

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Why did Moses tell Pharaoh, if not a lie, then less than the full truth? Here is the conversation between him and Pharaoh after the fourth plague, *?arov*, “swarms of insects” (some say “wild animals”): Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land.” But Moses said, “That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us??We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness? to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, as He commands us.” (Ex. 8:21-23)

Not just here but throughout, Moses makes it seem as if all he is asking is for permission for the people to undertake a three day journey, to offer sacrifices to God and (by implication) then to return. So, in their first appearance before Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron say: “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival to Me in the wilderness.’”

Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.”

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take? a three-day journey into the wilderness? to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or He may strike us with plagues or with the sword.” (Ex. 5:1-3)

God even specifies this before the mission has begun, saying to Moses at the burning bush: “You and the elders of Israel will then go to the king of Egypt. You must tell him, ‘The Lord, God of the Hebrews, revealed Himself to us. Now we request that you allow us to take?a three day journey into the desert, to sacrifice to the Lord our God’” (3: 18).

The impression remains to the very end. After the Israelites have left, we read: The king of Egypt received news that the people were *?escaping*. Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds regarding the people, and said, “What have we done? How could we have released Israel from doing our work?” (14:5)

At no stage does Moses say explicitly that he is proposing that the people should be allowed to leave permanently, never to return. He talks of a three day

journey. There is an argument between him and Pharaoh as to who is to go. Only the adult males? Only the people, not the cattle? Moses consistently asks for permission to worship God, at some place that is not Egypt. But he does not speak about freedom or the promised land. Why not? Why does he create, and not correct, a false impression? Why can he not say openly what he means?

The commentators offer various explanations. R. Shmuel David Luzzatto (Italy, 1800-1865) says that it was impossible for Moses to tell the truth to a tyrant like Pharaoh. R. Yaakov Mecklenburg (Germany, 1785-1865, *?Ha-Ktav vaha-Kabbalah*) says that technically Moses did not tell a lie. He did indeed mean that he wanted the people to be free to make a journey to worship God, and he never said explicitly that they would return.

The Abarbanel (Lisbon 1437 – Venice 1508) says that God told Moses deliberately to make a small request, to demonstrate Pharaoh’s cruelty and indifference to his slaves. All they were asking was for a brief respite from their labours to offer sacrifices to God. If he refused this, he was indeed a tyrant. Rav Elhanan Samet (*Iyyunim be-Parshot Ha-Shevua*, Exodus, 189) cites an unnamed commentator who says simply that this was war between Pharaoh and the Jewish people, and it war it is permitted, indeed sometimes necessary, to deceive.

Actually, however, the terms of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh are part of a wider pattern that we have already observed in the Torah. When Jacob leaves Laban we read: “Jacob decided?to go behind the back?of Laban the Aramean, and did not tell him that he was leaving” (Gen. 31: 20). Laban protests this behaviour: “How could you do this? You went behind my back and led my daughters away like prisoners of war! Why did you have to leave so secretly? You went behind my back and told me nothing!” (31:26-27).

Jacob again has to tell at best a half-truth when Esau suggests that they travel together: “You know that the children are weak, and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for even one day, all the sheep will die. Please go ahead of me, my lord” (33:13-14). This, though not strictly a lie, is a diplomatic excuse.

When Jacob’s sons are trying to rescue their sister Dina who has been raped and abducted by

Shechem the Hivite, they “replied deceitfully” (34:13) when Shechem and his father proposed that the entire family should come and settle with them, telling them that they could only do so if all the males of the town underwent circumcision.

Earlier still we find that three times Abraham and Isaac, forced to leave home because of famine, have to pretend that they are their wives’ brothers not their husbands because they fear that otherwise they will be killed so that Sarah or Rebecca could be taken into the king’s harem (Gen. 12, 20, 26).

These six episodes cannot be entirely accidental or coincidental to the biblical narrative as a whole. The implication seems to be this. Outside the promised land Jews in the biblical age are in danger if they tell the truth. They are at constant risk of being killed or at best enslaved.

Why? Because they are powerless in an age of power. They are a small family, at best a small nation, in an age of empires. They have to use their wits to survive. By and large they do not tell lies but they can create a false impression. This is not how things should be. But it is how they were before Jews had their own land, their one and only defensible space. It is how people in impossible situations are forced to be if they are to exist at all.

No one should be forced to live a lie. In Judaism, truth is the seal of God and the essential precondition of trust between human beings. But when your people is being enslaved, its male children murdered, you have to liberate them by whatever means are possible. Moses, who had already seen that his first encounter with Pharaoh made things worse for his people – they still had to make the same quota of bricks but now also had to gather their own straw (5:6-8) – did not want to risk making them worse still.

The Torah here is not justifying deceit. To the contrary, it is condemning a system in which telling the truth may put your life at risk, as it still does in many tyrannical or totalitarian societies today. Judaism – a religion of dissent, questioning and “arguments for the sake of heaven” – is a faith that values intellectual honesty and moral truthfulness above all things. The Psalmist says: “Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place? One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken My name in vain nor sworn deceitfully” (Ps. 24:3-4). Malachi says of one who speaks in God’s name: “The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips” (Mal. 2:6). Every Amidah ends with the prayer, “My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech.”

What the Torah is telling us in these six narratives in Genesis and the seventh in Exodus is the connection between freedom and truth. Where there is freedom there can be truth. Otherwise there cannot. A society where people are forced to be less than fully

honest merely to survive and not provoke further oppression is not the kind of society God wants us to make. *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

“Therefore say to the children of Israel, ‘I am the Lord. I shall take you out from under the sufferings of Egypt, I shall save you from their toil, I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm, I shall take you to Me for a nation, and I shall bring you to the land...’” (Exodus 6:4) With these “four expressions of redemption” (in bold above), the book of Exodus emerges as the biblical book of redemption; indeed, the very Hebrew meaning of the name Moshe (Moses) literally means “the one who draws forth”, the one who takes out, the one who frees from slavery within the context of Egyptian enslavement of the Hebrews. And so, when the Mishna begins to describe the order of the annual Passover Seder, we find the imperative, “And no one may drink less than the prescribed four cups of wine, even if they must take from the community charity kitchen,” with Rashi explaining the source: “Corresponding to the four languages of redemption regarding the exile of Egypt... in the portion of Va’era” (Pesachim, Mishna 10, 1, 99b, Rashi ad loc.).

The famed halakhic authority and arbiter of the last century, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein of blessed memory, even initially requires four cups of wine rather than grape juice. This is because wine actually makes the individual feel “free” physiologically – and the four cups of wine at the Seder are not only for the sake of sanctity, memory and joy (as is the case with ordinary Kiddush on the Sabbath and usual festivals) but are also for the sake of freedom!

But what is the precise nature of the freedom that we are celebrating on Passover in general, and at the Seder in particular? Conventional traditional wisdom would maintain that it is the freedom of the Hebrews, the special relationship between God and Israel which caused the Almighty to step into history, as it were, and free the children of Israel from their servitude under Pharaoh. And it is from this perspective that the great universalist philosopher Maimonides is generally associated with the biblical book of Genesis – the book he most usually cites as his proof-texts for the views he offers in his *Guide for the Perplexed* – whereas the more nationalist philosopher Yehudah HaLevi is more closely identified with the biblical book of Exodus – the book most widely drawn upon in HaLevi’s *Kuzari*.

However, I would insist that such a distinction does not do proper justice to the biblical message. Moses’ mission, and God’s miraculous freeing of the

Hebrew slaves, was never meant for Israel alone. Indeed, if the Almighty had merely desired to redeem Israel because of His special relationship with them, He could have simply airlifted the Israelites from Egypt without having to upset all of nature with the ten cataclysmic and fantastic plagues, and then with the sensational splitting of the Yam Suf (Reed Sea). The Almighty was rather attempting to teach a crucial lesson to Pharaoh, and to all subsequent despotic and totalitarian rulers in world history: slavery is a rank evil. No human being has the power to lord it over another human being. Every human being is created in the divine image, and therefore every human being has the inalienable right to be free!

It is largely from this perspective that the book of Exodus emerges from, and is based upon, the book of Genesis. You will remember that the Sabbath day, the seventh day wherein all manner of physical work is forbidden and in which the human being has the ability to exercise his existential freedom under God, has two distinct but intertwined biblical significances: first, the Lord Creator because “in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the seas and everything which is in them, and rested on the Sabbath day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (Exodus 20:11); and second, the Lord Redeemer: “You shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God took you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; therefore did the Lord your God command you to make the Sabbath day,” (Deuteronomy 5:16). Clearly, the second reason emanates from the first: the God who created every individual in His own divine image decries and abhors the enslavement of one human image of the divine over another human image of the divine. Every human being has the right to be free. Hence the second Decalogue includes the additional message of the Sabbath: “In order that your [gentile] manservant and your [gentile] maidservant may rest like you” (Deuteronomy 5:14).

A fascinating support to this universal message of the Exodus may be found in the Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 10, 1), where the source for the four cups of freedom wine is not traced to the four expressions of redemption in the Torah portion of Va'era, but rather to the four instances of the word “goblet” in the dream of the butler that was interpreted by Joseph: “In my dream, behold a vine was before me...and the goblet of Pharaoh was in my hand, and I took the grapes, and I squeezed them into the goblet of Pharaoh, and I gave the goblet into the hand of Pharaoh...And Joseph said, ‘In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place the goblet of Pharaoh into his hand as you did before when you were his butler...’” (Genesis 40:9, 11, 13)

Now the butler is an Egyptian, who was arbitrarily and unfairly imprisoned by Pharaoh; his

dream portends his freedom from enslavement by an unjust despot. I believe that the Jerusalem Talmud – in making this passage from the end of the book of Genesis the source for the four cups of freedom wine at the Passover Seder rather than the passage from Va'era – is emphasizing the universal message of freedom for all of humanity rather than merely parochial freedom for Israel. In the interdependent global village in which we now live, when the ideal of freedom and world peace is so cardinal, when life-preserving democracy is locked in battle against suicide-bombing, fundamentalist terrorists for world hegemony, this interpretation of the Exodus has never been so vital!

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

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The Lord, so to speak, according to Rashi and the Talmud, longs for the previous generations of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel who seemingly bore their trials and difficulties without complaint even though God's revelation to them was in a lesser level than was the case with Moshe. Yet we do find that the patriarchs, Avraham and Yaakov did challenge God at moments of crisis.

Avraham says to God; “What can you grant me as I go childless?” And Yaakov says to God: “And You promised me that You would be good to me [and now Eisav threatens to destroy me.]” So why is the Lord disturbed by Moshe's statement that the lot of the Jewish people in Egypt has not yet been improved? Where do Moshe's words differ radically from those of Avraham and Yaakov? And why does God, so to speak, long for the previous generations over the behavior of the current generation? And according to the aggadic interpretation of the verses in the parsha, Moshe is punished for asking that obvious question as to why the Jewish situation has shown no improvement even though Moshe is apparently fulfilling God's mission accurately and punctually. Where is the shortcoming that provokes such a critical response from Heaven?

I think that the answer perhaps lies in recognizing the difference between the individual Jew as an individual and the belief in the fate of the Jewish people as a nation and community. The individual Jew, Avraham, Yaakov, you and me, regularly face crises and difficulties in our lives as individuals. We have no guarantee that the Lord will extricate us from our difficulties.

As Yaakov put it; “Perhaps my sins will have cancelled out any Heavenly promises of success and aid.” Avraham realizes that perhaps God's promises to him can also be fulfilled through his faithful disciple and servant Eliezer. The doubts of the patriarchs are personal, not national. They never for a moment waver in their belief in the ultimate survival and triumph of the

Jewish people, of the truth and justice of their cause and code, and of the validity of the mission of the Jewish people. Moshe's moment of complaint is not only personal, but it is national. Maybe this people will never leave Egyptian bondage. Maybe the Jewish people as a nation will not be able to come to Sinai and accept the Torah and become a kingdom of priests and a holy people. Maybe they are not worthy of the grandiose promises made to them.

Moshe is forced to account for doubting the people and implying that God has not chosen well, for the troubles of that people have not subsided. One can doubt one's own place in the story of Israel. One can never doubt the validity of Israel and the Heavenly promises made to it itself. ©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

Although the plagues may seem like random punishments, they are actually a divine plan to teach the Egyptians fundamental lessons. For example, the first plague of water turning into blood can, as the Midrash points out, be seen as an attack on the Egyptian god: the Nile River. The point of this plague was to demonstrate to the Egyptians the true impotency of their god (Shemot Rabbah 9:9).

Alternatively, the plague of blood can be viewed as a measure-for-measure punishment. Since the Egyptians drowned Jewish children, shedding their blood in water, their water was turned into blood (Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer 19).

The Maharal insists that the plagues reveal God's unlimited power. The first three (blood, frogs, and lice) are attacks from below – turning the land and sea against the Egyptians. The next three (beasts, pestilence, and boils) are attacks from the ground level. And the last three before the final plague of the firstborn (hail, locusts, and darkness) emerge from the heavens.

While the story of Genesis is the story of God unleashing His power to create the world, as the rabbis say, "with ten sayings the world was created," the story of the plagues is the story of the world unraveling on all levels (Ethics of the Sages 5:1). As creation was carefully carried out by God, so, too, were the plagues a carefully designed plan by God to undo part of that creation which had gone wrong.

Most importantly, the plagues do not reveal a God of vengeance but a God of compassion. The plagues move from the external (blood, which first attacks water outside the house) to that which is closer (the frogs, which enter the home) to the body itself (lice affecting individuals). Rather than increasing in intensity, the plagues then diminish in power,

withdrawing once again to the external (beasts), moving to the inner home (pestilence) and finally to the body (boils). The seventh, eighth, and ninth plagues repeat the same cycle. Thus, the plagues fluctuate in severity.

Some commentators even insist that in reality there are functionally only three plagues prior to the smiting of the firstborn, as only the third, sixth, and ninth plagues directly impact the bodies of the Egyptians. Note that for the first, fourth, and seventh plagues, Pharaoh is warned near the Nile. For the second, fifth, and eighth, he is warned in the privacy of his palace. But for the third, sixth, and ninth, there are no warnings, as the first two of each of the triad serve that purpose (Rashbam, Exodus 7:26). After each triad, the Egyptians have the chance to repent.

Even the plague of the firstborn, which seems to be the harshest, reveals a God Who judges mercifully. After all, the elders were Egypt's leaders, the priests, who masterminded the enslavement of the Jews together with Pharaoh. God's mercy is manifested in that virtually all of Egypt was spared. Only the elders who had orchestrated the oppressive plan were attacked.

The plagues therefore reflect a God Who is reticent to inflict pain; a God Who hesitates to destroy; a God Who, even when punishing, does so with the hope that those affected will examine their ways and learn from their mistakes. ©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

Why Frogs?

Parashat Va'eira contains the first seven of the Ten Plagues that were brought on Egypt. The first plague, dam, blood, was discussed in a previous drasha. That plagued affected the water of the Egyptians, turning their drinking and bathing water into blood, but it also affected those things which are directly dependent on water, such as the fish and the crops. The Nile River was the only source of irrigation in Egypt, as even the streams and ponds were dependent on the Nile as their source. We can understand the fear of all Egypt when confronted with this plague. Our problem comes from the second plague, tzephardeia, frogs. It is hard to comprehend why this plague should be significant. It is important for us to understand the significance of this plague.

The Torah states, "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Come to Par'aoh and say to him, "So said Hashem; send out My people that they may serve Me. For if you refuse to send out, behold, I shall smite your entire border with frogs. The river shall swarm with frogs, and they shall ascend and come into your house and your

bedroom and your bed, and into the house of your servants and of your people, and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls. And into you and into your people and all your servants will the frogs ascend.” Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Say to Aharon, “Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals, and over the reservoirs, and raise up the frogs over the land of Egypt.”’ Aharon stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frog ascended and covered the land of Egypt. The necromancers did the same through their incantations, and they brought up the frogs upon the land of Egypt. Par’aoth summoned Moshe and Aharon and said, ‘Entreat Hashem that He remove the frogs from me and my people, and I shall send out the people that they may bring offerings to Hashem.”

The Torah continues with the conclusion of the plague, but there is a more important aspect of this plague which is our quest. The first plague, Blood, was an attack on a god of the Egyptians, the Nile River. The Nile was especially important for the Egyptians because it was a basic source of life. Hashem prevented rain from blessing the Egyptians because they were so evil, yet He continued to give them a source of life through the water of the Nile. The Egyptians dug canals from the Nile River which irrigated their crops. Since drought is a primary factor in a famine, other countries were affected by droughts, but Egypt continued to be rain-free and yet watered by the Nile.

The plague of Frogs was not directly an attack on the Nile even though the frogs originated in its waters. So, what was the message of Frogs that Hashem wished to impart on the Egyptians? HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that frogs are normally “shy of light and noise.” During the plague, however, the frogs entered the palace, even into the king’s bedchambers, and spread to his court and then to the common people. Egypt was a caste system with the lowest caste being the Jewish slaves. The people “proudly exalted themselves as gods over the Jewish slaves.” Hirsch points out that the places mentioned in our passage where the frogs went, each is a “reference to all the instances in which the Egyptian masters embittered the lives of their Jewish slaves.” Jews had “no homes, no private family rooms, no sleep, and no proper bread.” The frogs were a reminder to the lives the Jews were forced to live within as slaves.

The Kli Yakar explains that the purpose of the Frogs was to counter the doubts of Par’aoth when he doubted Hashem, “And he said, I have not known Hashem.” Here, the frogs recognized Hashem even though Par’aoth had difficulty doing so. The Kli Yakar says that for that reason, the frogs came to rebuke Par’aoth about the holiness of Hashem’s name, for one who accepts rebuke and confesses and agrees with the other litigant, it is like one hundred witnesses testifying.

For they said that there was a side of the Nile that was godly. The Egyptians saw the Nile as a god, but it was Hashem who caused the Nile to bring this plague.

The Ohr HaChaim says that there were really two purposes of the plague of frogs. The first was the noise of the croaking which disturbed the Egyptians even though the cries of the Jewish slaves did not. The second purpose stemmed from the way in which the frogs attacked the individuals. The Ohr HaChaim uses the sentence, “And into you and into your people and all your servants will the frogs ascend,” to tell us that the frogs literally ascended into the intestines of the Egyptians. The pain was such that no Egyptian was certain that he would live. HaAmek Davar explains that the word used, “nogeif, I will smite,” implies death. The Ramban tells us that during the first plague, Par’aoth did not feel that his life was threatened, but here, when the frogs entered his intestines, he feared for his life. Par’aoth later demanded that Moshe remove the plague from him, literally from inside him.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin gives even greater depth to the plague of frogs. The voice of the frogs, as we saw from the Ohr HaChaim, played a large role in this plague. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the cries that the Egyptians heard from the croaks of the frogs were to emphasize that the Egyptians did not listen to the cries of the Jewish children who were thrown into the Nile to drown. Their voices were then swallowed into the throats of the frogs so that the frogs’ croaking sounded more like the cries of the Jewish babies. Hashem brought the frogs so that it was unavoidable for the Egyptians to finally hear those cries.

It is important for us to understand that each of the Ten Plagues was a punishment of the Egyptians in line with Hashem’s judgment of “midah k’neged midah, the punishment should be a reflection of the sin which was committed against the Jewish People. It is enlightening to see the various meforshim, commentators, demonstrate how each plague grows out of the sins committed against the Jews. It is also a reminder to us that Hashem balances every action with its proper reaction. But we must also keep in mind that Hashem may choose to defer His reaction until a later time. We might not ever witness Hashem’s reaction, but we can be certain that Hashem’s Justice will prevail. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Astrology

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Pharaoh works closely with his astrologers and magicians in Parshat Va’era. What is the Jewish view of these practitioners?

The Rambam feels strongly that astrology and magic are nonsense and lies, with no power whatsoever. In contrast, Ramban and other *Rishonim* maintain that astrology is a tool through which G-d rules

the world. He Himself, of course, is not subordinate to it. He is free to do whatever He wants, and change anything that might be predetermined by the stars.

Given this debate, is it permissible according to Jewish law, for us to seek the advice of an astrologer, or to allow the daily horoscope to guide our decisions?

The Ramban asserts that following one's horoscope is permitted and does not fall into the category of the Torah prohibitions of magic and divination. If a person's horoscope predicts that something bad will happen to him, he should respond by praying to G-d for mercy and performing many *mitzvot*. This is because a person's actions can change what is predicted by the stars. Nevertheless, if a person's horoscope predicts that a certain day would not be a good time for him to undertake a certain activity, he should avoid doing it, as it is not appropriate for him to defy his horoscope and rely on a miracle.

In contrast, Rambam maintains that someone who plans his activities based on astrology is not only transgressing, but is even subject to lashes.

The Meiri is one of the rationalists among the *Rishonim*, but he takes a more moderate position than the Rambam. What is forbidden is to relate to the stars as having power independent of G-d. But they do have an effect, the same way that the sun does when it produces light and heat. Accordingly, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with taking a horoscope into account when planning one's day. The Meiri sees it as the equivalent of a person who wants bright light for an activity, so he plans it for the middle of the day, when the sun is at its maximum strength. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

It's all too easy to disassociate the beginning of a parsha from the end of the preceding one. But Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, in *LaTorah UlaMoadim*, sees Hashem's declaration at the opening of *Vo'eira* as connected to Moshe's question toward the end of *parshas Shemos*. That question was (*Shemos* 5:22) "Why have You treated this nation badly?" And Elokim's response (*6:2*) is "I am Hashem."

Rav Zevin compares the apparent question/answer disconnect here with what transpires in *Ki Sisa*, when Moshe asks Hashem to "Let me know Your ways" (*33:13*) and is responded to with "You will see My back but My front will be unseen" (*33:23*).

What gives?

In both cases, explains Rav Zevin, the response expresses the reality that we cannot perceive justice, or even any sort of sense, with our limited purview of history. We are like a person first seeing the "burial" of a wheat kernel and its decay in the ground without having ever seen the stalk of wheat that emerges as a result, and the loaf of bread to which it

will eventually contribute.

Elokim -- the midas hadin, strict justice, name of Hashem -- tells Moshe to rest assured that the *din* he perceives is not detached from "I am Hashem" -- the *sheim havaya* that implies *rachamim*, benevolence. The *din* is but a prelude to *rachamim*, and the redemption of the Jews is at hand.

And the ultimate redemption, too, as hard as it may be to spy, is forthcoming no less. ©2025 Rabbi A. Shafran & torah.org

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Hashem said to Moshe, "See that I have made you an overlord to Pharaoh, and Aharon, your brother, will be your spokesman. (*Shmos* 7:1) Hashem had chosen Moshe as His messenger and agent to take the Jews from Egypt. However, Moshe still was somewhat uncomfortable and not confident in his personal abilities. At the top of his list was the fact that he had a speech impediment.

As a partial answer to Moshe's concerns, Hashem told him his brother Aharon, who could speak well, would accompany Moshe. Moshe would be the leader, and Aharon would serve as his prophet, assistant, and spokesman. In this way, Moshe would still carry out Hashem's wishes, but his concerns that Pharaoh would not listen because of Moshe's physical limitations were assuaged.

This appointment had another impact as well. The first three plagues were initiated by Aharon's action, taken at Moshe's command. Why didn't Moshe perform them? The plague of blood and frogs required the water of the Nile to be struck with a staff. Similarly, the plague of lice began when the sand was struck.

Were Moshe to hit the water or the sand, it would be a denigration of the gratitude he had to feel for the water which saved him as a baby set afloat, and the sand that saved him when the Egyptian Moshe killed was buried in it. Therefore, he could not do these acts.

Had Pharaoh heard that Moshe could not strike the water or sand because he had *hakaras hatov* to them, he would have seen this as a sign of weakness. Perhaps he would have argued that Moshe and the Jews owed Pharaoh and the Egyptians a debt of gratitude as well. (We do, but not the way they would have demanded it.)

However, now that Moshe had a "prophet," it seemed that the reason he commanded Aharon to strike the water or sand was because Moshe couldn't be bothered to do so. To Pharaoh, this was the more familiar behavior of a leader. They delegate and relieve themselves of responsibility. For example, during the famine some two hundred years earlier, Pharaoh told the people, "Go to Yosef, and do whatever he tells you."

This was a more understandable perception for Pharaoh, and having Aharon there raised Moshe's stature. Astounding how Moshe's shortcoming led to a solution which did much more than Moshe even imagined. This is just a small insight into Hashem's perfect orchestration of the world, so that all the details work out as part of a master plan better than anything we could have imagined ourselves.

The 'baal agalah,' the unlearned coach driver of a certain respected Rav, complained to his passenger that while the rabbi enjoyed great honor wherever they went, he was treated like a nobody. The Rav nodded sympathetically, and said, "What can we do?"

The driver suggested that at the next stop, they switch places. The rabbi, understanding his driver's feelings, agreed. Before they entered the next town, the rabbi put on the leather coat and warm hat of the driver, and took the reins, while the driver donned the silk robe and rabbinic hat, and sat in the back. As they entered the town, a crowd formed and accompanied them to the home of the local Rav, singing and dancing with great joy.

When the 'baal agalah' alighted from the coach, he got to enjoy all the honor and prestige. But then, the rabbi of the town came forward and asked the visiting "rabbi" a question he'd been grappling with.

The newly-minted "rabbi," snorted. "Ha! Such a simple question. Even my wagon driver could answer that!" And with that, he directed his "driver" to respond to the town's Rav. © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Last week, as I sat and composed this column, I saw the breaking news regarding Israel's ceasefire agreement with Hamas. At this point, any steps toward finalizing something with the animals of Hamas is going to provide a very, very bittersweet sense of relief.

Once again, the outsized trading of many hundreds of murderous Hamas terrorist prisoners for the remaining 98 hostages -- many of whom are either known or presumed to be dead -- seems to be a capitulation to Hamas.

Moreover, it's going to be a painfully elongated process -- over the next six weeks only 33 hostages are to be released (women and children, as well as men who are either sick, wounded, or over the age of 50), the rest will be negotiated for in a separate deal. Unsurprisingly, Hamas, a thoroughly evil entity, even ransoms bodies for live terrorists. In the words of Ronan Neutra, the grieving mother of Omer Neutra who died as a hostage in Gaza; "They use the bodies of dead hostages as negotiating chips."

Though thankful that, for some, this progress will provide a measure of closure, the entire Jewish nation is still dealing with the continuing repercussions

from the horrors that began on the Shabbat and Simchat Torah of 5784, aka October 7, 2023. The devastating and lasting psychological impact to the survivors, hostages, and brave soldiers engaged in the ensuing war on three fronts -- not to mention the ongoing suffering of all their families, friends, those living in Israel, and the Jewish nation at large -- will resonate for many years, perhaps decades, to come.

Unfortunately, the Jewish people are no strangers to these kinds of devastating, life-altering tragedies. The history of the Jewish nation is sadly filled with equally (and more) horrific episodes; from last century's Holocaust, to the Cossacks under Khmelnytsky in 1648-49, to the Spanish Inquisition, to the horrors of the Crusades...these are but a few of the many tragedies that the Jewish people have endured in the last millennia alone.

One would rather expect some sort of a collective depression to grip the psyche of the Jewish people. While it is true that there have been many jokes about the fatalistic attitude of the Jewish people -- it is not really an accurate portrayal of our people.

One of the more popular songs that for the last few decades has seemed to shape the collective psyche of Israeli Jews is an attitude that is attributed to the well-known mystic, Rabbi Nachman of Bratislav (April 4, 1772 -- October 16, 1810). This ever-popular song reiterates, repeatedly, that it is a great mitzvah to always be happy.

This outlook on life was captured in the writings of his son Rabbi Natan: "For the nature of man is to pull himself towards black depression as a result of the vicissitudes and misfortunes of time, and every man is full of this affliction. As such, he must force himself with great strength to be joyful, always. He must therefore constantly focus on bringing himself to joy, even if it involves silliness" (Likutey Moharan II, 24:2) He actually begins this chapter with, "It is a great mitzvah to be happy always, and to empower oneself to distance the black depression with all one's strength."

To be perfectly honest, I never found it a compelling argument to merely tell a person suffering from depression to simply "try harder" to be happy and joyful. Instructing a person suffering from depression to bring himself momentary respite through any means, including "silliness" seems, at best, insufficient.

In this week's Torah portion we find an illuminating lesson; one that if properly internalized, can have a powerful impact on how we deal with our issues and perhaps even change how we interact and relate to others.

"And God spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and gave them a charge to the Children of Israel" (Exodus 6:13). The Talmud (Jerusalem Talmud Rosh Hashanah 3:5) derives from this verse a fascinating teaching: Rabbi Shmuel, son of Rabbi Yitzchak, asked, "What did he (Moses) command the Children of Israel? He

charged them with the Torah obligation (mitzvah) of freeing one's slaves." Quite remarkably, according to this sage, the very first mitzvah that the Almighty asked Moses to command the Jewish people as a nation was the obligation to free their slaves.

Why would the mitzvah of freeing one's slaves have the prominence of being the first mitzvah given to the Jewish nation as a whole? There are other, seemingly more significant commandments like observing Shabbat or keeping kosher that would logically take precedence.

Furthermore, this was an oddly irrelevant commandment at the time. Since the nation was still in Egypt none of the Jews even had any slaves! Even more problematic; this law only applied once they arrived and settled in the Land of Israel -- which turned out to be some 40 years later. Why charge them with a mitzvah that cannot even be fulfilled yet, and why give it the importance of being the first mitzvah they are commanded as a nation to fulfill?

As stated above, the overly simplistic attitude of striving to be happy all the time -- or referring to it as a mitzvah -- does not, to me at least, seem to be correct.

Everyone wants to be happy. In fact, many people mistakenly believe that their life goal should be "to be happy." I have even seen the Dalai Lama quoted as saying that "the purpose of our lives is to be happy." While I have no idea in what context this was said (or if it was even said at all), it is an absolutely incorrect attitude.

Being happy is a description of a momentary state of being. At any particular moment a person may be happy, sad, angry, jealous, etc. These emotions are generally the result of a specific event or occurrence. Such transitory feelings cannot be the "purpose" of our lives. In fact, this attitude specifically contradicts the teaching of King Solomon, aka "the wisest of all men."

In his magnum opus of philosophy, known as Ecclesiastics, he writes, "For all seasons there is a time for each and every action" (3:1). King Solomon continues, "A time to cry and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance" (Ibid 3:4). He goes on to give many such examples, "A time for building, a time for war, a time to distance, and a time to hug [...]."

King Solomon is, unsurprisingly, teaching us a profound axiom of life. Throughout our lives we will experience intense highs and lows -- often within the same category. For example, having children is one of the most meaningful parts of life and can be a source of great joy. At the same time, the Torah guarantees that raising children will cause us to endure great pain (see Genesis 3:16 and Rashi ad loc). One of our school's founders, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Berkowitz, OBM used to say, "Little kids don't let you sleep. Big kids don't let you live."

What we must internalize from this teaching of King Solomon is that these experiences -- both the joy

and the pain -- do not dictate who we are. Our job is to focus on living meaningful lives of accomplishment. A person who has a fulfilling life, one full of meaning and a certain sense of achievement, will reach a general sense of satisfaction with who they are. This leads to a sense of calm and a true peace of mind.

King Solomon is telling us that when bad things happen to us -- and they absolutely will -- we must understand that, for whatever reason, it is something we must experience. There is simply a calculus beyond our earthly knowledge as to why things happen. But we must view these experiences, both good and bad, as transitory moments in times.

We should therefore not internalize feelings or base our identity or even our perception of ourselves on them, as this can lead to depression. For instance, you might be frustrated or angry about failing a test, but that does not make you a failure or stupid. We need to understand that it is okay to embrace momentary feelings, but these presumptive and mistaken views about ourselves are merely illusory and fleeting. These feelings do not define us -- rather we should focus on our actions as the true indicators of who we are.

This is why -- after being slaves in Egypt for over 100 years -- the first mitzvah given to the newly minted Jewish nation was that of freeing slaves, even though it's a commandment that wouldn't apply for another 40 something years. Often, a person suffering from an emotional trauma like abuse will abuse others to subconsciously feel better about himself. It's a coping mechanism, and a way to begin to internalize that he is no longer a victim himself.

The Jewish people were being told that they were no longer slaves, and that, in fact, they too would have slaves one day. The ultimate test of being free is when you can let others have their freedom as well. In this way, their experiences as slaves would not define them. They understood that the slavery in Egypt was merely an experience they lived through -- not a determination of who they were or would be. ©2025 Rabbi Y. Zweig and shabbatshalom.org

