

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

The Message of Mount Sinai

The first reference to Mount Sinai in the Torah, appears when our teacher Moses witnessed there a strange phenomenon. As he was shepherding his sheep he glanced up at the mountain and he saw a thorn bush that was burning but it was not being consumed by the fire. Our sages grapple with the meaning of this first encounter. Rashi states that the fire was a sign that G-d would be with the Jewish people even in hard times when they were slaves in Egypt. As an extension from the above, when a person grieves, G-d grieves as well. When the Jewish people are being oppressed in bondage Almighty G-d is with them.

A second interpretation relies upon an obscure Midrash that states that this burning bush was a rose bush. The significance of this reference is that though the Jewish people might be as difficult as thorns, there are nevertheless "roses" among them, and for them alone it is worthwhile to save them from their tyranny.

As an outgrowth of this interpretation one might further posit, that though within every Jew there are many "thorns", there are, nevertheless, "roses" as well. Our charge is to always search for the good -the "roses"-in each and every Jew. Rabbi Soloveichik states that in every Jew there is a "Ratzon Elyon" a sublime desire to do what is correct. When we look at people we must always search for the virtuous aspects that are in their character. Though there are Jews who demonstrate bad qualities, there is also within them the potential of doing noble acts. Our job is to seek out and to bring to fruition that potential.

There is a third interpretation- the view of Rabenu Bachya- that states that the burning bush represents the Torah. The Torah was given to the Jewish people to give warmth and support-to illuminate our lives and to provide us with the necessary tools to meet the challenges that we face daily; to offer comfort in difficult times.

However just as the bush was not being consumed so also the Torah should never be used as a vehicle of destruction. No one has the right to use the Torah as an excuse to denigrate anyone-Jew or non Jew. No one has the right to say that because he learns

Torah he is by definition better than someone else! Only G-d has the right to judge anyone! Some of the most incompetent people who led the Jewish people in times of need, were still referred to as leaders by our sages. The Talmud tells us that "Yiftach Bdoro k'Shmuel bdoro" .Yiftach, who was perhaps not the best representative of Jewish leadership in his generation, was equivalent to the great prophet Samuel. We do not understand the ways of Almighty G-d, nor can we use the Torah as a means to laud ourselves and to step on other people because of their seemingly lack of religious observance. No one has the right to use the Torah as an excuse to degrade another person. This is symbolized by the burning bush not being consumed by the fire.

These lessons demand the attention of our teachers when they are actively involved in the instruction of Torah to our children. Rabbis who must berate others in the name of Torah- to show their superiority- are doing a disservice to our people. No teacher has the right to criticize any one -Jew or non-Jew- and use derogatory language all in the name of Torah. Too often teachers are quick to use insulting language to describe Jews who are less observant, or non-Jews in any situation. They make statements such as "guyesha Kop" or call Reform or Conservative Jews "Reshaim", wicked people, using the Torah as their basis. A teacher that resorts to this is in the wrong profession. We don't use Torah as an excuse to step on people and belittle them.

Secondly, teachers must have the ability and the desire to always look for the "rose" in every child. There is always good in everyone and certainly in all our Jewish children.

Teaching is a serious responsibility. We have in our hands the power to destroy or to build. As Chaim Ginat so beautifully writes: "As a teacher, I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized or dehumanized".

These principles gleaned from the burning bush

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must guide us in our daily interactions with people and be inculcated into the hearts and minds of our teachers as they embark on the serious task of educating the next generation of children. © 2007 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss has been involved in Jewish education for the past forty-six years, serving as principal of various Hebrew day schools. He has received awards for his innovative programs and was chosen to receive the coveted Outstanding Principal award from the National Association of Private Schools. He now resides in Israel and is available for speaking engagements. Contact him at ravmordechai@aol.com

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Sometimes others know us better than we know ourselves. In the year 2000, a British Jewish research institute came up with a proposal that Jews in Britain be redefined as an ethnic group and not as a religious community. It was a non-Jewish journalist, Andrew Marr, who stated what should have been obvious. He said: "All this is shallow water, and the further in you wade, the shallower it gets."

It is what he wrote next that I found inspirational: "The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us. They have had their Bible, one of the great imaginative works of the human spirit. They have been victim of the worst modernity can do, a mirror for Western madness. Above all they have had the story of their cultural and genetic survival from the Roman Empire to the 2000s, weaving and thriving amid uncomprehending, hostile European tribes." (The Observer, Sunday 14 May, 2000)

The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us. I love that testimony. And indeed, from early on, storytelling has been central to the Jewish tradition. Every culture has its stories. (The late Elie Wiesel once said, "God created man because God loves stories"). Almost certainly, the tradition goes back to the days when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers telling stories around the campfire at night. We are the storytelling animal.

But what is truly remarkable is the way in which, in this week's parsha, on the brink of the Exodus, Moses three times tells the Israelites how they are to tell the story to their children in future

generations.

1. "When your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.'" (Ex. 12:26-27)

2. "On that day tell your child, 'I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'" (Ex. 13:8)

3. "In days to come, when your child asks you, 'What does this mean?' say, 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'" (Ex. 13:14)

The Israelites had not yet left Egypt, and yet already Moses was telling them how to tell the story. That is the extraordinary fact. Why so? Why this obsession with storytelling?

The simplest answer is that we are the story we tell about ourselves. There is an intrinsic, perhaps necessary, link between narrative and identity. In the words of the thinker who did more than most to place this idea at the centre of contemporary thought, Alasdair MacIntyre, "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal." We come to know who we are by discovering of which story or stories we are a part.

Jerome Bruner has persuasively argued that narrative is central to the construction of meaning, and meaning is what makes the human condition human. (Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, Harvard University Press, 1986) No computer needs to be persuaded of its purpose in life before it does what it is supposed to do. Genes need no motivational encouragement. No virus needs a coach. We do not have to enter their mindset to understand what they do and how they do it, because they do not have a mindset to enter. But humans do. We act in the present because of things we did or that happened to us in the past, and in order to realise a sought-for future. Even minimally to explain what we are doing is already to tell a story. Take three people eating salad in a restaurant, one because he needs to lose weight, the second because she's a principled vegetarian, the third because of religious dietary laws. These are three outwardly similar acts, but they belong to different stories and they have different meanings for the people involved.

Why though storytelling and the Exodus?

One of the most powerful passages I have ever read on the nature of Jewish existence is contained in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Considerations on the Government of Poland (1772). This is an unlikely place to find insight on the Jewish condition, but it is there. Rousseau is talking about the greatest of political leaders. First of these, he says, was Moses who "formed and executed the astonishing enterprise of instituting as a national body a swarm of wretched fugitives who had no arts, no weapons, no talents, no

virtues, no courage, and who, since they had not an inch of territory of their own, were a troop of strangers upon the face of the earth."

Moses, he says, "dared to make out of this wandering and servile troop a body politic, a free people, and while it wandered in the wilderness without so much as a stone on which to rest its head, gave it the lasting institution, proof against time, fortune and conquerors, which 5000 years have not been able to destroy or even to weaken." This singular nation, he says, so often subjugated and scattered, "has nevertheless maintained itself down to our days, scattered among the other nations without ever merging with them." (The Social Contract and other later political writings, Cambridge University press, 2010, 180)

Moses' genius, he says, lay in the nature of the laws that kept Jews as a people apart. But that is only half the story. The other half lies in this week's parsha, in the institution of storytelling as a fundamental religious duty, recalling and re-enacting the events of the Exodus every year, and in particular, making children central to the story. Noting that in three of the four storytelling passages (three in our parsha, the fourth in Va'etchanan) children are referred to as asking questions, the Sages held that the narrative of Seder night should be told in response to a question asked by a child wherever possible. If we are the story we tell about ourselves, then as long as we never lose the story, we will never lose our identity.

This idea found expression some years ago in a fascinating encounter. Tibet has been governed by the Chinese since 1950. During the 1959 uprising, the Dalai Lama, his life in danger, fled to Dharamsala in India where he and many of his followers have lived ever since. Realising that their stay in exile might be prolonged, in 1992 he decided to ask Jews, whom he regarded as the world's experts in maintaining identity in exile, for advice. What, he wanted to know, was the secret? The story of that week-long encounter has been told by Roger Kamenetz in his book, *The Jew in the Lotus* (HarperOne, 2007). One of the things they told him was the importance of memory and storytelling in keeping a people's culture and identity alive. They spoke about Pesach and the Seder service in particular. So in 1997 Rabbis and American dignitaries held a special Seder service in Washington DC with the Dalai Lama. He wrote this to the participants: "In our dialogue with Rabbis and Jewish scholars, the Tibetan people have learned about the secrets of Jewish spiritual survival in exile: one secret is the Passover Seder. Through it for 2000 years, even in very difficult times, Jewish people remember their liberation from slavery to freedom and this has brought you hope in times of difficulty. We are grateful to our Jewish brothers and sisters for adding to their celebration of freedom the thought of freedom for the Tibetan people."

Cultures are shaped by the range of stories to which they give rise. Some of these have a special role in shaping the self-understanding of those who tell them. We call them master-narratives. They are about large, ongoing groups of people: the tribe, the nation, the civilisation. They hold the group together horizontally across space and vertically across time, giving it a shared identity handed on across the generations.

None has been more powerful than the Exodus story, whose frame and context is set out in our parsha. It gave Jews the most tenacious identity ever held by a nation. In the eras of oppression, it gave hope of freedom. At times of exile, it promised return. It told two hundred generations of Jewish children who they were and of what story they were a part. It became the world's master-narrative of liberty, adopted by an astonishing variety of groups, from Puritans in the 17th century to African-Americans in the 19th and to Tibetan Buddhists today.

I believe that I am a character in our people's story, with my own chapter to write, and so are we all. To be a Jew is to see yourself as part of that story, to make it live in our time, and to do your best to hand it on to those who will come after us. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**W**hen your children will say to you, 'What is this service to you?' You shall say, 'It is the Passover service to God'" Why does the author of the Haggada call the questioner in this sequence "the wicked child"? The reason that the Haggada itself emphasizes lies in the questioner's exclusion of himself from the family ritual when he asks, "What is this service to you?" The Haggada explains: "Saying 'you,' he excludes himself, and by doing so he denies a basic principle of our faith." For a Jew, it is considered "wicked" to exclude oneself from the Jewish ritual-familial experiences.

Also, in this instance, the child doesn't ask his parents anything; instead, he tells them: "...when your children shall say to you" (Ex. 12:26). An honest question reveals a willingness to learn, but the wicked child is not interested in answers – only in making statements.

How might we respond to such a child? The Bible itself gives one response: "It is the Passover service to God. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt [when he slew the Egyptian firstborn] and He saved our homes" (Ex. 12:27); the author of the Haggada gives another: "You shall cause his teeth to be on edge, and say to him, 'It is because of that which

God did for me when I went out of Egypt” (Ex.13:8).

Why the difference, and what is the specific message of each? The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893) teaches that the wicked child’s statement reflects his belief that so many years after the original events there is no reason to retain such an old-fashioned and outmoded service. The biblical answer is that it is a Passover sacrifice to God, who saved our homes, and our families.

There are two central pillars in Judaism: family ties and Divine directions. Family has been an important Jewish value from the beginning of our history, when Abraham is told that he is distinguished and loved by God “so that he command his children and his family after him that they do righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). And when Pharaoh’s servants agree to allow Moses to leave Egypt – but only with the males – Moses and Aaron respond, “We shall go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters” (Ex. 10:9). It’s a family affair.

Hence, the Bible tells this wicked child that the Passover sacrifice is a reminder of a Divine miracle that preserved the Jewish family. The Seder is precisely the kind of family ritual that is crucial for familial continuity.

The author of the Haggada cites a different verse: “When the Lord brings you to the land which He swore to your fathers to give to you... You shall tell your child on that day, saying, ‘It is because of this [ritual] that God did [miracles] for me when I went out of Egypt’” (Ex. 13:5-8).

The key words here are “did for me.” Passover teaches the two most important messages of Judaism: the inalienable right of every individual to be free and the injunction that we love the stranger because we were (unloved) strangers in Egypt. The continuity of the generations and the familial celebrations of crucial historical events demand that each Jew have the ability to transform past history into one’s own existential and personal memory. The initial biblical answer emphasizes the importance of familial experiences for familial continuity; the author of the Haggada adds that without incorporating past into present there can be neither meaningful present nor anticipated future.

I am my past. Despite the fact that the wicked child has denied his roots, we dare not tear him out of the family. He may think that he wants to remove himself from historical continuity, but it’s the task of his family to remind him that this celebration is an indelible part of his existential identity, that he is celebrating his own personal liberation.

The Haggada instructs us to set the teeth of the wicked child on edge. The phrase in Hebrew is “hakheh et shinav.” It doesn’t say “hakeh”, which means to strike, to slap him in the teeth, but rather “hakheh,” from the language of the prophet Ezekiel, “The fathers eat the sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.

(Ezek. 18:2). The prophet is expressing the fundamental unfairness in the fact that the parents have sinned but their children are the ones who must suffer the pain of exile. Indeed, children do suffer for the sins of their parents – always. Anyone who comes from a difficult or dysfunctional home will bear the burden.

But just as the child has responsibility to his past, the parent has responsibility to the future. Are we certain that the wicked child’s teeth are not set on edge because of the sour grapes that we, the parents, have eaten because we have not properly demonstrated the requisite love and passion for the beauty and the glory of our traditions? Have we been there to hear his questions when he was still ready to ask them and to listen to answers? Have we been the appropriate models for him to desire continuity within our family? The author of the Haggada subtly but forthrightly reminds both parents and children of their obligations to each other, to past and to future. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah reading of this week begins with the Hebrew word ‘bo.’ This word literally means to enter. Normally, if we wish to describe crossing a threshold to appear before a person, the word ‘bo’ is not usually the verb that is used. To enter, in this instance, means to delve into the personality and the mind of the person, – to enter the conscience of that person, so to speak. So, why does the Torah use this verb ‘bo’ in connection with Moshe, appearing once again before the Egyptian Pharaoh, in order to tell him that he should liberate the Egyptian slaves and allow the Jews to live as free people outside of the land of Egypt?

I think the insight into this can be found in the words that the Lord imparted to Moshe. The Lord tells Moshe that he should be aware that his words will have no effect on the Pharaoh, and that the Pharaoh will not allow the Jews to be released from their bondage in Egypt. It appears Moshe is sent on a mission of futility, with the sole purpose to somehow change the mind and heart of the Pharaoh and allow him to free the Jewish people by sending them forth from his country as an independent nation. If this is the case, and it seems obvious that it is, then the entire conversation between the Lord and Moshe leaves us wondering as to what its purpose is, what is its import and reason. What are we to learn from it?

I believe that the insight necessary to understand this conversation lies in the fact that God tells Moshe that Heaven has hardened the heart of Pharaoh, i.e. that Pharaoh is now incapable of making the correct choice for his own salvation and the salvation of his people. The Talmud teaches us that people who are completely evil, based on previous

behavior and actions, are incapable of repenting and choosing wisely, even when they stand on the precipice of hell itself.

We are witness to the fact that many times in life people, usually very bad people who previously had the opportunity to repent and do good, find themselves trapped by their very nature. Though these are circumstances that they have brought upon themselves, even though they are aware that their policies and behavior may be suicidal in nature and harmful to them in the extreme, they are unable to prevent themselves from falling into the abyss that they themselves have created by their stubborn mindset.

The Lord tells Moshe that this is the case regarding Pharaoh. He is unable, even if he wanted to withdraw from the situation that he himself has entered, through his previous behavior and decisions. His greatest advisors have told him that he is destroying Egypt and himself. Yet Pharaoh is unable to regain his sense of balance and make the wise choice that will save the lives of thousands of Egyptians and himself as well.

So, the Lord told Moshe, 'bo'- enter into his mind, and when you are able to do so, you will appreciate that Pharaoh is not going to be able to save himself. This lesson, regarding human stubbornness and futility, is the reason that the Torah uses the verb 'bo' when referring to the conversation and narrative that introduces this week's Torah reading. ©2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The Biblical term for midnight, the time Moshe (Moses) says God will slay the first born-is ka'hatzot ha'lailah. (Exodus 11:4) Different interpretations are given for the prefix ka, which gives us the key as to the true meaning of this term.

On its simplest level, ka, says Rashi, means "when." From this perspective, ka'hatzot is a delineation of time, i.e. that actual moment when the night was divided - midnight.

The Talmud sees it differently – ka means "approximately." Although the plague actually occurred ba'hatzi ha'lailah, precisely at midnight, Moshe says ka'hatzot. (Exodus 12:29) This was because Moshe feared the Egyptians would make a mistake in calculation and believe midnight had arrived when it had not. The Egyptians would then accuse Moshe of being a false prophet. (Berakhot 4a)

Or Ha-hayyim (Hayyim ibn Attar) understands ka as referring to a moment in the past. The term refers to that midnight in the book of Genesis when Avraham (Abraham), the first patriarch, rescued his

nephew Lot. (Genesis 14) As Avraham was victorious at midnight, so would the Jews overcome the Egyptians at midnight.

Another approach can be suggested. Perhaps ka does not refer to the past, but to the future.

Consider the following: night in the Torah symbolizes suffering and exile. Hatzi takes it a step further. It is not only night, but it is the night of the night -- midnight, the time of the deepest suffering and exile, when the voice of God seems silent.

Hence, the Torah here states ka'hatzot. As we were saved from Egypt, so will we in the future, survive other midnights - other times of pain and despair.

In the will of Yossele Rakover, a fictitious last testament left in the ruins of Eastern Europe during the Holocaust, this idea of ka'hatzot is expressed powerfully. There he writes: "I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine. I believe in love, even when I am alone. I believe in God, even when He is silent."

What is true about the nation of Israel is similarly true about individual lives. Often God intervenes precisely when one thinks there is no hope.

Note the sentence, "As for me, I trust in Your kindness, my heart will rejoice in Your salvation." (Psalms 13:6) In Hassidic thought, the Psalmist is telling us that our faith in God should be so great that we rejoice in our salvation not after being saved, but even before we are saved – even when it is still dark.

Ka, a small two-letter prefix that could easily be overlooked, teaches a profound lesson – darkest moments contain sparks of hope. ©2020 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 DAVID S. LEVIN

The Paschal Lamb

In the beginning of Parashat Bo, Hashem spoke to Moshe before explaining the last set of makot (plagues) that He would bring on Egypt. Hashem says to Moshe, "Come to Pharaoh because hichbad'ti libo, I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants in order that I will set up these, my signs, in his midst." This pasuk presents several questions which we will deal with both individually and collectively.

All of the commentaries deal with the concept of "hardening his heart". Two different terms for this action are used throughout the narrative of the ten plagues. In the beginning of Moshe's journey back into Egypt, Hashem said to Moshe, "I will strengthen his heart (va'ani achazek et libo) and he will not send out the people." The two terms are similar but with a marked difference. The term chazak is a strengthening of what is already strong. If I want to lift a heavy weight, I may put on knee pads and a back support to

strengthen those parts of me which might suffer and bend under the weight. The term kaved implies a re-strengthening of something which is already crumbling such as a levee which has already been compromised. By shoring up this structure, we allow it to do what it had already lost the power to do because of its decay. Hadrash V'ha'iyun gives us another explanation of kaved. The kaved is also the liver, and the liver will not absorb anything while it is cooking. In fact, the more one cooks the kaved, the harder it becomes. This was also true of Par'oh.

The commentaries ask how Hashem could punish Par'oh if He first hardened or strengthened his heart. Doesn't this action cancel Par'oh's b'chira chofshit, his freedom of choice? The Rabbis counter with the answer that this actually enabled Par'oh's ability to choose. Par'oh would never have had the ability to refuse Hashem once he experienced even one plague. In last week's parasha after the plague of wild animals, the Torah tells us, "and Par'oh hardened his own heart also at this time." Clearly here Par'oh hardens his own heart because he wanted to continue to rule over his people and to maintain his own deity. He was already defeated and had agreed to let the Jews sacrifice to Hashem. Yet in order to maintain that control, he insisted that the sacrifices be brought in Egypt. The bottom line was that Par'oh wanted to continue to fight against Hashem.

This eighth plague, locusts, was a perfect example of how Hashem played to Par'oh in order to give him hope that he might somehow succeed. The Sefas Emes describes the wonder of Hashem, "that Hashem gives the evil person the strength to go against Hashem's wishes." The plague of hail destroyed the barley because its stalks were already firm, but it left the stalks of wheat and spelt which was the primary source of wealth for the Egyptians. There was then a break between the time of the plague of hail and the plague now of locusts. This break gave Par'oh hope that maybe the plagues were over and Egypt would still have food and wealth. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that this was one of the reasons that Hashem spoke to Moshe at this time. Moshe could not comprehend why Hashem had spared the wheat and the spelt when he destroyed the other grains. But this was to give Par'oh a temporary break to rebuild his conviction to disregard Hashem's wishes if he so chose to. The Malbim adds that Moshe could not understand how Par'oh was so defeated by hail that Hashem had to strengthen him for him to refuse. Yet after a short time, Par'oh now appeared to have his full strength again. That is why Hashem told Moshe that He had shored up Par'oh, hichbaditi, in order to show Par'oh His signs.

One of the other reasons for an interruption in the plagues at this time was to demonstrate that this new plague showed a change in the reaction of

Par'oh's servants to the plagues. The plague of locusts was the first time that we saw open rebellion from Par'oh's servants. "And the servants of Par'oh said, 'How long will this one continue to be a snare for us. Send the people out that they may serve their Hashem Elokim. Don't you yet know that Egypt is lost?'" Yet this rebellion is incomprehensible in light of the statement made to Moshe, "I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants." We must remember that hardening enables one to do what he truly wishes to do. It does not take away his Free Will, it enables it. What was the problem of Par'oh's servants that their hearts had to be hardened? HaRav Sorotzkin points out that Par'oh was not accustomed to taking advice that was negative to his own thoughts. Remember that Yitro fled Egypt after advising Par'oh not to make the Jews slaves. Many of Par'oh's servants had come to realize that Par'oh was not the deity that he claimed to be and that Hashem ruled the world. They wanted Par'oh to stop refusing to let the Jews go. Yet how could they express this to Par'oh and then face immediate death? When Hashem strengthened their hearts, it was to enable them to follow their own desire to tell Par'oh that he had lost, even at the threat of losing their own lives. That is why they were now capable of rebellion.

Even though it may be difficult for us to fathom, this same strengthening and hardening that Hashem does for Par'oh here, he does for each of us in a similar way. We speak of mitzvah goreret mitzvah avera goreret avera, the performance of a mitzvah brings about the performance of another mitzvah, yet the performance of a sin brings about the performance of another sin. This is merely Hashem enabling us to follow our own path in order to serve Hashem with Free Will. It is our own responsibility to redirect our path back to the correct way to serve Hashem. We must turn and return to Hashem on our own, but He will help us along that path. Should we choose to rebel against Hashem, He will be compelled to help us on that path also, for only in that way can we do teshuvah and return to Hashem. Sometimes, as with an addiction, that path will lead us to a point where we will be embarrassed enough that we will seek help from Him to break that downward spiral. The choice will always be ours. That also means that the punishment as well as the reward is also ours. May we each choose to become closer to Hashem and allow Him to guide us in that path. © 2020 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Hashem said to Moshe, come to Pharaoh for I have hardened his heart so I might display My signs in his midst." (Shmos 10:1) As we come to the last three plagues, Hashem once again tells Moshe to come to Pharaoh and declare that

he must send the Jews out. Though Pharaoh won't listen, this is part of the plan and there is nothing to be upset about when he doesn't. While the Torah has been describing numerous terrifying plagues, there is one thing that is noticeably different.

Throughout the plagues, and especially now, as we are reaching fever-pitch of the mounting miracles, Hashem uses a syntax that connotes calmness instead of anger and purposefulness instead of chaos. The word for speaking is 'dibur,' and it connotes a harsher tone, one of insistence. This word almost never appears in the conversation during the time of the plagues.

Instead, forms of the word "amira," saying, are used. This is a more even-tempered form of speech, where one is speaking almost matter-of-factly. If you go through the story of the makkos in Parshas Va'era and here in Parshas Bo, you find "Moshe says to Pharaoh," "So says Hashem," "Pharaoh said to Moshe," and so on. It's almost a peaceful, civil discourse.

While we would imagine the ultimatums flung back and forth, and flaring tempers between the parties, such was not the case. It was calm and unemotional as each party put forth his position. It was not a heated fight, but a rational, composed debate.

The Navi Zecharia, which we read on Chanukah, prophesied for Zerubavel, who would lead the return from Babylonia to Eretz Yisrael, "Not with might nor with strength, but with My spirit, says Hashem." Hashem will not redeem Klal Yisrael with noise and thrashing, but with serenity and calm. This is what was happening in Egypt. Hashem was not getting angry with Pharaoh, nor threatening him. Rather, Hashem was simply explaining the facts to him. "If you let My people go, you will be spared. If not, you will suffer. The choice is yours." There was no posturing, no vehemence; just quiet talking and statements.

When Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, they were dumbfounded. His quiet statement that, "I am Yosef," was enough to cast them into turmoil with its devastating revelation of the truth. This is the power Hashem displayed to Pharaoh – the simple power of truth. That is why there was no need for anger or raised voices. It underscores that Hashem is not mighty because He destroys, but because He does not.

The Chofetz Chaim heard that a bochur was caught smoking on Shabbos and asked to speak to him. The boy was afraid of what the Chofetz Chaim would say to him, and he was prepared for a lengthy rebuke with a lot of angry yelling. Nobody heard what the Chofetz Chaim said to him, but that boy was never mechallel Shabbos again.

Years later, he revealed what took place. "I was prepared to be yelled at, but that didn't happen. Instead, the Chofetz Chaim sat me next to him at his table. He grasped my hands in his and held them firmly and said one word, "Shabbos." He repeated that word

again and again as tears began streaming down his face. 'Shabbos!' he sighed, 'Shabbos.'"

"Had I tried to remove my hands I would not have been able to for I felt paralyzed. One of his holy tears fell onto my hand and I could feel the searing heat of the tzaddik's concern for me and the Holy Shabbos."

Absent-mindedly rubbing his hand, the man continued, "I can still feel the burning of that tear on my hand. It was at that moment I vowed never again to hurt this tzaddik by desecrating the Shabbos. It is too holy, and apparently, the sage of Radin felt that I was too holy as well." © 2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

The Ramban's Chumash commentary is a storehouse of fundamental Jewish philosophical beliefs. There is a famous Ramban at the end of Parshas Bo which explains why the Torah contains so many commandments that commemorate the Exodus. To name just a few T'fillin, Mezuzah, Pessach, Succah, and Kiddush are all "zecher l'yetzias Mitzrayim".

The Ramban explains that the Exodus set the record straight and debunked all the myths that were prevalent in the world. Some argued that the Master of the Universe did not exist. Others admitted that there was a Creator, but after Creation, He decided not to have anything to do with the world anymore. Still others believed that G-d Knows what goes on in the world, but does not care about it.

The Exodus contradicted all these theological errors. The miraculous unfolding of the events which led to the departure of the nation of slaves from the hands of the most powerful empire of its day proved that G-d created the world and still takes an active role in its direction, changing "nature" itself if it suits Him. This is why this historical event is so crucial for setting straight the "theological facts of life".

Since G-d does not want to create open miracles on an ongoing basis, it was necessary to provide commandments that remind us of the "open miracles" that occurred in the past. The Ramban explains that from the belief in G-d's ability to create "open miracles" (in the past), a person will come to accept the concept of "hidden miracles" (that happen on a daily basis), which the Ramban calls the foundation of all of Torah. "For a person has no portion in the Torah of Moshe our teacher until he believes that everything that happens to us in all circumstances of life -- whether private or public -- are all miracles."

We need to believe that life itself is a miracle. The fact that I can stand here and talk and you can listen or the fact that the sun rises every morning in the eastern sky and sets every evening in the western sky is a miracle -- except that these "miracles" are disguised as "nature". We become used to these things because they have happened throughout all our lives

and perhaps throughout all of history, but they are miraculous nonetheless.

I recently received the following letter. After hearing the above Ramban regarding "hidden miracles", I believe we can all have a greater appreciation of this letter and the story it tells:

"In the summer of 2004, Andrew and Sharon finally became engaged and asked me, their Rabbi from Bel-Air California, if I would officiate at their wedding. The ceremony was to take place on December 5, 2004.

I told them I would be happy to officiate at their wedding provided they satisfied four basic requirements: (1) They are both Jewish; (2) The bride will go to the mikvah before the marriage; (3) The food at the wedding will be kosher; (4) Neither of them are currently married to another person and if they are currently married they must first obtain a Jewish divorce.

The couple agreed to the conditions, however "to be up front" Sharon told me that she had been married previously "but it was only for 6 hours and it was a mistake and I had the marriage annulled and I don't want to revisit it because it was a terrible mistake on my part."

I told her that in Judaism it does not matter if one is married for 6 hours or 6 years or 60 years -- one remains married until the death of the spouse or one obtains a Jewish divorce.

"But the courts annulled my marriage, Rabbi. Please understand. It was a mistake."

"I am sorry, you need a Get", I told her.

"Rabbi, what if I can't find the 'mistake'? Am I doomed forever?"

I told her "I will be there for you. Let's contact the Jewish courts in Los Angeles, and they will help us get through this dilemma."

It took several weeks. This first husband was finally tracked down. I got in touch with the Beis Din in Los Angeles. They arranged the Get and the Beis Din told Sharon, "Now that you have your Get, you can get married, but not before 92 days from today." [This is based on the law of 'havchana,' which requires a waiting period before remarriage to preclude doubt regarding paternity issues of a child that may be born 7-9 months after the first marriage was terminated.]

The couple was now very distraught because this waiting period would push the wedding date past December 5th. All they could think about was their wedding plans, their honeymoon, their chosen dates. For days, they did not understand why they would have to wait until January 2005 before they could get married. But they finally agreed. After a few days, Andrew and Sharon called me back and told me that they wanted to do the wedding right in G-d's Eyes, so they began re-planning their wedding for January 23, 2005.

Still, in the back of their minds they could not understand why G-d was delaying their wedding. They could not understand that until December 26, 2004. Andrew and Sharon were supposed to be on the last days of their three week honeymoon in a luxury hotel on a romantic island in the Indian Ocean, which was totally swept away by the 12/26/2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which took almost a quarter of a million lives.

As Andrew said, "The best advice the Rabbi ever gave us was to follow the rules of G-d's Torah. He assured us that it would be a blessing for us in the end." ©2013 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Bo contains the very first commandment the Jews received as a nation; the Mitzvah to have a Rosh Chodesh (new month), and to mark the beginning of every month thereafter (Exodus 12:2). What makes this commandment so important for it to be the very first commandment for the Jews as a people? Also, when describing the first month that the Jews need to acknowledge, the Torah fails to name that month. If the Torah values the months, wouldn't it be important for the Torah to name those months, just like the Torah names important places the Jews had traveled through?

The Ramban explains that the Torah referred to the months as "first", "second" and so on, because the numbers refer to how many months the Jews were removed from the moment when we were established as a people. This helps focus our attention to the most important moment we had as a nation. It also focuses us on something else; The months we now controlled (both in name and in timing) dictate when holidays occur, when customs are performed, and even when G-d judges us. The very first commandment is the one that empowers us the most. The first commandment as a nation makes us partners with G-d, because although we didn't determine the holidays to celebrate, we do determine when they are celebrated. So every time we celebrate Rosh Chodesh (like today), we should celebrate our partnership with G-d, and our being empowered to individually "name" the month as we, as a people, see fit. ©2015 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

