

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

It is no accident that parshat Bo, the section that deals with the culminating plagues and the exodus, should turn three times to the subject of children and the duty of parents to educate them. As Jews we believe that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education. Freedom is lost when it is taken for granted. Unless parents hand on their memories and ideals to the next generation – the story of how they won their freedom and the battles they had to fight along the way – the long journey falters and we lose our way.

What is fascinating, though, is the way the Torah emphasises the fact that children must ask questions. Two of the three passages in our parsha speak of this: And 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)

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

There is another passage later in the Torah that also speaks of question asked by a child: In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (Deut. 6:20-21)

The other passage in today's parsha, the only one that does not mention a question, is: On that day tell your son, 'I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' (Ex. 13:8)

These four passages have become famous because of their appearance in the Haggadah on Pesach. They are the four children: one wise, one wicked or rebellious, one simple and "one who does not

know how to ask." Reading them together the sages came to the conclusion that [1] children should ask questions, [2] the Pesach narrative must be constructed in response to, and begin with, questions asked by a child, [3] it is the duty of a parent to encourage his or her children to ask questions, and the child who does not yet know how to ask should be taught to ask.

There is nothing natural about this at all. To the contrary, it goes dramatically against the grain of history. Most traditional cultures see it as the task of a parent or teacher to instruct, guide or command. The task of the child is to obey. "Children should be seen, not heard," goes the old English proverb. "Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord," says a famous Christian text. Socrates, who spent his life teaching people to ask questions, was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young. In Judaism the opposite is the case. It is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions. That is how they grow.

Judaism is the rarest of phenomena: a faith based on asking questions, sometimes deep and difficult ones that seem to shake the very foundations of faith itself. "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" asked Abraham. "Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people?" asked Moses. "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" asked Jeremiah. The book of Job is largely constructed out of questions, and God's answer consists of four chapters of yet deeper questions: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? ... Can you catch Leviathan with a hook? ... Will it make an agreement with you and let you take it as your slave for life?"

In yeshiva the highest accolade is to ask a good question: Du fregst a gutte kashe. Rabbi Abraham Twersky, a deeply religious psychiatrist, tells of how when he was young, his teacher would relish challenges to his arguments. In his broken English, he would say, "You right! You 100 prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong."

Isadore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied, "My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to ask: 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?' That made the difference. Asking

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated by

Emunah Temimah Klavan
in honor of her new sister
Shalhevet Yakira Klavan!

Thanks for evening up the odds, sis!

Good luck to Mommy & Abba.
The. House. Is. Ours.



good questions made me a scientist.”

Judaism is not a religion of blind obedience. Indeed, astonishingly in a religion of 613 commandments, there is no Hebrew word that means “to obey”. When Hebrew was revived as a living language in the nineteenth century, and there was need for a verb meaning “to obey,” it had to be borrowed from the Aramaic: le-tsayet. Instead of a word meaning “to obey,” the Torah uses the verb shema, untranslatable into English because it means [1] to listen, [2] to hear, [3] to understand, [4] to internalise, and [5] to respond. Written into the very structure of Hebraic consciousness is the idea that our highest duty is to seek to understand the will of God, not just to obey blindly. Tennyson’s verse, “Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do or die,” is as far from a Jewish mindset as it is possible to be.

Why? Because we believe that intelligence is God’s greatest gift to humanity. Rashi understands the phrase that God made man “in His image, after His likeness,” to mean that God gave us the ability “to understand and discern.” The very first of our requests in the weekday Amidah is for “knowledge, understanding and discernment.” One of the most breathtakingly bold of the rabbis’ institutions was to coin a blessing to be said on seeing a great non-Jewish scholar. Not only did they see wisdom in cultures other than their own, they thanked God for it. How far this is from the narrow-mindedness that has so often demeaned and diminished religions, past and present.

The historian Paul Johnson once wrote that rabbinic Judaism was “an ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals.” Much of that had, and still has, to do with the absolute priority Jews have always placed on education, schools, the beit midrash, religious study as an act even higher than prayer, learning as a life-long engagement, and teaching as the highest vocation of the religious life.

But much too has to do with how one studies and how we teach our children. The Torah indicates this at the most powerful and poignant juncture in Jewish history – just as the Israelites are about to leave Egypt and begin their life as a free people under the sovereignty of God. Hand on the memory of this moment to your children, says Moses. But do not do so in an authoritarian way. Encourage your children to ask, question, probe, investigate, analyse, explore. Liberty means freedom of the mind, not just of the body. Those who are confident of their faith need fear no question. It is only those who lack confidence, who have secret and suppressed doubts, who are afraid.

The one essential, though, is to know and to teach this to our children, that not every question has an answer we can immediately understand. There are ideas we will only fully comprehend through age and experience, others that take great intellectual preparation, yet others that may be beyond our

collective comprehension at this stage of the human quest. Darwin never knew what a gene was. Even the great Newton, founder of modern science, understood how little he understood, and put it beautifully: “I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

In teaching its children to ask and keep asking, Judaism honoured what Maimonides called the “active intellect” and saw it as the gift of God. No faith has honoured human intelligence more. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt”l* © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“G od said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt: This month shall be unto you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year to you.” (Exodus 12:1–2) The sanctification of the new moon, the first commandment which the Jews receive as a people, should not be seen as a commandment which just happens to be the first. Nothing in the Torah just happens to be. The firstborn commandment of God’s firstborn people inevitably reveals basic truths about the Jewish psyche. The more we examine the nature of this commandment, the more we understand who the Jews are as a people.

According to the Midrash, this commandment is so important that God himself guides Moses’ gaze across the sky to familiarize him with the different phases of the moon so that he can recognize exactly what the moon should look like when it is to be sanctified.

Halakhically, we can see the significance of this commandment because, prior to Hillel the Elder’s fixing of the calendar for all subsequent generations in the third century of the Common Era, the new moon was established on the basis of witnesses’ testimony in court. The halakha even allowed these witnesses to desecrate Shabbat if necessary in order to get to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem without wasting one minute. When their testimony was finally accepted after rigorous examination, the Sanhedrin declared: “The month is sanctified, the month is sanctified.”

Even today, when first-hand testimony of the sighting of the moon has not been required for many centuries, the Sabbath before a new month takes on a special character and is known as Shabbat Mevarkhim, the Sabbath of the blessing of the new moon. A special prayer requesting a month of life, peace and sundry blessings (composed by the first-generation Amora Rav and found in Berakhot 16b) is chanted by a respected

member of the congregation, and the time of the moon's exact appearance to a fraction of a second is announced.

The day before the new moon appears, when the sky is pitch black, is called "Yom Kippur Katan," and is maintained by the very pious as a fast day. The first day of the month (or the last day of the previous month and the first day of the new month, if the previous month has thirty days) is a minor festival called Rosh Chodesh. On this day (or these days), half of Hallel is chanted during the morning service and the special prayer Ya'ale VeYavo is added during the Amida and in the Grace after Meals. There is an additional scriptural reading, just as on any festival, and we recite the additional Musaf prayer, a reminder of the extra sacrifice in the Temple. General custom dictates that women are freed from certain domestic tasks, and fasting and eulogizing are forbidden.

During the first half of the new month, generally on Saturday night after Shabbat, and preferably between the third and eleventh day of the month, the congregation leaves the synagogue, stands outside gazing up at the new moon, and recites the Kiddush Levana (the prayer for the sanctification of the moon). If the clouds are thick, the special prayers to be recited are delayed until the first clear night on the closest Saturday night. One New York-based Hassidic group (Bobov) rents a helicopter for the Rebbe and his most respected aides to make sure that they will actually see the moon and recite the appropriate prayers. In most cities in the Diaspora, neighbors and passers-by are mystified by these Jews gathered together in prayer, singing and dancing as they look up at the moon.

Why this fascination with the moon?

In the portion of Bo, as in a number of adjacent portions, the Jews find themselves in Egypt, a land where the calendar followed the sun. The Maharal of Prague points out that when the Jews were given this first commandment, they were actually given more than just a law telling them to start counting months according to lunar cycles; they were given a whole new way of life that would stand in sharp contrast to that of the Egyptians.

The sun is symbolic of constancy and power – the very image of Egypt. Discounting dark clouds (not too many in Egypt), every day the sun's warmth and light reaches someone in the world – 365 days a year we trust the sun to rise and set. "There is nothing new under the sun," writes the author of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), because the sun is a symbol of constancy. The sun sees and oversees everything in an unchanging fashion. Under the moon there is something new at least twelve times a year. The moon is forever changing,



going through its phases, getting smaller and smaller and then, when it seems to have disappeared completely, there is a sudden turnaround and rebirth in the heavens. To the ancient imagination, the permutation of the moon in its twenty-eight-day journey was a constant source of speculation, wonder and mystery – and a ray of optimistic faith that from the depths of darkness and disappearance will re-emerge light and rebirth.

The Zohar compares the Jewish people to the moon because both the moon and the people of Israel go through phases, disappearing little by little until it seems that it is the end, but nevertheless, stubbornly insisting upon being born again. After each Temple destruction, even after a centuries-long exile climaxing in Europe's death factories – a new moon is suddenly sighted and the messengers run to Jerusalem.

The repetition of a monthly cycle – this law of change and rebirth – firmly established within the Jewish psyche the constant quest for renewal. Our sanctity as a nation is tied to our potential for national renewal. Our history attests to the phenomenon that when a Jewish civilization in one part of the world finds itself facing destruction, almost simultaneously a new culture emerges to replace it. The year 1492, for example, signaled the destruction of Spanish Jewry as well as the birth of an American haven.

The commandment of sanctifying the new moon is given when it is clear that Pharaoh himself, master under the Egyptian sun, will not change. After nine terrifying plagues, we might expect him to have a change of heart, but the leader of Egypt does not – cannot – relent. Despite all that he has witnessed, he refuses to let the Jews go.

All of the nay-sayers were certain that the Egyptian social hierarchy would never change. The Israelites were doomed to remain slaves in Egypt forever.

The message of this first commandment is that in contrast to the Egyptians, the Jews can and do change, emerging again and again as survivors from the fangs of evil. World society, individual nations and specific people can and will change, often for the better. "Chodesh" is the Hebrew word for month, "chadash" is the Hebrew word for new, and "chidush" is the Hebrew word for a brilliant, novel insight or invention as well as the word for renewal. Our optimistic scanning of the black-blue skies for the first sliver of the new moon is our testimony to the possibility of growth, change and development, and we must learn to sanctify that change. In the immortal words of Rabbi A.Y. Kook, the old must experience renewal, and the new must be sanctified (ha-yashan yitchadesh, ve-hachadash yitkadesh).

There is yet another significance to our fascination with the moon. The most fundamental human sin – jealousy – is reflected in the phases

("imperfection") of the moon. Initially, records the Midrash, the moon and the sun were to have been equal in size, co-rulers over the hosts of heaven and earth. After all, the Bible records: "And the Lord made two great lights..." (Gen. 1:16). It is only in the continuation of the verse that we read: "the greater light to rule by day and the lesser light to rule by night" (ibid). What happened? Rashi explains: "[The lights] were created equal in size, but the moon was lessened when it complained, saying that it was impossible for two rulers to share one crown." (Rashi ad loc.)

The moon expected God to remove some of the glory of the sun, but as punishment for greed and envy, it was the moon who had to suffer imperfection. It is this jealousy and greed, perhaps built into the very fabric of human nature, which caused Cain to kill Abel, the brothers to sell Joseph. Similarly, the Second Temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred (sinat hinam) The new moon, with its promise of wholeness and perfection, symbolizes our faith that we will overcome jealousy and envy, that humanity will redeem itself and that messianic peace is within reach. Our prayers during the ceremony of the sanctification of the new moon are for the moon to become free of her imperfection and for David – King of Israel, Messiah and redeemer. Our greeting to one another in the midst of these prayers is Shalom Aleikhem – peace and wholeness. Kiddush Levana closes with these words: "May it be Your will...to readjust the deficiency of the moon so that it may no longer be reduced in size. May the light of the moon be again as the light of the sun, as it was during the first seven days of creation, before it was reduced..."

This prayer brings us full circle. Ultimately, when redemption finally arrives, the moon will return to its former glory and jealousy will no longer exist – neither between the lights in the sky nor between the lights down on earth, the human lights. Redemption will only happen when we humans join God in helping to make it happen – by sanctifying the moon, by sanctifying life, by sanctifying ourselves. The sanctification of the new moon is the first commandment: Our dream of renewal and redemption is our highest priority. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Shemot: Defining a Nation, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. ©2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The great moment of freedom and redemption has finally arrived. The faith of the people of Israel in Moshe and Aharon has been vindicated. The Lord's plagues have finally brought down the arrogance and stubbornness of Pharaoh. If this was an old-fashioned movie script, we would write "and then they

lived happily after."

But we are all aware that this parsha only represents the beginning of a long and arduous story plot that has yet to reach its eventual happy conclusion. The new situation of freedom from actual physical slavery, as heady and triumphant as it is, presents only new challenges.

Life itself resembles a series of doors. Upon successfully opening one door, it is discovered that there are now different doors – even a series of doors – behind the original one. The challenges of being a free person are, to a great extent, even more challenging than those of being locked into servitude.

We are witness to the Torah's recording of forty years in the desert until there arises a generation of Jews that is able to meet the challenge of establishing itself as a functioning national entity in its promised land of Israel. The word "bo" which serves as the headline of this week's parsha indicates "coming" – a beginning – not a sense of finality and end.

The Torah wishes to indicate to us that "the arrows are always yet ahead of us" to find and deal with. And there are many miracles involved in being freed from slavery but the road from there to true independence and accomplishment requires hard work, human persistence and unflagging spirit and high morale. In our world of changing eras and bewildering uncertainties we can only reflect upon the enormous challenges facing us. The Diaspora, as Jewry knew it to be for many centuries on end, is no longer. The tremendous accomplishment of the creation of the State of Israel and its sustenance is behind us.

This process was fraught with many plagues and concurrent miracles. The faith of Israel has sustained us through these times of ordeal and difficulties. But now there are new and perhaps even more difficult challenges that face us. The task of nation-building is a long and arduous one, not given to easy solutions and pat sloganeering. It is measured not in years but in decades – if not even in centuries. It requires faith and tenacity and a long view of things. That is what God meant when he told Moshe at the beginning of the redemption process that Israel would accept the Torah at Sinai and that He would eventually bring them to the land that he promised to their forefathers. Why bother Moshe with those promises when the people are under the lash of slavery?

But God informs Moshe that freedom from slavery is only the beginning of the story, not its culmination. Our modern story of Israel does not end in 1948 or 1967. The realization of this stark truth can fire us to greater understanding and firmer belief and behavior in the justice of our cause and its eventual triumph. ©2025 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

About to leave Egypt, we are commanded to offer a paschal lamb. While the biblical mandate is presented rather briefly in chapter 12 of the Book of Exodus, the Talmud in Pesachim devotes many chapters to explicating its laws. Built into its intricacies are spiritual messages. Here, we present fourteen such teachings. Hopefully, reviewing one a day during the fourteen days of Nissan leading up to the Passover holiday, will be of some meaning.

1. Stay humble. By noon on the day before Passover, when the sacrifice can be offered, no chametz (leaven) can be in the house (Exodus 23:18; Pesachim 28b). The sacrifice is a celebration of the great victory over Egypt, but when one is victorious, one can become “bloated.” And so, chametz, puffed-up dough, identified in the Talmud (Berachot 17a) and in later Chassidic literature as being symbolic of hubris and self-absorption, cannot be in one’s possession by the time the Passover sacrifice is offered, reminding us to remain humble even when most successful.

2. Make space. Every morning and late afternoon, the korban tamid (standard sacrifice) is the first and last to be offered. There is one exception: the paschal lamb is offered after the afternoon tamid. Although, because of its constancy, the tamid has the right to maintain its position as first and last always, it makes way for the paschal lamb, teaching the importance of stepping back and making space for others when necessary (Pesachim 58a).

3. Fill yourself with inner meaning. Along with the paschal lamb, the korban chagigah (holiday sacrifice) is offered. The chagigah functioned to make a person full prior to eating the paschal sacrifice. As a result, the paschal lamb was eaten when one was already satiated (Pesachim 70a). The eating of the paschal lamb is not primarily for satisfying our physical needs but to focus on celebrating the inner spiritual meaning of the holiday.

4. Empathize. The paschal sacrifice must be brought in a state of spiritual purity and is not offered by individuals who, for various reasons (such as contact with a dead body), are impure at the time of the offering. (These individuals do get a second chance a month after Passover.) If the majority of the community is impure, however, the paschal lamb is still offered by everyone based on the principle that impurity is waived for the sake of community. Interestingly, even those who are pure offer their sacrifices as if they are in an impure state. In this way, we do not split the community (Pesachim 79b–80a). In other words, no matter my purity, if the majority is impure, I am impure, allowing for empathy with amcha (one’s people).

5. Make a difference. And suppose, the Talmud asks, half the people are pure, and half are not – what

then? The Talmud weaves a discussion about what to do in such circumstances (Pesachim 79b). Why debate such an unlikely event? Here, the law may inspire us to consider the observation made by Maimonides that we should view our deeds and the world as evenly balanced (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4). The next good deed we perform could make all the difference.

6. Reflect. Among the laws of the paschal lamb – and for that matter all sacrifices – is the concept of piggul (an abhorred thing; Leviticus 7:18, 19:5–7; Pesachim 120b). If one’s thoughts are inappropriate, (i.e., imagining eating the sacrifice after its prescribed time), the sacrifice is invalid. Our inner thoughts play a crucial role in performing the external ritual obligations as well as in our everyday actions.

7. Properly prepare. All who eat of the paschal lamb must RSVP registering their intent to join the ritual. This teaches the importance of intentionality – of focusing and preparing before participating in an important ritual (Pesachim 61a). As Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik taught, there is no holiness without preparation. An act is as meaningful as its preliminaries.

8. Turn fate into destiny. The Talmud emphasizes that any accumulation of water on the skewer may leave the impression that the paschal lamb is being cooked in a liquid, which invalidates the sacrifice (Pesachim 74a). There must be absolute clarity that the animal is being roasted, which simulates the fire of exile. Yet fire can also be a positive force, transforming metal into a more useful instrument for productivity. Indeed, we need to feel an inner fire, a deep passion, to be redeemed. History has shown that when oppressed, when aflame, we meet our challenges, become tougher, and have the capacity, as Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik writes, to “turn fate into destiny.”

9. See good in others. The skewer used to roast the sacrifice is pomegranate wood (Mishnah, Pesachim 7:1). The pomegranate reminds us of the rabbinic teaching that even the greatest sinners – like the pomegranate’s outer shell, which has no use to us – have endless inner pure seeds, giving them the capacity to return. This concept is reflected in the story told by Dr. Yaffa Eliach, of blessed memory, of the Kapo Schneeweiss who turned on his own people. One Yom Kippur, however, he refused to submit to Nazi demands that he force Jews in the camp to eat. He was shot dead on the spot. The saintly Bluzhever Rebbe, who told this story to Dr. Eliach, commented that this was the moment when he understood the Talmudic dictum that “Even the transgressors in Israel are as full of good deeds as a pomegranate is filled with seeds” (Berachot 57a, Eruvin 19a).

10. Don’t shame others. If the paschal lamb becomes tamei (impure), it is burned near the Temple.

This, says the Talmud, is in order to embarrass the owner, as, no doubt, he was negligent in allowing the sacrifice to become tamei. And yet, the wood used for fire comes from the pyre of the altar (not one's personal wood). This, says the Talmud, is to avoid embarrassing those who – through no fault of their own – may be too poor to possess wood (Pesachim 81b). This important teaching shows that, while there are times that rebuke through shame is necessary, those moments are rare – ultimately, embarrassing another should be avoided.

11. Remain silent. The Talmud offers an intricate discussion on what one does and says if searching for a designated paschal lamb that has been lost. Interestingly, it concludes that sometimes the best solution can be achieved if one says nothing. In this case, that would mean not telling those meant to partake of that sacrifice that he searches on their behalf. It concludes by underscoring the importance of refraining from speech (Pesachim 99a). All my adult life, I've encouraged people to speak out. But the Talmud teaches that, sometimes, it is best to remain silent. As Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, "I have found nothing better for a person than silence" (Ethics of the Sages 1:17).

12. Stick to the foundational mission. Rabbi Yehudah in the Talmud posits that one cannot sacrifice and eat the paschal lamb alone, highlighting the importance of community. And while those registered in a group may join another group, Rabbi Yehudah explains that at least one of the original individuals must remain (Pesachim 99a). This perhaps teaches that while missions evolve, a group that made a commitment to partake of the paschal sacrifice together should never turn its back on its foundation and an original participant must always be present.

13. There are second chances. If one is too far from the Temple to arrive for the paschal sacrifice, one has another opportunity to offer the sacrifice thirty days later, on Pesach Sheni. How far is too far away? One position insists it is even one step outside of the Temple area (Pesachim 93b). Truth be told, one can be far but close, just as one can be close and yet far. And so Pesach Sheni could be a second chance for one who is physically close but spiritually distant. Such individuals are warmly welcomed.

14. Help others pass over. The Talmud records differences between the first paschal lamb slaughtered and those that followed (Pesachim 96a). As we left Egypt, the blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the two side posts of the door and the lintel of each Jewish home (Exodus 12:7). The Angel of Death, seeing the blood, passed over that home, sparing the firstborn Israelite inside. Hence, the holiday is called Pesach – pass over. But vocalized differently, Pesach could be read as pise'ach – literally, one who limps or is lame. While there is, to my knowledge, no Midrash that speaks to this association, it may teach an important

message. Lest one think that Passover is meant to celebrate only those of particular strength, with an ability to "pass over," the term pise'ach reminds us to reach out to the disadvantaged, the vulnerable – those who find it difficult even to walk. As we were downtrodden in Egypt, so too should we be there for those who are downtrodden, forgotten, too often excluded. The pise'ach plays a central role in Pesach, in the spirit of the "Ha lachma anya" (This is the bread of affliction) declaration at the beginning the Seder: "Kol ditzrich yetei v'yifsach" (All who are needy are welcome to join in the Pesach feast).

Yes, the laws are intricate. The folios of Talmud run page after page, one chapter into another. Still, beneath its surface, the law imparts spiritual messages, touching the soul, helping us soar higher and higher. ©2025 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 LEVIN

Make Holy the Firstborn

The end of Parashat Bo presents a series of sentences in which Hashem commanded Moshe on several different subjects. Later, in the same section, Moshe gave a more detailed explanation of these same laws. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that this is an example how the Oral Law (Torah She'b'al Peh) works as an explanation of the Written Law, (Torah She'bichtav), the Torah. Our concern, however, is only with the first of these sentences.

The Torah tells us, "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first of each womb among the Children of Israel, of man and beast, is Mine.' Moshe said to the people, 'Remember this day on which you departed from Egypt, from the house of bondage, for with a strong hand Hashem removed you from here, and therefore chametz may not be eaten. Today you are leaving, in the month of spring. And it shall come to pass when Hashem shall bring you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite, which He swore to your forefathers to give you – a land flowing with milk and honey – you shall perform this service in this month. For a seven-day period shall you eat matzot, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to Hashem. Matzot shall be eaten throughout the seven-day period; no chametz may be seen in your possession in all your borders. And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "It is on account of this that Hashem did for me when I left Egypt." And it will be for you for a sign on your hand and for a remembrance between your eyes – so that Hashem's Torah may be in your mouth—for with a strong hand Hashem removed you from Egypt."

HaRav Hirsch explains that these laws were a

means by which the Jewish People would become united in their service of Hashem. In Egypt, each of the twelve tribes acted separately. Even in the Pesach night and the Exodus from Egypt, the people remained divided into their groups, their tribes. Hashem wanted the tribes to remain separated, but He wanted them united in service to him. The command to make Holy the firstborn of each household, was Hashem's means to appoint "living representatives of this thought within the families and the homes." When Hashem commanded that the firstborn should be made Holy, the term used, "kadesh, make Holy," means separated for a purpose. The firstborn son would become Hashem's "representative, to be the bearer, cultivator, and defender of His Will; and in the herd, the firstborn, as the expression of the family possessions belonging to, and being given up to, His Will."

The Ramban and HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin both point out that this paragraph is important for the fact that the power to "make Holy" was now given to the B'nei Yisrael, to Man. This concept of transforming something which is mundane into something which now becomes Holy, is the foundation of many of our blessings and actions. Ramban and HaRav Sorotzkin give examples which directly point to this power: making holy the special holidays, designating the ability for Moshe to sanctify the Mishkan, the Temple of the Desert, having the power to set aside Aharon and his sons as well as their clothing, and using this same ability to consecrate Pinchas, the only descendant of Aharon who originally was not included in the sanctified Kohanim.

HaAmek Davar concentrates his words on the term "kadesh, Holy." He explains that there is no real meaning to the word kadesh. The term should be "hineni m'kadesh, which is a form of the word which demonstrates action. HaAmek Davar explains that the firstborn animal is automatically Holy, but it still requires a verbal designation as the firstborn of its owner. As it says later in Parashat R'ei, "You shall cause it to become Holy (takdish) to Hashem." The message from the firstborn animals applies also to firstborn sons: the parent is required to cause the firstborn to become dedicated to Hashem.

The firstborn sons were originally to be set aside (Kadesh) to serve in the Temple as the Priests. The command given to Moshe to sanctify (make Holy) the firstborn sons was a command for all time, not limited to the time when the firstborn would serve Hashem directly in a formal Temple. This commandment was upon every family in every tribe should their firstborn be a son. Later, after the sin of the Golden Calf, where only the tribe of Levi stood firm and did not participate, the right to serve in the Temple was taken away from the firstborn and given to a subset of the Leviim, Aharon and his sons, the Kohanim. From that time on, only the Kohanim could

serve Hashem in the Temple (His Holy place), yet this did not take away the Holiness of the firstborn sons. They were still designated as Holy and assigned to Hashem even though they were precluded from serving as the Priests. The Torah prescribed that these firstborn sons would need to be redeemed.

The original redemption is found in the Torah where, by lottery, the firstborn sons of the families from each tribe were paired against the entire tribe of Levi (Leviim and Kohanim). Since there were more firstborn sons than the entire tribe of Levi, those, who by lottery did not pair with a member of the tribe of Levi, were required to redeem their firstborn sons by giving five silver shekels to a Kohein in exchange for their own inability to serve in the Temple. S'forno explains that the firstborn sons were designated to serve in the Temple, and even though they were now forbidden to serve, that designation could only be abrogated by the act of redemption. S'forno continues, a firstborn son may not do any form of work that is considered mundane until he is redeemed. This normally takes place on the thirtieth day of life, a time at which a child is deemed likely to survive. Should a father fail to redeem his son, others, including the son himself, may redeem the firstborn at a later time.

It is daunting to think that Hashem granted the B'nei Yisrael with the power to consecrate and sanctify even when He had already determined which child would be born first and whether that child would be a boy or girl. Our verbal declaration became the necessary act through which Hashem's Will was to be carried out. May we treasure that privilege granted us by Hashem. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Chametz on Pesach

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The laws relating to *chametz* on Pesach include the prohibition of eating *chametz*, the obligation to get rid of *chametz*, and the prohibition of owning *chametz*.

However, it is not clear if these laws all go into effect at the same time. The prohibition of eating *chametz* and the obligation to get rid of it both begin a number of hours before the holiday starts. However, the Ra'avad is of the opinion that the prohibition of owning *chametz* applies only during the actual holiday, based on the verse, "No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days" (*Shemot* 12:19). Rashi, in contrast, maintains that this prohibition too begins in the afternoon, at the same time as the other prohibitions.

There is also a difference of opinion as to the minimum amount (*shiur*) of *chametz* a person would have to possess in order to transgress the prohibition of ownership. The *shiur* in this case would seem to be an olive (*kezayit*). However, there is a general principle that even less than a *shiur* (*chatzi shiur*) is biblically

prohibited (although the transgressor does not receive lashes). Some maintain that *chatzi shiur* is forbidden only when someone is doing something with the food (such as eating it), which makes it clear that this amount is significant to him (*achshevei*). However, if no action is involved (*shev ve-al ta'aseh*), as is the case with the prohibition of owning *chametz*, this principle might not apply. If so, owning a small amount of *chametz* (less than a *kezayit*) would be permitted on the biblical level.

Why should less than a *shiur* be prohibited? Shouldn't the criterion, almost by definition, be the full *shiur*? One of the reasons for this stringency is the fear that someone will start by eating only part of a *shiur*, but will keep nibbling until, within a relatively short amount of time, he ends up eating an entire *shiur*. All that he ate combines together (*mitztaref*), and he is considered to have violated the prohibition from when he began eating. However, when we are dealing with a prohibition of ownership, even if someone ultimately acquires a full *shiur*, he will transgress only from the point of full acquisition onward, but not retroactively.

© 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Hashem strengthened Pharaoh's heart and he did not send the Children of Israel. (Shmos 10:20) As the plagues progressed, Pharaoh came under increasing stress. Not only because of the physical manifestations of torture the Egyptians endured, but because of the inconvenient truths those plagues represented. Having to accept a completely new approach to life is very difficult, and would undermine all that Pharaoh had believed his entire life. This is extremely mentally taxing.

By the time it came to the sixth, seventh, and eighth plagues, Pharaoh should have had a complete mental breakdown. But he didn't. Why? Because Hashem strengthened his heart. Elsewhere it says that Hashem hardened his heart, and that could mean making him feel cold and emotionless towards the Jewish subjects he had enslaved.

Now, however, it uses the word, "strengthened." This answers a question asked by many. "If Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart, then he didn't have free will to let the Jews go, so how could he be punished?" The answer, now, is that Hashem didn't change Pharaoh's thinking on the matter. Rather, he fortified Pharaoh with the feeling of wellbeing which enabled him to choose freely. His heart was strengthened so the outside forces of the plagues didn't interfere with his own judgment, as they would have anyone else.

Chazal have taught us that the "measure of good" is five hundred times the "measure of bad." We learn this from the posuk which states Hashem visits

the sins of the fathers on people up to four generations (if they follow the negative ways) and rewards the kindness of people for two thousand generations (five hundred times more.)

If Hashem gave Pharaoh strength to be able to do evil and choose wickedness, then certainly Hashem gives us all the strength to do good and wonderful things. The chizuk we find from Hashem should enable us to overcome the challenges of suffering and make the proper choices based on our reflection and good judgment.

The fact that, time and time again, Hashem strengthened Pharaoh's heart for bad, should give us all tremendous chizuk and peace of mind. If we want to do the right thing, Hashem will strengthen us, and enable us to resist the urge to fall apart; giving us the strength to stand up for what we believe in, and helping us to succeed.

A Jew arrived to seek the blessing and counsel of his Rebbe, the great R' Yisrael of Rizhin. As he prepared himself to enter the tzadik's office, the Rebbe's son, Dovid Moshe, who was then a curious child who would later become the Rebbe of Chortkov, asked the visitor what he was going to ask of his holy father. As the door opened for his yechidus to begin, the Jew turned to Dovid Moshe and replied, "I am going to ask for a bracha from the Rebbe; I am davening for many things," and entered the room. A few short minutes later, when the man emerged from his meeting with the Rizhiner, the inquisitive child asked, "So? What did my father have to say?"

"The Rebbe said that "der Eibeshter vet helfin, 'G-d Above will help.'" Seeing that the man was still feeling stressed by his predicaments, Dovid Moshe said, "Aha, that's nice. But what will be biz der Eibeshter vet helfin' — until Hashem helps?" "I don't know," the man admitted.

"Go back to my father and ask him what will happen until Hashem Yisborach helps." When the man reemerged a second time, the boy asked, with a twinkle in his eye, "So what did my father tell you?"

The man smiled: "The Rebbe said that "Der Eibeshter darft helfin... biz er vet helfin, "The One Above will have to help... until He will help." © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

