian Revolution, have failed. Once the revolutionaries seize power, they become more tyrannical than those against whom they rebelled. Tragically, the Arab Spring revolutions have not yet proven to be exceptions to this rule.

Many people desire to flee the challenges of freedom and responsibility, even though the alternative may be subjugation. This is not what our G-d wants for humanity. Hence Va'era opens with a new name for G-d: not "El Shaddai," the Almighty and All-Powerful G-d who created and sets limits upon nature and people, but rather Y-H-V-H, the G-d of redemption and love who leaves room for, and thereby empowers us, to be His partners in redeeming and perfecting the imperfect world.

He will effectuate the redemption - but the people must want to be redeemed, must be willing subjects, yearning to be free. Moses and Aaron must lead them as full partners with G-d and they will be expected to take risks for freedom by sacrificing the Egyptian pagan god (the lamb). They will be expected to put their lives on the line by fighting for their homeland, Israel, and settling it.

The G-d of redemption must even wean Moses from his desire that G-d dominate everything and direct the historical process without human input. The shortness of spirit (kotzer ruah) and hard labor of the Israelites under Pharaoh make it difficult for them to even imagine the possibility of freedom and human potential.

It will be a long process, one that will not even be completed by the end of the biblical story. But G-d is preparing the way by instructing Moses to command the Israelites to want to be free, to cooperate as partners with G-d in their march to redemption. © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Pharaoh and Egypt sustain a slew of plagues and misfortunes as they are vividly recorded in this week's parsha. There are those among the Egyptian leadership who waver and realize that Egypt is

lost if it does not allow the Jews to be freed from slavery and to leave Egypt. But Pharaoh is still not convinced. His heart is not only hardened but it is unalterably predisposed to refuse the requests of Moshe.

The Talmud teaches us that "even when standing at the gates of Hell, wicked people will remain unrepentant." Admitting error, changing one's predisposition on important matters, and reversing course -- these are very difficult challenges for people to deal with. Our ego gets in the way of our sense of reality. It prevents us from dealing wisely and practically with circumstances as they are now, not as they once were, nor as what we wish them to be.

Power always brings with it an inflation of ego. Pharaoh cannot change course because doing so would deflate his ego and weaken his perceived power base. His strength, his power, is really his ultimate weakness. The great Pharaoh cannot admit his past mistakes for then he would no longer feel himself to be the great Pharaoh.

He is the victim of his own position and the power that comes with it. Ordinary people, even his own advisors, can admit to error and change course and policies. Not so the great Pharaoh, who deems himself to be a god and above all other humans in his realm. The more arrogant and prideful a person is, the less likely it is that he or she will allow reality to alter preconceived ideas and policies. Pharaoh is trapped in the web of his own making.

Moshe's observation of the folly of Pharaoh and of his personality flaw constitutes a great personal lesson and plays a significant part in the development of Moshe as the greatest teacher and leader of Israel. Witnessing Pharaoh's arrogance and display of egocentric behavior drives Moshe to become the exact opposite type of person -- the most humble of all human beings.

The Torah records for us instances when Moshe admits error and reverses decisions previously enunciated. Moshe's humility is legendary and his sense of real and practical judgment, of circumstances and of the Jewish people for good or for better, is the hallmark of his leadership of Israel for the next forty years. Once ego is tempered and dealt with, true personal growth and concern for national welfare will undoubtedly follow.

The contrast between Pharaoh and Moshe can therefore not be any clearer. Unlikely as it may sound, the meek and modest will in the long run always triumph over the arrogant and prideful. This is a life lesson that the Torah and Judaism impart to us in a repetitive fashion. We all should learn from Pharaoh's faulty personality and behavior. And we should all certainly attempt to emulate the character and nobility of the trait of modesty and humility as exhibited by our great teacher and leader, Moshe. © 2013 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs,*

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“For this time I am sending all of My plagues to your heart and that of your servants and your people” (Sh’mos 9:14). “We learn from here that the plague of the firstborn was equal to all the plagues” (Rashi). Almost every commentator on Rashi asks the obvious question: since this verse is part of the warning to Pharaoh about the seventh plague (hail), why is Rashi explaining it to be referring to the tenth plague? There are two basic approaches used to explain Rashi; some explain why Pharaoh was being warned about the tenth plague before the seventh even hit, while others find a way to adjust Rashi so that he is really referring to the seventh plague. All of the approaches have issues that need to be addressed.

Maharshal and Gur Aryeh are among the commentators who suggest that the plague of the firstborn was referenced before the plague of hail because the sixth plague (boils) was less destructive than the fifth (pestilence), and Pharaoh might think that G-d had already sent His most powerful plagues. Therefore, G-d informed Pharaoh that had He wanted to, He could have killed the Egyptian people when He killed their animals (see Rashi on 9:15), and that such a plague (the tenth) was still to come. Attempts are made to explain how this devastating plague could be said to be sent “this time” (9:14) if it was still several plagues away. The best explanation (see Alshich) is based on the way (and reasons) Rabbi Yehuda grouped the plagues when he gave them an acronym, with the plagues broken into three sets. Since the third set consisted of the last four plagues, “this time” includes the tenth plague. However, if a group of plagues are being referenced together, the indication that the plague of the firstborn was equal to all the plagues is lost; “all of My plagues” no longer refers to all ten -- only to those that are yet to come.

Even if we could explain “this time” as only referring to the tenth plague, this “lesson” can only be learned after it has been established that the plague being referred to is the tenth plague. How/where was this established? Until Rashi mentioned “the plague of the firstborn” in his commentary, would we have considered the possibility that this was the plague being referred to here? Rather than just telling us the lesson learned from the wording of the verse, Rashi should have first explained how we know that the plague being referred to is the tenth plague, not the seventh. Then, once that has been established, he could add that since the tenth plague is referred to as “all My plagues,” it must have been equal to all of the other plagues combined. Since Rashi does not explain how we know that the verse is discussing the tenth plague, it is fair to

assume that the “lesson” is learned from the fact that the seventh plague is referred to as “all My plagues.” Obviously, though, it would be extremely difficult to learn that the tenth plague, the plague of the firstborn, was equal to all the other plagues from the fact that the seventh plague, the plague of hail, is called “all My plagues.” This “lesson” only makes sense if it is the plague of hail that is “equal to all the plagues.”

Another strong indication that Rashi somehow meant that the seventh plague is equal to all the other plagues is that there is no known Midrash that says that the plague referenced in this verse (9:14) is the plague of the firstborn, or that we can learn from this verse that the plague of the firstborn was equal to all the others. Midrash HaGadol, on the other hand, does say that the word “all” teaches us that the plague of hail was equal to the ten plagues. Being that for the overwhelming majority of his commentary on Chumash Rashi either quotes or is based on Chazal, it would be difficult to say that Rashi was equating the tenth plague with all the others on his own while ignoring an explicit Midrash that says that the seventh is (see Rabbi Menachem Kasher’s essay on this subject, one of the appendixes in his Torah Sh’laimah). It therefore seems much more likely that Rashi really meant that the seventh plague is equal to all the others. The question is why, if he meant the plague of hail, he wrote the plague of the firstborn instead.

The most widely quoted answer is that of Rabbeinu Yaakov of Orleans (a disciple of Rabbeinu Tam, Rashi’s grandson), that even though Rashi used a word that is spelled the same as “firstborn” (b’choros), the vowels are different, and it should be read “bakuros,” referring to the earlier crops. The hail destroyed these crops, but not the later crops (see 9:31-32). In other words, Rashi was, in fact, referring to the same plague Pharaoh was being warned about. However, if Rashi meant hail, why didn’t he just say “hail” (as Midrash HaGadol does)? Why use terminology that is not only confusing, but also misleading? A similar approach is suggested by some, based on a manuscript of Rashi that has the word “b’tzores” (lit. “in a tight, or harsh, situation”), with Rashi referring to the plague of hail this way because of the lack of food that resulted from the damage done to the crops. However, Iyunim B’Rashi points out that there is only one known manuscript that uses this word instead of “b’choros” (firstborn), and it was obviously an error (with a tzadi mistakenly written instead of a chof), as the word “b’choros” is written in the margins next to it, the way a scribe corrects his errors. Another attempt to explain why our editions of Rashi say “b’choros” instead of “barad” (hail) is made in Chanukas HaTorah; it was originally written as an acronym, “m”b,” short for “makas barad” (the plague of hail), but was mistakenly written out as “makas b’choros” (the plague of the firstborn). Here too, there are no known manuscripts using an acronym, making it unlikely to be a scribal error, unless

it occurred in very, very early in the transcription process. I would add that such an error (either spelling out the acronym wrong or copying the wrong word), made while copying to a manuscript -- which is often done without paying full attention to the content and context -- is quite understandable, as with the exception of the plague of the firstborn, all of the plagues almost always appear -- and are said -- without saying "the plague of" (makas) first (as this is the way they are said in the Hagada). It would therefore be quite natural to say or write "b'choros" after the word "makas." Be that as it may, however it happened that our editions say "b'choros" despite Rashi meaning "barad," it still seems much more likely that Rashi meant "barad."

Even if Rashi meant "barad," there are still several problems that need to be addressed. First of all, Rashi had told us earlier (4:23) that Pharaoh was warned about the plague of the firstborn right away (before any of the plagues) because of its harshness. If hail was harsher than all the other plagues, shouldn't it have been part of the initial warning? Additionally, since it was only some of the crops that were affected by the hail (and the most important one, wheat, was not), why is the plague of hail considered to be the harshest?

Maharai, after quoting R"Y of Orleans, adds that this was a terrible plague for farmers. The crops were destroyed just as they had fully ripened, and after putting in all that work and watching them grow from sprouts, they were looking forward to enjoying the fruits of their labor. While this doesn't explain why this made it the harshest plague for others (including Pharaoh), the concept can apply to them as well. Egypt had just gone through six debilitating plagues, and was becoming extremely demoralized. However, as the change of season approached, and things started to bloom, a glimmer of hope emerged -- anticipation that things would return to normal. Just as the new crops were ready to be harvested, a new leaf about to be turned, BOOM, G-d destroys all their vegetation, ending their optimism and returning their despair.

The main target of the seventh plague was the mental state of the Egyptians. Their symbol of renewal was destroyed, and the thunder and lightening that accompanied the hail drove them crazy. This was the first plague that caused Pharaoh to admit he had sinned (9:27), and he seems to have placed greater emphasis on stopping the thunder than the actual hailstones (9:28). His advisors told him to avoid the eighth plague, as "Egypt is already in ruins" (10:7). Pharaoh was warned that the seventh plague was directed "at his heart" not because of the actual damage it would do, but because of the damage to the Egyptian psyche that it would cause.

While it's true that the plague of the firstborn was the harshest as far as the damage done (and was therefore included in the initial warning), the seventh plague caused the most despair, leaving only Pharaoh to be convinced to let Moshe's people go. It brought as

much of a feeling of hopelessness, despair and vulnerability as all of the other plagues did combined, even if it didn't destroy their main crop. Therefore, G-d warned Pharaoh that He was about to "send all of His plagues against Pharaoh's heart and the heart of his people and servants," i.e. a plague that was equal to all of them as far as how it made them feel. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

The significance of the name of Hashem plays a central role throughout the events of yetzias Mitzrayim. Parshas Vaera begins with Hashem telling us that unlike His relationship with the avos which was expressed through the names of Keil and Shakai, Hashem will now be known by the shem havaya that we are not allowed to pronounce. Although a true understanding of the meaning of this description of Hashem is obviously not within our grasp, we can get a glimpse of the role this particular name has in the events of yetzias Mitzrayim.

The shem havaya refers to Hashem being haya hoveh v'yehey -- He was, is, and will always be. This name highlights that Hashem is not bound by the limits of time. As human beings we focus on the present which is the only reality for us at the moment. It is this focus that can distance us from Hashem. The Rambam in Hilchos Teshuva explains that the sound of the shofar is the vehicle that wakes us up from slumber. Those who must be awoken are described by the Rambam as "hashochachim es ha'emes b'havlei hazeman -- those that forget the truth because they are preoccupied with the frivolities of time."

One can become locked into the reality of the present for two different reasons. The fleeting pleasures of this world can lead one to believe that it is only instant gratification that matters. Conversely, one can be suffering so profoundly that it is difficult to see past the moment. This was the state of mind of the Jewish People as the situation in Mitzrayim deteriorated. They couldn't even hear the words of Moshe. As the events of yetzias Mitzrayim unfolded, they would have to leave their world of the present and realize that Hashem Who is above time can provide them a glorious future notwithstanding the bleak present.

A person who lives only in the present loses sight of his destiny as he doesn't focus on where he came from. "Mosay yagi'uh ma'asay l'ma'aseh avosai -- when will my actions reach the level of the actions of my forefathers." One who sees himself as a link in the chain beginning with our avos sets standards for himself that are fitting for descendants of such giants. Throughout the events of yetzias Mitzrayim, Hashem reminds the Jewish People that they are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Although they are right now in a lowly state of slavery,

they are descended from great people and they too can emulate their illustrious ancestors.

How do we prevent ourselves from succumbing to the "havlei hazeman -- the frivolities of time"? Only through connecting to Hashem whose very name represents One above time can we avoid the pitfalls of living our lives only for the moment. In Koheles we are taught, "mah yisron la'adam bechol amalo she'ya'amol tachas hashemesh -- what worth is there for a man for all of his work under the sun?" Although a seemingly depressing thought, Chazal drew tremendous inspiration from this observation of Shlomo Hamelech. Under the sun has no lasting worth. However, the work performed above the sun, spiritual pursuits of Torah and mitzvos, last forever. The sun symbolizes time as days and years are measured by its travels. Efforts "under the sun," those that are bound by time, are the havlei hazeman that Shlomo Hamelech and the Rambam describe as worthless. Those who toil "above the sun," in the realm of Hashem, are connected to the Source of Eternity. © 2013 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & The TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

Some people just don't get it... They fixate on the details along the way without realizing where things are headed...

In this week's parsha, Va'era, the plagues, and the essential messages they contained about Hashem and His interaction with the world, are brought upon Paroah and Egypt. The message of the first three plagues was, as the passuk {verse} states: "With this you will know that I am Hashem. [7:17]"

Blood and frogs, the first two plagues, attacked the Nile River that the Egyptians revered and worshiped. The Nile was viewed as their very life -- source as it provided drinking and bathing water, irrigation for their crops and a steady supply of fish. By transforming this Nile-god into a malodorous bloodbath and then into the generator of frog-induced pain and suffering, Hashem was clearly showing that He, and only He, is the true G-d and source of power.

The third plague, lice, also proved this same point but in a different way. Whereas the Egyptian sorcerers were able to duplicate the first two plagues, their inability to produce lice led them to openly proclaim: "This is the finger of G-d." Once again, "that I am Hashem."

At first glance, the Egyptian sorcerers turning water to blood and then bringing out frogs seems to present a difficulty. Why would Hashem make a miracle/plague that could so easily be imitated? Wouldn't it be better to inflict upon them plagues that couldn't be parroted?

Imagine someone taking a hard punch to the face. He then stands up and belligerently taunts his

attacker: "You think you're so strong? You think you can hit hard? I'll show you a real hard punch!" and then proceeds to hit himself even harder in the face...

The plagues were not a competition of wizardry. They came to teach enduring lessons to the world. The first two plagues taught that those entities through which we receive blessings are not sources, but rather, conduits. Though we must appreciate them for the blessings that flow through them, we cannot allow them to distract us from acknowledging the true source. If they obscure that acknowledgment then they will be degraded.

The sorcerers got a bit fixated on the details along the way... They also turned the water into blood. They also brought forth the frogs. But they didn't realize that they were simply hitting themselves in the face. They too were clearly showing that the Nile was not a power source and could therefore be degraded. Their acts didn't diminish, but rather, strengthened the plague.

It's easy to mock the sorcerers but we too fixate on the details along the way without realizing where things are headed...

The parable is given of a person moving to Israel who will be stopping in Spain for a few days in transit. In preparation for this momentous move, he spends months learning the language and acquainting himself with the geography and customs of... Spain.

Each individual, on their life-long path toward the recognition "that I am Hashem. [7:17]," must be careful not to get too fixated on the details along the way. © 2013 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

On most occasions when the Torah states that G-d issues a command, the details of the directive are spelled out. Our portion offers an exception to the rule. The text reads, "and the Lord spoke to Moshe (Moses) and Aaron and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel." (Exodus 6:13). But the specific command is not spelled out.

The reality is that the power of certain situations go beyond words. When the emotion is so high, words simply do not suffice. For example, in the Hagaddah we proclaim that had G-d taken us to Sinai, but not given us the Torah-dayenu, it would have been enough. Is this true? What value is there in coming to Sinai if the Torah is not given? But perhaps it can be suggested that the experience of coming to Sinai, the revelation moment, even without words, has intense power. The rendezvous with G-d would have been enough. Following this idea, it can be suggested that the mere experience of being commanded was enough - nothing more had to be said.

One wonders, however, why here specifically were no words required? After all G-d commands

Moshe and Aaron many times-and the specific mandate follows? But perhaps the command was indeed fully spelled out. Note that after the Torah says, "and He commanded them (va-yetzavem)," the Torah adds the two letter word, "el" which literally means, "to." Here, Moshe and Aaron were commanded "to" the Jewish people; in other words they were to become involved with the Jewish people in a way that they would connect with them no matter what.

Sifrei makes this very point by declaring "G-d said to Moshe and Aaron, I want you to know that the Israelites are a stubborn and troublesome lot; but you must accept this mission on the understanding that they will curse you and stone you." Ibn Ezra follows this idea by stating that Moshe and Aaron were commanded to be patient with Israel and not be angry with them, even if the nation refused to believe in their leadership.

This idea also makes contextual sense. It follows immediately after the Jewish people had bitterly complained to Moshe and Aaron that their efforts to free the people had only made things worse. (Exodus 5:21)

This approach rings true today. Debate has emerged on how to deal with Jews who have strayed. In Israel for example, there are those who throw stones at Jews who do not keep the Sabbath. Our analysis points us in a different direction-rock throwing is counter productive. Patience and love are the way.

A chassid once approached his rebbe. "My child is desecrating the Sabbath. What shall I do?" "Love him" replied the rebbe. "But he is desecrating the Sabbath publicly," retorted the chassid. The rebbe looked up with a smile and responded, "Then, love him even more."

Hence, G-d's command to Moshe and Aaron-"to the children of Israel." "El" teaches that the gateway to the soul is not through stones or harsh words, but rather through love. © 2009 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

The Hebrew language has so many hidden lessons, and one such lesson lies within this week's Parsha (portion), Vaeira, where G-d promises to take the Jews from under the 'burdens' of Egypt (6:6). But as the Rebbe of Gur explains, the Hebrew word that means 'burden' also means 'tolerant', which would make the Passuk (verse) read..."I will deliver you from being tolerant of Egypt". We find proof for this tolerance when even after the Jews were released from Egypt, when the situation looked bleak, they wanted to go back to slavery. Had their slavery been such a burden, why would they ever consider going back?

The answer is that the problem was not that they were overworked, but that they were too tolerant of

their surroundings. Hashem therefore told them, and is telling us, that the first step Jews have to take is to realize when we are 'slaves' to our society. If we tolerate our surroundings, not only will we not appreciate how lucky we are to be different, but also we'll forget that we even are different. In a society where some people hide their religious identity, the Torah is telling us to always keep in mind our ultimate differences as Jews, to never settle for being just like everyone else, and to love it, show it, and prove it in constructive ways every chance we get. In response to this Parsha, we should all pick one way to show the world and ourselves what it means to be a Jew, whether it's by volunteering to visit the sick, to give charity, or to say one Perek (paragraph) of Tehillim (Psalm) every day. Find a way to find our way.

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SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

"Behold, I shall strike the waters that are in the River with the staff that is in my hand, and they shall change to blood." (7:23) In the Pesach Haggadah, we say that Moshe's staff performed "otot" / "signs." Also, we refer to the plagues as "moftim" / "wonders." What do these terms mean? R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) explains: The miracles that Hashem has performed for Yisrael fall into two categories. The first is called, "otot" / "signs," which describes miracles intended to foretell or even bring about a future event. For example, in Melachim II (13:15-19), the prophet Elisha tells King Yo'ash to shoot arrows toward the Kingdom of Aram as a sign that Yo'ash would defeat Aram. When Yo'ash obeys only partially, the prophet tells him that he will weaken, but not destroy, Aram.

Moshe's staff was a "sign" because the names of all of the plagues were carved on it, thus foretelling what would occur. Also, the staff was a sign of Hashem's desire to fulfill the will of tzadikim, because the staff represented a king's scepter, and its being in Moshe's hand foretold that Hashem would turn over a certain amount of control over the world to Moshe and Bnei Yisrael, i.e., that the world's future would depend on the quality of Bnei Yisrael's deeds.

"Moftim," on the other hand, are miracles that Hashem performs directly without a "sign" preceding them and without any participation by tzaddikim on earth. These are not meant to prove anything, but serve other purposes.

The plagues in Egypt, concludes R' Chaver, were both otot and moftim. They were "signs" because they were meant to prove a point, namely that G-d gives control of the world to deserving tzaddikim -- information that would encourage Bnei Yisrael to receive and observe the Torah. They also were moftim, miracles that were designed to punish the Egyptians. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yad Mitzrayim) © 2013 S. Katz & torah.org