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A Blueprint for Persecution

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin

The Israelites, initially welcomed to Egypt at the end of the patriarchal era, experience a precipitous change of fortune after the death of Yosef and his generation.

A “new” Egyptian king initiates a campaign of persecution against the descendants of Yaakov, transforming them into a subgroup of slaves within the Egyptian population.

Questions:

Why does the Torah dedicate twenty-two sentences of text to a detailed, step-by-step description of the enslavement of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians?

What eternal lessons can be gleaned from this tragic narrative?

Approaches:

A. The enslavement of the Israelites is not Pharaoh’s endgame. While the king clearly intends to benefit from the forced labor the Hebrew slaves will provide, he will ultimately be satisfied with nothing less than this fledgling people’s total destruction. Genocide, however, even when mandated by a mighty Pharaoh, cannot be perpetrated in a vacuum.

A careful reading of the text, therefore, reveals a frighteningly prescient reality. The first phase of our nation’s birth is shaped by a painful pattern. We become the targets of a blueprint for persecution which, tragically, will be reused over and over again during the ensuing centuries.

B. The purpose of Pharaoh’s malicious plan is twofold. On the one hand, as the Ramban explains:

“Pharaoh and his advisers could not attack [the Israelites] by the sword. An unprovoked attack upon a people that had originally come to Egypt at the invitation of the first king would be viewed as great treachery.... The [Egyptian] populace would not have allowed such an abomination.”

Instead, Pharaoh realizes, the stage must first be set. A painstaking, detailed plan must be set in motion that will render the destruction of the Israelites “acceptable” to their Egyptian neighbors.

On the other hand, Pharaoh must “prepare” the victims, as well. Slowly and inexorably robbed of their confidence, of any vestige of self-worth, the Israelites will be transformed into unwitting participants in their own demise.

We watch with horrible fascination as the stages of this plan unfold – details that, centuries later, are much too familiar for comfort.

Stage 1: Propaganda

“And a new king rose up over Egypt who did not know Yosef. And he said to his nation: ‘Behold the nation, the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we. Come let us be wise to them, lest they become numerous and it will be that if war occurs, they will join our enemies and wage war against us and go up from the land.’”

Persecution, the Torah testifies, inevitably begins with propaganda, with the verbal isolation of a people from surrounding society.

Clearly Pharaoh’s description of the Israelites as “more numerous and stronger” than the Egyptians is patently false, even ludicrous. And yet the king knows that lies, boldly spoken, will be readily accepted by those who want to believe them.

Pharaoh’s evil genius is also evident in his specific accusations against the Israelites. He consciously plays upon his own nation’s envy, xenophobia and fear of a fifth column within their borders. Why should we tolerate, he asks, a dangerous separate “nation” in our own land?

Stage Two: Isolation

“And they appointed taskmasters over them in order to afflict them with their burdens and they built storage cities

for Pharaoh, Pitom and Raamses.”

Pharaoh’s edicts move to the next level with the designation of taskmasters and projects specific to the Israelites. These people are different, the Egyptian king proclaims through these actions, and the problems they create require special treatment.

The physical and psychological isolation of the Israelites is now complete.

Stage Three: Degradation

“And the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with crushing harshness (b’pharech).”

When the Israelites respond to Pharaoh’s initial decrees with resilience, the Egyptians ratchet the process up to the next level.

The biblical term b’pharech potentially conveys, according to the commentaries, varied aspects of this new level of persecution:

Rashi leads a number of scholars who, choosing the path of pshat (the straightforward explanation of the text), explain that the term refers to labor that crushes and breaks the body. Such toil has no real purpose beyond the physical torment and psychological degradation inflicted upon the laborers.

One particularly telling Talmudic source sees the word pharech as a consolidation of the two Hebrew words peh (mouth) and rach (soft). The Egyptians beguiled the Israelites with soft, enticing speech. Through lies and false promises of security, the taskmasters induced the slaves to cooperate in their own enslavement.

Stage Four: Murder

“And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives..., ‘When you deliver the Hebrew women, you shall see on the birthing stool, if it is a son you are to kill him, and if it is a daughter, she is to live.’”

The Secret of Moshe’s Selection

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

After many years of Jewish suffering under the heavy burden of Egyptian servitude, Hashem decides that the time has finally come to redeem His people. In order to do so He chooses Moshe to be His representative and to lead the people to freedom. Given the significance of this decision it is curious, therefore, that we are never told why Moshe – and not someone else – was

“And the midwives feared God and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them ...”

“And Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying: ‘Every son that is born – into the river you shall throw him! And every daughter – you shall keep alive!’”

Murder, particularly when carried out in the public arena, must be perpetrated slowly and cautiously. Pharaoh, therefore, opens the final devastating stages of his design against the Israelites in a manner that not only attacks the weakest among them but that can be carried out secretly. He commands the Hebrew midwives to kill the male infants in such a way that “even the birthing mothers themselves will remain unaware.”

When this subterfuge is thwarted by the righteous midwives, Pharaoh finally proclaims his true intentions and commands that all male infants be cast into the Nile. Even at this point, however, as the king’s malicious plan moves into the open, Pharaoh ingeniously shields himself from blame. The Ramban notes that Pharaoh couches this final, devastating edict in language that distances the murder from the official seat of government. The king does not command his army or his officers to carry out this terrible act. Instead, he instructs his “entire people” to murder the Hebrew infants. In retrospect, the king will be able to protest, What do you want from me? This was not an official action. This was a spontaneous, popular pogrom.

Points to Ponder

The uncanny ability of the Torah text to speak across the centuries is nowhere more clearly – nor more frighteningly – evident than in its description of the enslavement of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians. Here, openly rooted at the dawn of our history, are the very methods used against us and other innocent victims, to such devastating effect, by enemies in every era, including our own.

selected for this important task. What had Moshe, with his Egyptian name and childhood spent in the palace of Pharaoh, done to deserve this appointment?

Perhaps an answer to this question can be found in the Torah’s very first description of Moshe, not as a passive baby, but as an adult and active party: “Va’yigdal Moshe,” Moshe grew up, “va’yeztei el echav va’yar be’sivlosam,” and

he went out to his brothers and he saw their afflictions, “va’yar ish Mitzri makeh ish Ivri me’echav,” he saw an Egyptian task master beating his Jewish brother. After looking all around, “va’yar ki ein ish,” Moshe saw that there was no one else so he intervened and killed the Egyptian (Shemos 2:11-12). A careful reading of this event notes that these pesukim repeat the word “va’yar,” stressing what Moshe saw – and didn’t see – in the field.

The apparent focus on this word is confirmed when we examine Hashem’s initial statement to Moshe at the burning bush. When describing why He had decided to free the Jewish people Hashem relates that, “ra’oh ra’isi es ani ami asher be’Mitzrayim,” I have surely seen the affliction of My people in Egypt (3:7), and then again, “ve’gam ra’isi es ha-lachatz asher Mitzrayim lochatzim osam,” I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them (3:9). Just like with Moshe, here too regarding Hashem, the Torah repeatedly mentions what was seen.

It seems clear that the Torah is linking Moshe and Hashem through this common terminology but it is not clear why, of all things, it is the sense of sight which connects them. Rashi explains that, in fact, what is being described was not Hashem’s ability to see but rather, “samti lev le’hisbonen u-leda’as es mach’ovav ve’lo he’elamti einai,” that He truly empathized with and felt the pain of the Jewish people. In other words, it is an emotional form of sight which is being stressed.

Regarding the Torah’s description of Moshe, here too Rashi explains that the focus is not on the physical sense of seeing, but rather, “nasan einav ve’libo lihiyis meitzar aleihem,” that Moshe truly connected with and was concerned about what was happening to his brothers. It’s actually remarkable that, when one considers Moshe’s privileged and protected background, he was able to nevertheless empathize with an experience so different from his own.

Perhaps it is this shared characteristic that led Hashem to choose Moshe to carry out the mission of redemption. Hashem was looking for a leader who shared His “vision” and in Moshe He found someone who was able to see not just with his eyes but with his heart as well.

Certainly this is a lesson for all of us to heed. Not just seeing – as opposed to averting our gaze – but empathizing with the pain of others is a basic characteristic of *mentchlichkeit*.

There is one additional point that should be added, and that is that in both of these instances the feeling of empathy is followed by action. When Moshe saw what the Egyptian task master was doing he immediately acted to defend his fellow Jew and when Hashem felt the burden and pain of the Jewish people He started the process redemption. Seeing and feeling are important – but even better is when they lead to action.

At the end of Birkat Ha-Mazon we recite the verse, “na’ar hayisi gam zakanti ve’lo ra’isi tzaddik ne’ezav,” I have been a young lad and I have aged and I have never seen a righteous person forsaken (Tehillim 37:25). The simple translation of this statement is quite difficult to understand; after all, it doesn’t seem to be true. Are there really no tzaddikim who are suffering? Is there really no injustice in the world?

I once read a beautiful explanation of this verse in the name Rabbi Leo Jung which actually corresponds to the idea we mentioned above. R. Jung suggested that the word “ra’isi” needs to be understood along the same lines as it was understood by Rashi in our parsha. Just as Moshe and Hashem “saw” in the sense that they felt the pain of others and then acted to ameliorate that pain, so too we can understand this statement. Dovid Ha-Melech declares that there was never a time – “ve’lo ra’isi” – that he saw injustice and didn’t act upon it. On the contrary, whatever pain he may have witnessed he tried to help and he tried to do something about.

Not coincidentally, this is the same word that Esther used when she asked Achashverosh to save the Jews of Persia (Megillas Esther 8:6): “eichecha u-chal ve’raisi,” how can I see the pain of my brothers and sisters and not do anything about it.

This was the lesson of Moshe’s selection and this has been the legacy of Jewish leadership ever since. From Moshe to Dovid to Esther, the lesson is consistent and powerful. A Jew, and especially a leader, cannot be apathetic. If we see suffering we must feel the pain of others and we must do whatever we can to help.

The Uniqueness of Moshe Rabbenu

Rabbi David Horwitz

The beginning of the third chapter of Sefer Shemot records Moses' encounter with God at the "burning bush." It begins as follows:

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the L-rd appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why is the bush not burnt?" When the L-RD was that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

The uniqueness of Moses' prophecy is enshrined by Rambam in his list of Thirteen Principles, found in his Perush a-Mishnah to Massekhet Sanhedrin Perek Heleq (the 10th chapter). It goes (in part) as follows:

The 7th fundamental principle is the prophecy of Moses, our teacher, that is to say, we should believe that he is the father of all the prophets that preceded him and that followed him. All are below him in rank. He was chosen by God from all of mankind. He reached a greater understanding of God than any man who ever existed or will ever exist will be able to reach. He attained such an extreme state of exaltedness above the level of a human being that he reached to the level of a celestial being and became established at the angelic level. There was no curtain which he did not pierce. No physical impediment held him back and no defect, whether small or great, troubled him. The imaginative powers and sensations were separated from him in all his perceptions and his power of lust was silenced. And he remained pure intellect only, It is in this sense that it is said to him that he spoke to God without the mediation of angels. (See Fred Rosner, Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah: Tractate Sanhedrin [New York, 1981], p. 153.)

In light of these words (which are repeated in Mishneh Torah, and {with some variation} in the Guide for the Perplexed), another famous Maimonidean passage becomes difficult to fathom. It is written in the course of the Rambam's stirring declaration in Hilkhhot Teshuvah

(5:2) regarding the Jewish assertion of man's absolute freedom of will. It goes as follows:

Let not the notion, expressed by foolish gentiles and most of the senseless folk among Israelites, pass through your mind that at the beginning of a person's existence the Almighty decrees that he is to be either righteous or wicked. This is not so. Every human being may become righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked like Jeroboam; wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, niggardly or generous; and so with other qualities. (Rambam, The Book of Knowledge: translated by Moses Hyamson {Jerusalem, 1965}, p. 86b-87a)

But if it the uniqueness of Moshe Rabbenu is an article of faith, then how could any human being become righteous like Moses? Wouldn't the actualization of that possibility contradict that dogma of Judaism?

Numerous answers have been suggested: the common denominator of virtually all of them is that the term "righteousness," however defined, in truth does not include those intellectual capabilities (and/or the prophetic powers) that made Moses the greatest prophet ever to have lived, and the unique and never-to-be-repeated role he has in Judaism. Thus, to the extent that a simple reading of the Hilkhhot Teshuvah passage could be construed to be absolute and to include those intellectual capabilities and / or prophetic powers, in truth it only expresses the Rambam's use of rhetorical excess to underline his assertion of human free will.

R. Aharon Soloveichick, zatzal, (in a shiur delivered circa 1986 at YU that I heard) once suggested a slightly different interpretation. Perhaps the Rambam in Hilkhhot Teshuvah, he declared, was only claiming that theoretically anyone could utilize their freedom of choice (to make correct decisions) every second of their lives and consequently reach the heights that Moshe Rabbenu did. In actuality however, no one else did so, and no one else will ever do so. Consequently, no one became, and no one else will ever become, as great as Moshe. The 7th iqqar, in this view, expresses the situation based upon the reality of the imperfection of the rest of humanity vis a vis Moshe Rabbenu.

Whether one follows the standard explanations or this last one, I think that this notion is ultimately bound up with the notion of the principle of plenitude, which

various philosophers, including Rambam, subscribed to. This principle teaches that if the universe is to be as perfect as possible it must be as full as possible, in the sense that it contains as many kinds of things as it possibly could contain. For example, the world of nature must be as rich as possible. This is connected with the idea, used by various philosophers, as part of the ontological argument for God's existence. That is, there must be a most Perfect Being possible, that existence is a perfection, and hence what we call God is that most Perfect Being. Another version of the principle refers to events rather than to kinds of objects. It says that there can be no possibilities that remain as possibilities (and are not foreclosed) but are unrealized throughout eternity; in this form, the notion goes back at least to Aristotle.

It would seem that there is a principle of plenitude regarding human beings as well. There had to have been (and there was!) a greatest human being ever, and according to Jewish dogma, that one is Moses. (For an important scholarly article on the general topic, see Charles Manekin, "Problems of Plenitude in Maimonides and Gersonides," in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture. Essays in Honor of Arthur*

Hyman, edited by Ruth Link-Salinger. [Washington, D.C., 1988], pp. 183-94.)

But if this is all correct, I think that there are repercussions regarding how we as thinking, religious Jews, look at the biblical narratives regarding Moshe. None of us, no matter how talented and brilliant, will approach Moshe. Our human qualities of emotion and imagination, which itself is a function of our corporeality, preclude that. We might try to approach his intellectual qualities as presented in the Maimonidean texts, but we must recognize that we will not do so. At the most, just as our imperative of *Imitatio Dei* (the imitation of God: just as He is kind, we should be kind, etc.) concerns, as Rambam teaches us, not God's essence (which is absolutely unfathomable), but God's actions in this world, we can only try to imitate Moshe's actions. That is all. More importantly, our fealty towards Moshe is the fealty towards the Law that he bequeathed us, the Torah, with its commands and prohibitions. And at the end of the day, our intellectual energies must be primarily absorbed in understanding that Law. Moses charged us with the Teaching; as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob (Deuteronomy 33:4).

Using Non-Jewish Names

Rabbi Michael Taubes

The parshah begins by identifying Yaakov and his twelve sons by name, indicating that they had all eventually come down to Egypt (Shemot 1:1-5). The Ba'al HaTurim (to pasuk 1, s.v. *ve'eileh*) points out that the opening letters of the second through fifth words there (*shemot bnai yisrael haba'im*) spell out the word "shivyah," meaning "captivity," indicating that even when in captivity in Egypt, the Jewish people did not change their names, but rather maintained the same kind of identifiable names which they had when they first came to Egypt. Moreover, he suggests that prior to his death, Yosef had actually commanded the family not to take on other names; the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 32:5) teaches that the fact that the Jewish people did not abandon their Jewish names in favor of other names was actually one of the things which led to their ultimately being redeemed from Egypt.

Later in the Torah, Hashem indicates that He has separated the Jewish people from the other nations of the world (Vayikra 20:26); based on this and other *pesukim*, the

Rambam (Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 11:1) writes that the Jewish people must distinguish themselves from the other nations in terms of their behavior, their physical appearance and their dress, and may not emulate their practices. The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De'ah 178:1) rules accordingly; the Rama, though, adds there that there are certain things which the non-Jews do that Jews may do as well because they are done for a good reason and have no foreign religious or otherwise inappropriate overtones to them. Although using non-Jewish names is not listed in those sources among the practices to be avoided, it stands to reason that imitating non-Jews by using their names and not exclusively Jewish ones would be improper. Indeed, Rabbeinu Tam, as cited in Tosafot to Gittin (34b, s.v. *vehu*), states that it would be highly inappropriate to mention a non-Jewish name in a Jewish religious document such as a *get*. The Rosh in Gittin (4:7), however, notes that there are certain non-Jewish names which are very closely related to Jewish names (presumably referring to names that are basically

transliterated, such as Abraham in English for Avraham, Isaac for Yitzchak, etc.) and that it is common for Jews to be called by those names.

The Maharam Schick, in a famous teshuvah (Yoreh De'ah No. 169), writes emphatically that it is completely inappropriate for Jews to give their children non-Jewish names, indicating that it absolutely constitutes a violation of the Torah's commandment that Jews may not emulate the practices of the non-Jews in any fashion, as referred to above. Moreover, he adds, using non-Jewish names in any form represents a rejection of the long-standing tradition among Jews of distinguishing themselves from others by means specifically of their names, a practice which saved them in Egypt. Indeed, it is reported that when the government decreed that all residents of the area where he lived must adopt a "last" name, the Maharam Schick selected the last name "Schick" because its spelling in Hebrew, shin, yud, kuf, can be understood as an acronym for the words sheim yisrael kodesh, "the Jewish name is holy" (see Sefer Otzar HaBrit, Volume 1, Chapter 6, Note 1). The Darkei Teshuvah (Yoreh De'ah 178:14) cites the Maharam Schick's strong criticism of those who utilize non-Jewish names approvingly, agreeing that they are in violation of a commandment from the Torah. The Rogatchover Gaon (Shu"t Tzofnat Pa'aneiach Warsaw edition, No. 275) appears to agree that using a completely non-Jewish name is forbidden, but he adds that a name which is essentially a foreign language translation of a Jewish name is not a problem.

It is noteworthy that the Gemara in Gittin (11b) acknowledges that most Jews living outside Eretz Yisrael have names resembling those of non-Jews; the Maharashdam, in one of his teshuvot (Yoreh De'ah No. 199), understands that this was true even of many Jews living in Eretz Yisrael. He deals in that teshuvah with an interesting question regarding Jews from Portugal who had escaped the Spanish Inquisition by acting as non-Jews (Marranos) and had taken on non-Jewish names. He was asked about whether these people, after having returned to the Jewish community and begun to use their Jewish names again, could maintain the use of the other names for various business and legal purposes. While stating that it is certainly proper to avoid various kinds of practices associated with non-Jews, there is no actual prohibition against using non-Jewish names; he concludes, citing this Gemara in Gittin and the commentaries there, that those who take the stringent position about using non-Jewish names do so in

order to help assure that Jews will always be distinguishable from their non-Jewish neighbors, but he asserts that in terms of official documents and the like there is nothing wrong with using those names. In a possibly related remark, the Maharatz Chayes, commenting on Tosafot to Gittin 11a (s.v. Batti), notes that people who converted to Judaism did not necessarily give up their non-Jewish names; see, however, the comments of the Ramban to Bamidbar (10:29, s.v. vayomer) and of the Meshech Chochmah to Shemot (18:12) regarding Yitro, and of the Chizkuni to Bereishit (17:5, s.v. velo) regarding Avraham Avinu.

Rav Moshe Feinstein discusses this matter in several teshuvot. In one (Shu"t Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer 3:35), he notes (writing in 1966) that the overwhelming majority of even observant Jews, including Rabbanim, in America use English names and these names are accepted among the Jewish people, adding that these names are generally given to people before their Jewish names, as the English name is usually given in the hospital, while the Jewish name is given at the Brit for a boy and when the father next gets called the Torah for a girl. He does state that in light of the fact that Chazal praise the Jews in Egypt for not abandoning their Jewish names and teach that this helped lead to the redemption, it is certainly improper to employ non-Jewish names, but there is clearly no requirement to use only Jewish names, just as there is no requirement to speak exclusively in Hebrew even though Chazal say that maintaining their Jewish language also helped bring about the redemption of our ancestors.

In another teshuvah (ibid. Even HaEzer 4:102), Rav Feinstein adds that although the non-Jewish name is indeed usually given before the Jewish name, people who are committed to Torah values consider their Jewish name to be their primary name and the other name to be secondary. Elsewhere (ibid. Orach Chaim 4:66), he suggests that the use of non-Jewish names became more acceptable for Jews as the duration of our exile continued to lengthen; he points out that we thus find many names of Amoraim in the Gemara which are not Hebrew but Aramaic (Rav Pappa, Rav Zevid, Mar Zutra, and others) and so too many Geonim and even some Rishonim have names from other cultures. He explains there that perhaps this is because the idea of preserving exclusively Jewish names was indeed very important when the Jews were in Egypt and did not have mitzvot to maintain their distinct identity; after the giving of the Torah, however, this became less significant. The

Meshech Chochmah (to Shemot 12:22, s.v. ve'atem) makes a similar comment.

Nonetheless, it would seem that even according to those who allow the use of non-Jewish names, it is certainly proper for one to try and use his or her Jewish name, as this does help enable one to maintain a Jewish identity. At the same time, it appears that even according to those who are stringent about using non-Jewish names at all, there is more room for leniency if the name is common among

Jews as well, as opposed to a name which is exclusively associated with and used by non-Jews (see Get Pashut, Even HaEzer 129:23). In conclusion, it should be noted that one should be careful in general in selecting a name for one's child, because a name can sometimes have an impact on an individual's very life, as indicated by the Gemara in Berachot (7b) and in Yoma (83b), and by the Midrash Tanchuma to Parashat Ha'azinu (No. 7), among other places.

Bystanding Or By Standing

Rabbi Dr. John Krug

The Bystander Effect is an interesting psychological phenomenon and theory that refers to situations where, when someone is in danger or an emergency situation is unfolding, those present or "standing around," do not offer any aid or assistance. Rather, through a diffusion of responsibility, each individual can conveniently hide behind the "it's-someone-else's-responsibility-and-not-mine" lament or play the "I'm-hiding-behind-the-newspaper-and-don't-see-what's-going-on" game. Findings suggest that the larger the crowd or group of bystanders, the more likely any given individual is to feel that he or she need not be responsible for, and, therefore, remain uninvolved in and with, what's happening.

As we start a new sefer in our weekly kria haTorah and a new chapter in the development of Am Yisroel, we learn a stark and poignant lesson in Bystander Effect from the greatest of all leaders and teachers, Moshe Rabbeinu. In the short span of just twenty-two pesukim, we encounter Moshe four times, in four very different events. When first reeled in from his floating ferry, we are presented with an engrossing descriptor of Moshe (Shemot 2:6): "Vatiptach vatirehu et hayeled, v'hinei na'ar bocheh..." He has the physical appearance of a baby and child, but possesses the cry of a teenager and young man. The difference, in psychological terms, is very noteworthy. A baby, born with primary narcissism, cries only for its own needs, desires, wants and pleasures. A teenager, having developed an awareness that there are other people in this world, people with their own issues, challenges, troubles and adversity, cries for someone else's pain. Even at this tender chronological age, the maturity of the future leader of our people manifested a sensitivity, responsiveness and

consciousness well beyond his years.

We next encounter Moshe, at a later stage of life, when he goes out and witnesses an Egyptian beating a Jew (Shemot 2:11): "Vayifen ko v'ko, vayar ki ein ish..." "He looks this way and that way and he sees that there is no one there"...or is there? Both the Netziv in his HaEmek Davar and Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mechlenberg in his HaKetav VeHakabalah imply and suggest that there WERE other people present, but that no one was taking action, getting involved or standing up as a person should. They were bystanding. Says the Netziv, based on the Mishneh in Avot, "B'makom she'ein sham ish, hishtadel hu l'hiyot ish." Says the HaKetav VeHakabala, "Chashav Moshe she'achad m'echav ha'omdim sevivo... yatzil et echav," that, surely, one of the Jews standing around would come to the assistance of his brother in trouble. But, alas, no one does, so Moshe himself steps forward and takes matters into his own hands.

Another day, soon thereafter, Moshe comes across two Jews fighting with each other and immediately intervenes. (Shemot 2:13) He then flees Egypt and rescues the daughters of Yitro from the harassment by the local shepherds. (Shemot 2:16-17) These actions culminate in Hakadosh Baruch Hu asking Moshe to lead the Jewish people.

There is much to be learned from the proactive and activist actions of Moshe. His standing up, as a person should, becoming intricately involved and deeply caring about what happened to his fellow Jews should serve as a clear role model for all of us. This is the mettle of a true leader; determined and decided, courageous and confident, possessed of vigor, valor and virtue. Moshe, via his moral fiber and ethical idealism, was not afraid to harness that human trait called empathy; that power of

understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings, essence of being and experience. To be sensitive when someone else is hurt, and hurting, and not to walk away but to do something constructive about it is the highest level of love.

Elie Wiesel, in making two powerful points relevant to Moshe's story, said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference" and "Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." How true are Dr. Wiesel's words!

Moshe was a symbol of bravery, not because he was necessarily physically strong but because he had strong

faith and because he had the capacity to care-and to cry-and to love.

What a beautiful message Moshe brought and taught to create our Am Yisroel and bring us together. What a relevant message it remains for us even today, so that we can stay united as a nation, caring, loving and, yes, crying with and for each other in that extended family known as The Jewish People.

We have the choice. We can either be counted among the bystanders of life or be counted by standing in life. It is up to us.

Significant Signs

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

Moshe Rabbeinu was given three signs to utilize in order to convince B'nei Yisroel that Hashem was initiating the process of their redemption:

1. Moshe's staff became a snake and then reverted to being a staff once Moshe grasped it.

2. Moshe's hand became afflicted with Tzora'as when he removed it from his chest, and when he returned his hand thereto, it was healed.

3. Moshe was told to take some water from the Nile and pour it onto the ground, and the water would become blood.

What do these three signs symbolize? Why did these specific signs resonate with B'nei Yisroel?

B'nei Yisroel were not merely physically enslaved; their minds were also enslaved, and they could not fathom the idea of freedom, largely due to the iron grasp that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had on their bodies and their lives. Escape from Mitzrayim seemed impossible and was unheard of. (V. Rashi on Shemos 18:9, from Mechilta.)

The three signs given to Moshe were tailored to address the fears and insecurities of B'nei Yisroel, enslaved and full of despair.

Moshe's staff, which became a snake, represented Pharaoh, who was likened to a serpent. (V. Yechezkel 29:3) This sign indicated that the serpent, Pharaoh, would be supernaturally subdued and rendered powerless to further subjugate and enslave the Jews.

Moshe's hand represented B'nei Yisroel. The hand was healthy, then quickly became afflicted with Tzora'as, and subsequently was totally healed in an instant. B'nei Yisroel likewise were a free, unfettered, thriving nation, which

quickly became enslaved (as soon as Yaakov's sons had all died - v. Rashi from Medrash on 6:16). The instant healing of Moshe's hand and its restoration to health signified that B'nei Yisroel likewise would undergo a rapid healing via restoration and redemption to their former, glorious and free state. The previously free nation, which became afflicted with slavery, could and surely would again be suddenly freed, despite the seeming impossibility.

The water which became blood symbolized the Egyptians, whose survival depended on the Nile. (V. Rashi on Bereshis 47:10, from Medrash Yashan.) The same Egyptians, who with ruthless confidence exploited B'nei Yisroel as a national resource, reliant upon free Jewish slave labor in the same way that they relied upon the Nile for national prosperity and livelihood, would be cursed and plagued like the Nile's water which turned into blood, and would no longer be in a position to forcibly retain B'nei Yisroel as captives.

When Moshe presented these signs to B'nei Yisroel, he was in fact presenting supernatural messages that communicated statements of Hashem's ability to reverse the state of affliction and to redeem. These messages indicated that that which seemed impossible would occur, and that despair would evolve into hope and instant liberation. The captivating messages painted a detailed picture that immediately convinced B'nei Yisroel that the Ge'ulah (Redemption) was approaching, for just as Moshe perceived God speaking to him from the flame in the bush, so too did the Jews perceive God and know His truth from the unique signs presented by Moshe.