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All The World's A Wedding

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 11, 1964)

In a remarkable passage in the Talmud (Eruvin 54a) we find the Amora Samuel counselling his younger contemporary Rav Yehudah, *hatof ve'ekhol, hatof ve'ishti, d'alma d'azlinan mineih ke'hilula dami*—“hurry and eat, hurry and drink, for the world we are leaving is like a wedding.” What an unusual simile: all the world's a wedding!

What did the Talmud mean by that? According to some commentaries (Rashi and others), Samuel offered some sage and brooding advice: enjoy yourself with legitimate pleasures as long as you can because life is all too short, like a huppah which is put up and then quickly put away again; the wedding party doesn't last forever. There is, of course, much wisdom in that remark. Some of us tend to put off enjoying life's bounties, we begrudge ourselves G-d's gifts to us. We keep on saving for a rainy day so intensely that we fail to enjoy today's sunshine. What the Talmud means, then, is that what the Torah permits us to benefit from ought to be accepted cheerfully and happily. It is good Jewish doctrine.

There is, however, a Hasidic interpretation of this Talmudic dictum that is somewhat different, and that illuminates not only an obscure passage in the Talmud, but an obscure aspect of our passage through life. All the world's a wedding. At a wedding, there is much going on: food is eaten, drink is imbibed, cigars are smoked, toasts are exchanged, there is dancing to music and camaraderie and posing for photographers and admiring floral arrangements.... a great deal of motion and activity. All of it is enjoyable and exciting. However, all of this is meaningful only if there is a groom and a bride, and if he says to her *harei at mekudeshet li*. If there should be no *harei at*, if there should be no act of marriage, then all the rest makes no sense; it is a matter of going through grotesque, empty motion. Then the guests have come in vain, the eating is

gluttony, the comradeship is irrelevant, the toasting is a meaningless gesture, the dancing is weird. With the *harei at*, everything makes sense; without it, nothing does.

So it is with life itself. It is filled with all kinds of diverse activities of every description. We work, make money, spend it, socialize, build families, join groups, experience joy and sadness. Does all this make sense? Does it have any meaning? The answer is: the world is *ke'hilula dami*, like a wedding. If we are conscious, throughout all these activities, of the ultimate purpose, of the goal, then that purpose unifies all our deeds and gives them meaning and inspiration. Without that purpose, we merely go through motions that are incoherent, dull, and utterly insignificant.

And what is that ultimate purpose? It is—the same as in a wedding—a marriage formula. Like the formula expressed by groom to bride, *harei at mekudeshet li*, “you are hereby married *li*, to me,” so the Almighty has betrothed the people of Israel with the word *li*, to Me: in the words of Hosea, *v'erastikh li le'olam*, I betroth you to Me forever! The wedding of G-d and Israel, the intensely close and loyal relationship that finds its fulfillment through Torah and the Jewish way of Mitzvot, this is the purpose of all life. And if that purpose exists for us consciously, then all else we do somehow fits into the picture of a meaningful life. Without it, we have a life that is like a wedding party without a bride and a groom, without a wedding.

It is no exaggeration to say that especially we of the 20th century stand in great need of this teaching that *alma... ke'hilula dami*, that life is worth living only if it makes sense, that it makes sense only if there is a purpose, and that the purpose is loyalty to God, the wedding of our talents and substance and destiny with the will of God as taught in Torah. For we moderns have developed with unsurpassed excellence the perfection of means—science,

the exploration of nature, is a highly refined skill; business, commerce, and trade are complicated arts; communication and transportation are effected with consummate speed. We know how to do things like never before. The trouble is, we do not always know why we are doing them. We have elaborate technocracy in which we are so intoxicated with means that are efficient, that we have forgotten that ends are significant. Never before have we been able to go so fast; never before have we been so unsure of where it is we want to go in such a hurry. Indeed, all the world's a wedding!--and in our ever-smaller world of this century we have elaborate caterers, fabulous photographers, the most gifted musicians—and we have neglected to inquire whether a wedding is taking place. The Groom is absent, and the *harei at mekudeshet li* and the *v'erastikh li le'olam* are nowhere heard. And if there is no God, no Torah, no mitzvot, then all our efficiency, all our wealth, all our achievements, all our activities, are like the macabre gyrations of an intoxicated guest who dances alone in a darkened hall where the wedding has been called off. That is what Torah means for us—not just “religion” in the customary sense, but that which binds all the rest of existence together into a meaningful whole, and makes all the rest of life worth living.

What holds true for all of life generally is especially relevant to Jews as a people and to Israel as a sovereign state. From the very beginning, as Saadia taught, we have been a nation only by virtue of the Torah; we were given a Torah before we were given a homeland. Unlike other nations, we have been elected to be more than a natural group. We have been given a supernatural vocation: that of the kingdom of priests and the holy nation. God is our *hatan*, we his *kallah*. If we remember that, then our nationhood and peoplehood, our long adventure through history and our struggle to return to our home, all are graced with abiding meaningfulness. But if there is no *li*, if Israel will ignore God and Torah, then our peoplehood is a fossil, our nation and all its apparatus is hollow, our history a bitter joke.

It is this teaching which is implicit in this morning's Sidra. God uses four synonyms in informing Moses that He will redeem our people from slavery in Egypt—and it is to commemorate these *arba leshonot shel geulah* that we drink, on Passover, the four cups of wine, the *arba kosot*. The first three refer to our physical and political liberations: *ve'hotzeti* (I shall take you out), *ve'hitzalti* (I shall save you), and *ve'gaalti* (I shall redeem you). The fourth and climactic

one is of a different nature. The Zohar (ad loc.) refers to it as *shabha de'kula*, as the greatest of all. That is: *ve'lakhti etkhem li le'am ve'hayiti lakhem le'Elokim*, I shall take you for Me as a people and I will be for you a God. One of the commentators (Keli Yakar) rightly points out that the word *lakhti* is often used in the Bible to mean not only taking in the usual sense, but in the marital sense, to “take” a wife—and notice too the word *li*! After saving you, bringing you out of Egypt, and redeeming you, says the Almighty, I will take you or marry you as my people! The Torah is our *ketubah*, and the mitzvot our acts of love and duty. That is why the Jerusalem Talmud applies to the fourth cup, the one equivalent to *ve'lakhti etkhem li*, the verse *kos yeshuot esa u-ve'shem Ha-Shem ekra*, I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the Lord—for the purpose of *yeshuah*, the purpose and goal and aim of freedom and independence is: to call upon God, to live the life of Torah. No wonder that it is this fourth cup, the one symbolizing the spiritual destiny of Israel, that occasions, at the Seder table, the reading of *Hallel ha-Gadol*, the greatest and most beautiful praise (see Ketav Sofer).

The Halakhah too supports this point, that of Israel's Torah loyalty as the purpose for which it was redeemed. It tells us that between the first three cups—tokens of the first three synonyms, the symbols of political emancipation—and the fourth—representing Israel's communion with God—one may not drink any wine, *shema yishtaker ve'yishan velo yigmor et ha-hallel*, he may become intoxicated, fall asleep, and thus forget to recite the Hallel. Indeed, it is possible to become so intoxicated with the trappings of statehood, with the mundane problems of preserving freedom and security and a stable economy, that we forget the Hallel, we completely lose sight of the fact that all this is preliminary to the main goal: the fourth cup, the Hallel, the *ve'lakhti etkhem li*, the marriage of Israel's destiny to God's Torah. And when that is forgotten, then all the rest is without meaning. For *alma... ke'hilula dami*, all the world's a wedding; and Israel certainly is.

That is why Orthodox Jews and even not-so-Orthodox Jews are engaged in a wide attempt to give our beloved State of Israel the stamp of authentic Jewish character. Our endeavor is not merely to obtain “rights” for observant Jews—for such rights are not violated if there will be, for instance, only one truly kosher dining room aboard the liner Shalom. Certainly we Orthodox Jews have more opportunity to observe our Torah in Israel than anywhere

else in the world. Nor do we want to dictate to others how to live. That is an absurd and cruel charge; were it true we would insist on legislating kosher kitchens and Sabbath observance in every citizen's private home. We would be the first to oppose that. What we do want is to keep the collective character of the State of Israel Jewish. We want to see Israel's soul emerge as well as its body prosper. We want to offer it the fourth cup. We want to make sure that its tremendous and historic achievements on the battlefield and in immigration, in diplomacy and in finances, in industry and in science, are not disjointed, incoherent, and meaningless. We want to make sure that the feasting and the dancing culminate in the *li*, the consecration of our people to its prophetic mission, its spiritual destiny. A remnant of our people experienced the *ve'hitzalti*. We were saved from the tyrant's gas ovens. Then the D.P.s lived through *ve'hotzeti* — they were taken out of the accursed, bloody continent to the blessed Land of Promise. There we fought a bitter war, in 1948, and we were granted *ve'gaalti*, redemption from the aggressor's evil designs. Let us not stop now, only a few steps before the huppah. Now is the time for *ve'lakhahti*, for the betrothal of Israel as a whole to the Almighty. If we succeed in granting Israel this authentic Jewish spiritual quality, then the whole enterprise called the State of Israel will be not a short-lived episode in the long story of the Jewish

people (and there were other such before it), but a great and brilliant beginning of the *geulah shelemah*.

In every aspect of life let us remember that lesson—that all the world's a wedding, that our activities and achievements are meaningful and enduring only if they are geared to an ultimate purpose, that of dedication to Torah, the betrothal of God and Israel.

If we will do that, then all life will assume perspective and proper proportion. And then the result will be —like that of a wedding—the attainment of true *simhah* or joy. For happiness can never be found by looking for it or brooding over it. It is an elusive prey. It simply does not exist by itself as a separate entity. George Bernard Shaw once said that “the secret of being miserable is to have leisure to bother about whether you are happy or not.” Happiness is the result of a full and meaningful and purposeful life. When all of life is harmonious, then, like a marriage which is harmonious, there will be *simhah*. Where there is the *li*, the consecration of man as the purpose of life, there all else assumes dignity, peace—and joy.

Hatof ve'ekhol, hatof ve'ishti, let us eat and drink and in every way enjoy the bounty of God's goodness to us—but let us never forget that *alma... ke'hilula dami*, that all the world's a wedding.

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Testing

Rabbi Joshua (*The Hoffer*) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha begins the recording of the ten plagues that were brought upon the Egyptians as a result of Pharaoh's refusal to release the Israelites from bondage. We have mentioned in the past the kabbalistic notion that these plagues corresponded to the ten statements with which God created the universe, and explained it based on the theory that the entire process of the exodus from Egypt constituted a kind of recreation of the universe (see *Netvort to parshas Bo, 5760*, available at Torahheights.com). There is another notion, mentioned in the *Midrash Rabbah to parshas Bo (15:27)*, that the ten plagues corresponded to the ten tests that Avrohom withstood. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, author of the popular commentary *Keli Yakar*, cites this midrash, in brief, in a lesser-known work that he authored on the Torah, *Sifsei Da'as*, at the end of parshas *Vaeira*. He then endeavors to explain the exact correspondence, plague by

plague. According to his reckoning, however, the plagues seemed to have been tests imposed upon the Egyptians, just as the tests were challenges to Avrohom, with the difference being that while Avrohom passed the tests, the Egyptians did not. This explanation appears to be a bit strange, because why would there be need to test the Egyptians in the same manner that Avrohom was tested?

A look at the text of the midrash seems to reveal that it explains the ten plagues as being directed against Pharaoh in correspondence to the ten trials of Avrohom as a punishment. God, notes the midrash, referred to Israel as His firstborn (*Shemos 4:22*). This appellation came as a result of the love God had for the Jewish people as a result of the ten tests that Avrohom underwent and withstood. Since Pharaoh did not recognize how beloved they were, he was afflicted by ten plagues to correspond with the ten tests of Avrohom through which they attained their beloved

status. Rabbi Yitzchak Ze'ev Yadler, in his commentary to the Midrash Rabbah, Tiferes Zion, however, does not see this correspondence as being indicative of a punishment. Rather, he writes, that just as Avrohom sanctified God's name through the ten tests that he endured, so too did God sanctify the Jewish people through the wonders of the ten plaques, because through them they became His people, by recognizing His control over the universe. Based on our explanation, in last week's Netvort, of the midrash, cited by Rashi, concerning the donkey used by both Moshe and Avrohom, I believe that we can understand the correspondence of the plagues to the trials of Avrohom as being a message to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, as well as to the Jews.

The midrash, as we mentioned last week, says that the donkey upon which Moshe saddled his wife and children to take them with him to Egypt was the same donkey that was used by Avrohom at the akeida, and that will be used by the moshiach when he comes to bring the final redemption.

Moshe Rabbeinu's Equal

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jan 4, 2019)

At the end of the second aliya of this week's Parsha, it says *Hu Aharon u-Moshe asher omar Hashem Jahem hotzi'u es Bnei Yisroel mei-Eretz Mitzrayim al tzivosam*. He is Aharon and Moshe whom Hashem told to take Bnei Yisroel from Mitzrayim—according to their hosts. However, most psukim like this, list Moshe first. So, what is the reason for Aharon receiving a superior position in this pasuk? Some of the pashtanim here, like Chizkuni and Rabeinu Bachya, give an austere explanation. They say: Well. Since it's in the context of genealogy, Torah lists them in the order of birth—and Aharon was born first. However, the rest of the Torah usually mentions people in the order of chashivus. And since Moshe is clearly more chashuv, he usually comes first. But many of the meforshim follow Rashi, who quotes a Medrash that famously says: *Yesh mekomos she-makdim Aharon le-Moshe, ve-yesh mekomos she-makdim Moshe le-Aharon—lomar lach she-shkulim ke-echad*. Sometimes Torah mentions Aharon first, and sometimes Moshe. Not the same number of times, but nonetheless, that shows that they are both equal. And some of the Aharonim had trouble understanding this Rashi. What does it mean that they are *shakul*? *Lo kam*

We explained, based on Rav Kook, that one of the messages of the akeidah was that it is possible to infuse enthusiasm into the worship of God, just as idol worshippers had done in their service. This was what Moshe intended to teach the Jewish people, as well. The akeidah was, according to most commentators to Avos, the final test of Avrohom, and thus constituted the apex of his religious attainment. Therefore, when the midrash in parshas Bo tells us that the ten plagues corresponded to the ten tests of Avrohom, it can be explained, on one level, as meaning that the sum message of the akeidah was also delivered by the plagues, as Rabbi Yadler explains in a different way. This message, then, had meaning for both the Jewish people and for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In fact, another midrash, cited by Rashi, teaches that the plagues destroyed the idols of Egypt. The Egyptians, who were rampant idolaters, needed, then, to learn the lesson of the akeidah as well, and perhaps this was one of the reasons why the plagues were brought in correspondence to the ten trials of Avrohom.

be-Yisroel ke-Moshe od! No one is comparable to Moshe Rabeinu. He was unique. Maybe Aharon was equal to others, but Moshe was in a league of his own. The Torah itself ends with *lo kam be-Yisroel ke-Moshe od*. And Hashem himself told Aharon and Miryam—you are not like Moshe; and *lo chein avdi Moshe, be-chol beisi ne'eman hu*. So, in what way are Moshe and Aharon *shkulim*, if clearly, Moshe is on a level above everyone else?

So, Chasam Sofer says a very insightful pshat. In terms of objective Torah knowledge, in terms of nevius, in terms of closeness to Hashem, and in terms of objective ruchanius, Moshe clearly was above everyone else. No one could be equal to Moshe. But the Gemora in Sanhedrin says that Moshe said *yikov ha-din es ha-har*. There is an objective Torah truth, and he stuck with it. While Aharon was *ohev shalom* and *rodef shalom*; *ohev briyos u-mekarvan la-Torah*. Aharon didn't know as much Torah as Moshe—no one ever could. But his greatness was not only about Torah knowledge. Aharon went to people. He knew how to mekarev them, how to talk nicely to them, and how to bring Torah to them. And he did that much better than Moshe. So, each one had *ma'alos* that the other one did not

have. And Chasam Sofer says that's exactly the chidush of this pasuk, the chidush of this Medrash and Rashi—that *shkulim heim*. Although on some level, we might say that the prototypical Rosh Yeshiva, who just sits and learns and never goes out of his *arba amos*, and knows Torah better than anyone else, is greater (and in a certain respect he is). But in another respect, someone who goes out to bring Torah to the people, knows how to influence them, and knows how to change their lives, is great in his way. And therefore, *shkulim heim*. In their unique way, each is great—and we can't say that one is greater than the other. And then, what comes out of this Medrash, according to Chasam Sofer, is that there are two equally important goals that Rabanim, and Bnei Torah (the frum people), should pursue. They must get Torah knowledge and closeness to Hashem—and at the same time, they should bring other people closer to Torah and service of Hashem. Both are equally important—having an objective Torah knowledge and bringing people closer to Hashem—as well as enhancing kvod Shomayim and revealing Hashem's presence in this world.

Rav Moshe Feinstein has a different, more general, *pshat*. He says that it's not just about Moshe or just about Aharon. Clearly, Moshe was greater than Aharon. And yet, Moshe and Aharon were equal. But in what way? Moshe and his accomplishments were more eminent than those of Aharon. In every way you measure, Moshe was greater. However, we don't judge people by how great they are. We don't judge people by how much they accomplish. Both

Moshe and Aharon were necessary for Yetzias Mitzrayim. Moshe had a tafkid in Hashem's plan in the world, and Aharon had a tafkid in Hashem's plan for the world. Moshe did his best to perform the tafkid that Hashem wanted him to do, and Aharon did his best to fulfill the tafkid that Hashem wanted him to do. Rav Moshe develops Mussar that is relevant to everyone here. He says: It doesn't matter that Moshe was the greatest person who ever lived and that Aharon wasn't. And it doesn't even matter if we compared Moshe to a stam guy who fulfilled his tafkid in life. If you are doing a tafkid that Hashem sent you to do. Hashem put you in the world and gave you a role. If you play your role—whether it's less *chashuv* or more *chashuv*, whether you are smart or not as smart, whether you are more famous or less famous, whether or not you make it into the history books—you are equal to Moshe Rabeinu. Hashem did not put us into this world to ask us how great we can be—whether you are Moshe Rabeinu or a Rosh Yeshiva, a *Gadol ha-dor*, or someone who saves the world. Hashem only asks if you are doing the tafkid that Hashem sent you here to do. And anyone who fulfills his tafkid properly is equal to Moshe Rabeinu. Because ultimately, Moshe Rabeinu's greatest accolade was the epithet of *Ish ha-Elokim* when he passed away. He was called an *Eved Hashem*. And everyone who fulfills their tafkid is equal to Moshe Rabeinu. *Be'ezras Hashem*, we should all be *zoche* to fulfill our tafkid in life—however great or small it may be. And then, even if we are much, much smaller than Moshe Rabeinu, we would be considered his equals.

Short Breath and Shuttered Imaginations

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Moshe's first attempt to liberate the Jews didn't fare well. He was mocked by Pharo and scorned by his own people, shocked by their increased workload. Recovering from this debacle, Moshe unveils a bold new message. He doesn't merely speak about freedom in general, but broadcasts four specific "divine promises" – to liberate, to rescue, to redeem and to adopt the Jews as a chosen nation. These four "announcements" – known as the "four terms of redemption" or "*arba leshonot geula*" are designed to sway public enthusiasm and muster support for Moshe's revolution.

Unfortunately, the Jewish people are unmoved. They completely disregard Moshe's assurances. Too many

years of persecution and too many years of hopelessness had shuttered their imaginations and shattered their trust. Long-term prospects of nationhood or of life in Israel are too remote for them to envision. As the Torah describes, they were short of breath (*kotzer ruach*) and were burdened by crushing slavery (*avodah kashah*). For too many years, these slaves operated in "survivor mode" – putting one foot ahead of the other, merely to make it through the day. They lacked the imaginative sweep to look beyond the squalor of slavery to a more radiant future. Their vision was sealed.

Sadly, their "voice" is also muted. Moshe had hoped to rally the Jews as partners in redemption. Unfortunately, as

they can barely “breathe”, they can’t be expected to invest in grandiose visions of “tomorrow”. As the makkot unfold, the Jews are completely passive, waiting on the sidelines, as Hashem dismantles Egyptian culture and sacks Egyptian pride. The slaves only “find their voice” in the days leading up to the actual liberation, hurriedly preparing for the Pesach evening ceremonies. Only when redemption is immediately at hand do they awaken. Long-term vision has been crushed by slavery. It will take some time to rebuild.

What has happened to our long-term vision in the modern world? We may not face actual bondage, but our long-term vision has been similarly suppressed. The Pharo which enslaves us is a faceless tyrant- the culture of busyness. We live in ever-busy society of productivity, output and efficiency. We suffer from an ironic “paradox”: we had assumed that industrialization and technology would liberate us from the heavy toll of manual labor and improve our quality of life. Has this really occurred?

As difficult as life was under the weight of manual labor, natural regulators limited our work. Nighttime brought darkness and the cessation of industry. In the modern world, electricity has converted nighttime into day, stretching our work beyond the daytime hours. Manual labor was always intrinsically restricted: at a certain stage our bodies “gave out”, pausing human labor to allow for physical recovery. Our work is less physical, and there are no “natural limits” to how long we can work or how productive we can be. It seems as if we can always be a bit more productive if we just work a little harder or a little longer.

Our work habits have changed and so has our work space. In the past, our “spaces” more easily divided into personal and professional realms. Walking out of the “office” transitioned us into a personal space, free from professional duties. Communication technology has blurred those lines, merging our homes and our offices into one large workspace. Who knows where this is heading under the shifting sands of the pandemic? Covid-19 has “allowed” us to work remotely from home, providing a reprieve from painful commutes and nonstop business travel. In the long run will this shift actually increase our workload? When the dust settles, will working from home merely increase our professional commitments?

We aren’t enslaved to an Egyptian murderer, but in our world of busyness, our long-term vision has also been trimmed. We too, are short of breath and too busy to ponder long-term issues.

Regrettably, our busy world doesn’t only blind us to long-term vision. Busyness also impedes depth and appreciation of complexity. In-depth analysis of ideas requires time to ponder and to uncover multi-layered meanings. Complexity and nuanced thinking demand time, inner tranquility and mental energy. We lack all three, are becoming intellectually lazy, and inhabit a world which is becoming more and more shallow. When was the last time you quietly pondered one particular idea for more than 15 minutes? The internet has proliferated information but has slashed wisdom. In our world, action has replaced thinking- at the great cost of depth.

Our busy world isn’t only shallow but is also “labeled”. We are too busy to carefully assess people to ascertain their true character. We meet too many people to properly appraise them. Stereotypes offer us quick and easy labels which allow us to tag people and rapidly “fill in the blanks” on who they “really are”. These tags- color, gender, political affiliation, race, religion, and dress- provide easy “cutouts” of people. We live in a world of one-dimensional caricatures. Our world is too busy for individuals.

Not surprisingly, our busyness has also become addictive. At some point, society began to assign self-worth to those who appear “too busy for life”. Society convinces us that if we are busy, we must be productive and, if productive, we must be important. Busyness has become a drug which makes us feel better about ourselves. Success is metered in how packed our schedule is and how little time we have available for others. This illusion of success masks real identity and real meaning, creating a never ending vicious cycle of busyness. We often “busy” ourselves because we are fleeing from the struggle for “meaning”; It is much easier to fill our calendars than to look in the mirror. Being busy, however, doesn’t provide true meaning and, after a while, we no longer find it satisfying. Busyness becomes more of an escape than a reality.

Faceless tyrants are always more dangerous than actual oppressors. Powerful socio-economic forces are harder to detect, and to oppose than ruthless aggressors. Our grandparents in Egypt were incapable of long-term vision because of the stones they lifted and the lashes they absorbed. We don’t lift stones but carry heavy calendars. We don’t build pyramids but manufacture hectic schedules. It is easier to unshackle wrists than to free imaginations. We still inhabit Egypt.

Choice and Change: The Pharaoh Conundrum

Rabbi Josh Blass

There are certain topics in Jewish thought that have had an extended shelf life. Generation after generation going back for some 2,000 years pick up the mantle of debate from their predecessors and continue to question and prod in order to come to some meaningful resolution. In a way it's like a giant unending relay race in which the Tenaim pass along the baton to the Amoraim who relay it to the Geonim, Rishonim and Acharonim and then on to us. The notion is at once awe inspiring while also quite humbling.

The specific issue in question are the parameters of man's free choice especially as it relates to Pharaoh seemingly having free choice removed from him. We are all familiar with the pesukim from which this issue stems - ואני אקשה את לב פרעה (שמות זג) - *And I will harden Pharaoh's heart*, כי אני הכבדתי את לב *For I have hardened his heart*, ויחזק ה' את לב פרעה - *And G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart* (11:1) - all paint the picture of HKB'H stripping this leader of his choice.

The philosophical implications of this hardening are of course enormous. This is how the Midrash records the difficulty:

פי אני הכבדתי את לבו - אמר רבי יוחנן מכאן פתחון פה למינין לומר לא היתה ממנו שייעשה תשובה

For I have hardened his heart - Rabbi Yochanan said: Does this not provide heretics with an opportunity to open their mouths to say that he had no means of repenting. (Shemos Rabbah 13:3)

As mentioned, this conundrum of G-d stripping Pharaoh of free-choice and then punishing him for his inevitable decisions has been a source of energetic debate for the last millennia.

While almost all of the Rishonim address this in one way or another I would like to focus on the position of the Rambam. Maimonides speaks at length about the absolute prerequisite of man's freedom of choice and that the very notions of repentance and reward and punishment rests on the indisputable and unassailable presence of חפשיית. The language of the Rambam is striking:

וְדָבָר זֶה עָקֵר גָּדוֹל הוּא וְהוּא עֲמוּד הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמְצָנָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ל טו) "רָאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים". וְכַתִּיב (דברים יא כו) "רָאָה אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם". כְּלוּמַר שֶׁהָרְשׁוּת בְּיַדְכֶם. וְכָל שֶׁיִּחַפֵּץ הָאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת מִמַּעֲשֵׂה בְּנֵי הָאָדָם עוֹשֶׂה בֵּין טוֹבִים בֵּין רָעִים

And, this matter is a great and component part, the very pillar of the Torah and its precepts, even as it is said: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil" (Deut. 30.15), and it is, moreover, written: "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and curse" (Ibid. 11.26). This is as if saying, the power is in your hand, and whatever human activity man may be inclined to carry on he has a free will to elect either good or evil. (Hilchos Teshuva 5:3)

The language of the Rambam in saying that free choice a 'foundation' of the Torah is so remarkable that there are those who have asked why it is not listed among his thirteen principles of faith. The Rambam continues in this vein throughout the entire fifth chapter of hilchos teshuva and into the sixth chapter at which juncture the plot begins to thicken. The Rambam had already said that free choice is absolutely sacrosanct but now he seems to sing a slightly different tune. He writes that:

וְאִפְשָׁר שְׂיִחְטָא אָדָם חֲטָא גָּדוֹל אוֹ חֲטָאִים רַבִּים עַד שְׂיִתֵּן הַדִּין לְפָנָי דִּין הָאֵמֶת שְׂיִהְיָה הַפְּרָעוֹן מִזֶּה הַחֲטָא עַל חֲטָאִים אֵלּוּ שֶׁעָשָׂה בְּרִצּוֹנוֹ וּמִדַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁמוֹנְעִין מִמֶּנּוּ הַתְּשׁוּבָה וְאִין מְנִיחִין לוֹ רְשׁוּת לְשׁוּבַת מְרָשְׁעוֹ כְּדִי שְׂיִמּוֹת וְיֵאבֵד בְּחֲטָאוֹ שֶׁעָשָׂה. כְּלוּמַר חֲטָאוֹ בְּרִצּוֹנֵם וְהָרְבוּ לְפָשַׁע עַד שֶׁנִּתְחַבְּרוּ לְמִנְעַ מִקוֹן הַתְּשׁוּבָה שֶׁהִיא הַמְּרָפָא. לְפִיכָךְ כְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה (שְׁמוֹת ד כֵּא) "וְאִנִּי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת לֵב פְּרָעָה". לְפִי שֶׁחֲטָא מִעֲצָמוֹ תְּחִלָּה וְהָרַע לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הַגֵּרִים בְּאַרְצוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שְׁמוֹת א י) "הִבֵּה נִתְחַכְמָה לוֹ". נָתַן הַדִּין לְמִנְעַ הַתְּשׁוּבָה מִמֶּנּוּ עַד שֶׁנִּפְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ

The choice to repent, claims the Rambam, is always presents itself until it doesn't. There are those people who have consciously, brazenly, and unrepentantly thrown off the yoke of heaven until מְנִיחִין לוֹ וְאִין מְנִיחִין לוֹ שֶׁמוֹנְעִין מִמֶּנּוּ הַתְּשׁוּבָה וְאִין מְנִיחִין לוֹ רְשׁוּת לְשׁוּבַת מְרָשְׁעוֹ - teshuva is withheld from that person so that he ultimately dies in this state of sin. פרעה says the Rambam is an example of such a person.

The problem with this position of the Rambam is threefold. The first is that the Rambam himself lists the twenty-four different types of people who lose their share in the world to come. At the end of that list the Rambam writes that:

בְּמֵה דְּבָרִים אֲמוּרִים שֶׁכָּל אֶחָד מֵאֵלּוּ אִין לוֹ חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא כְּשִׁמְתָּ בְּלֹא תְּשׁוּבָה אֲבָל אִם שָׁב מְרָשְׁעוֹ וּמַתּוּ וְהוּא בַּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה הָרִי זֶה מִבְּנֵי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא שְׂאִין לָךְ דְּבַר שְׁעוּמִד בְּפָנֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה. אֲפֹלוּ כְּפָר בַּעֲקָרָה

In other words that even though there are certain people for whom olam habbah should be taken away from, if they

choose to do teshuva, they still merit the world to come. The Rambam is clearly stating that teshuva is not held back from even the worst of sinners.

Secondly, the Rishonim point out that individuals such as Achav and Menashe eventually did teshuva. It is hard to make an argument that these two were qualitatively any better than Pharaoh, yet the gates of teshuva were opened for them but not for him. Why should that be the case?

Lastly, I have always been bothered by what seems to be an internal weakness in the position of the Rambam. On the one hand free choice is established as an 'amud' - an unshakeable foundation of our belief system. Then in the very next breath, the Rambam says that this is only true for certain people, but if you are truly wicked then HKB'H takes away that right to choose. Seemingly the absolute sine quo non of free choice should preclude its removal.

The totality of these questions led the Abarbanel to say about this position of the Rambam that his position was
והוא אצלי זר וקשה מאד.

(This position) is strange and foreign to me.

How do we resolve the Rambam? How could we claim that teshuva is always an option, witness the repentance of the worst scoundrels known to man, claim that free choice is immutable and then also state that for certain people G-d has removed that choice??

A number of years ago I thought of the following approach in the Rambam and was gratified to see that Nehama Leibowitz Z'L seems to have said the same.

These pages are not the place to get into a lengthy discussion about free choice but both in the works of Jewish thinkers and in the pages of philosophy the question has been posed as to how truly free a human being really is. Is man's behavior completely determined by him or are their forces of predeterminism that dictate most of man's behavior? Where one comes from, their upbringing, personality, the circumstances and expectations of his/her life and all of one's past choices all conspire to, if not eliminate free choice, severely limit its scope. Famously, Rav Dessler compares this reality to the image of a football field in which the only areas of choice, and hence the only areas in which a person receives reward and punishment are the few yards in front of him. What is both behind the person or too far in the distance is not subject to man's free choice - free choice is limited to a relatively small swath of land in the individual's personal landscape.

When the Torah says that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart

what is being conveyed is that due to the past decisions that Pharaoh had made, due to him becoming entrenched in a certain position, due to his drawing lines in the sand and needing to save face - due to all of that he no longer really had genuine free choice as to whether he should release Am Yisroel. His own behavior eliminated any chance for allowing a truly thoughtful and unimpeded decision in an area that had become so personal.

The Rambam himself seems to say as much. He writes:

וְכֹן זֶה שֶׁאָמַר (תהילים נא יד) "וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִסְמְכֵנִי" כְּלוּמַר תִּנְיִחַ רוּחִי לַעֲשׂוֹת חֶפְצִי וְאֵל יִגְרַמוּ לִי חֲטָאֵי לְמַנְעֵנִי מִתְּשׁוּבָה אֶלָּא תִהְיֶה הַרְשׁוּת בְּיָדֵי עַד שֶׁאֶחְזֹר וְאָבִין וְאֲדַע דְּרַךְ הָאֱמֶת.

"Allow my spirit to uphold me". That is allow my spirit to do your will and do not allow my sins to turn me away and prevent me from doing teshuva. Rather, let the initiative to always remain with me, for me to be able to come back and understand and know the oath of truth ...

A careful reading of the Rambam and specifically the words וְאֵל יִגְרַמוּ לִי חֲטָאֵי לְמַנְעֵנִי מִתְּשׁוּבָה indicates that at stake is not that HKB'H has created a blockade to teshuva but a recognition that it is man in fact who through their choices have prevented the opportunities for growth and for return.

If this understanding of the Rambam is correct how would we correlate this man centered hardening with the pesukim that indicate that it was G-d who was the מקשה?

Nehama Leibowitz writes the following:

'God did not force Pharaoh to choose evil. It was Pharaoh's own doing. Once he persisted in his course of action it became more and more irresistible. God had built this response, as it were, into man's make-up. The more he sins, the more his sins act as a barrier between him and repentance.'

It wasn't G-d who hardened Pharaoh's heart per se. he simply placed into man's nature that one's choices ultimately makes free choice in future decisions near impossible. While, in all honesty, this may not be the simple peshat in the pesukim, on a conceptual level I believe the point is indisputable - man is the agent for limiting his own bechirah. Furthermore, this answer would resolve the questions that the Abarbanel and others had on the Rambam.

This answer raises an enormously daunting question. Namely, if man's bechirah is limited by the decades of decisions that he/she made previously. If, like Pharaoh, a human has become entrenched in the limitations of his or her own life. If so much of one's life is determined by all

of the forces that have led him to this moment including all of his previous choices, then is it truly possible for man to change? Is change possible if man is pitted against the avalanche of his entire life up until this point in time? How much freedom do we have to change course? This is a huge and daunting question.

The great social psychologist Erik Erikson, who was knowledgeable in both secular and Torah sources developed a theory that there are 8 stages of psychosocial development. Each stage has a core conflict that is at the center of that time period and the successful navigation of each conflict builds ego and psychological strength. The seventh stage which lasts roughly between the ages of 40 and 65 is defined by the conflict between Generativity versus Stagnation which essentially is the question of whether we are thriving and contributing or somewhat stagnant and stuck? To put this conflict in the light of our discussion in the Rambam, the question is does one feel that fundamentally they are thriving or does one feel an inability to change and move beyond the limitations that previous choices have created?

The answer is of course that man can always change.

Spiritual Fulfillment

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In the beginning of this week's parsha, Parshas Va'era, Hashem speaks to Moshe and says to him: I am Hashem... and I have also heard the groans of the Children of Israel that Mitzrayim is enslaving them and I remembered my covenant; Therefore say to the Children of Israel: I am Hashem, והוצאתי אתכם ממצרים, and I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; and I shall rescue you from their service; and I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgements; ולקחתי אתכם לי לעם, and I shall take you to Me for a people and I shall be a G-d to you... את. והבאתי אתכם אל הארץ אשר נשאתי את. and I shall bring you to the land about which I have raised My hand to give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and I shall give it to you as a heritage, I am Hashem (Shemos 6:2, 5-8).

With these wonderful words and Divine promise - the arbah lashonos geula, the four terms of redemption, along with the fifth promise of Eretz Yisrael, for which we have four cups of wine at the Pesach Seder and the fifth cup

The question is how. What are the mechanics of change? What can a person reasonably expect to change about their lives and what is or should be beyond their purview and scope. How is meaningful and lasting change created? The important thing is to remember that at the end of the day what the Rambam wrote is as true now as it was nine hundred years ago

רשות לכל אדם נתונה. אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו. ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו.

Every man was endowed with a free will; if he desires to bend himself toward the good path and to be just it is within the power of his hand to reach out for it, and if he desires to bend himself to a bad path and to be wicked it is within the power of his hand to reach out for it.

Do we sometimes feel like Pharaoh (well maybe not quite like Pharaoh) backed into a corner by our own decisions? Absolutely. With that said thoughtful, sensitive, and passionate man who understands the impact of his behavior on himself and on others, who realizes that ultimate happiness lies in a G-d centered life can always find the will and the means to ולהבין ולידע דרך האמת.

of Eliyahu ha'Navi zachur la'tov - Moshe speaks to the Children of Israel. Instead of rejoicing and giving thanks for this wonderful news of a hopeful and glorious future, the pasuk tells us: וידבר משה בן אל בני ישראל ולא שמעו אל, - *And thus Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel, and they did not listen to Moshe, because of shortness of spirit and hard work (v.9).* On this pasuk, Rashi teaches:

ולא שמעו אל משה. לא קבלו תנחומין

And they did not listen to Moshe: They did not accept consolation [from Moshe's message of the impending redemption]

מקצר רוח. כל מי שהוא מצר, רוחו ונשימתו קצרה, ואינו יכול להאריך בנשימתו

And from shortness of spirit - Anyone who is in travail is short of spirit and breath, and he is unable to breath deeply.

The Ohr Ha'Chaim Ha'kadosh (1696, Morocco - 1743, Jerusalem), however, explains differently. Why could they not listen to Moshe, and what was the source of their shortness of spirit?

מקצר רוח. אולי כי לצד שלא היו בני תורה לא שמעו, ולזה יקרא
קוצר רוח כי התורה מרחבת לבו של אדם

Perhaps because they were not bnei Torah (lit. 'sons of Torah'), they did not listen to Moshe, and that [deficiency in Torah] is called shortness of spirit, for the Torah expands the heart of a person [and lifts his spirits].

What a powerful comment of the Ohr Ha'Chaim!
When one is immersed in a life of Torah, the Torah learning and living gives a chiyus (life-giving force) that cannot be replicated with anything else. Furthermore, it gives that person the ability to face the vicissitudes of life with equanimity and strength.

Commenting on this pshat of the Ohr Ha'Chaim, Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein shlita teaches, "כי התורה מרחבת לבו של אדם, the expansion (broadening) of heart that occurs as a result of Torah study is a direct result of the happiness that results from spiritual fulfillment. When a person is happy, his heart expands. Happiness is the feeling of fulness, and this feeling gives a person peace of mind and serenity...

"When a person is happy and his heart expands, he feels that he lacks nothing, he is not jealous of anyone, and he bears no grudges or resentment toward anyone, for he has everything. This enables him to listen to others. However, people who suffer from 'shortness of breath,' are too despondent to listen to others, just like the Jews in Egypt who did not - and seemingly could not - heed Moshe's words."

Only one who is immersed in a life of Torah living, and learning, will be content and satisfied with all that life brings his way. "True and lasting satisfaction can never come from materialistic pursuits. The pursuit of physical pleasure leaves emptiness in its wake, and the more intense the pursuit, the more intense the resulting

emptiness. This is precisely what happens when a person chases materialism and attempts to satisfy his physical drives. Intense desire for material goods makes a person expend a great deal of energy, depleting his internal resources in order to fulfill his desire. This expenditure of energy needs to be restored. When the person achieves his desire, and the energy expended was greater than the resultant pleasure, there will be a feeling of emptiness. The person's resources will remain depleted, and the feeling of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment will fester...

"A person who has one hundred is not satisfied and wants two hundred (Koheles Rabba 3:1)... Gratification achieved through physical pleasure is only a mirage; from a distance, it seems to promise happiness and fulfillment, but when you reach it, the happiness disappears... The opposite is true when it comes to spirituality. The imagination cannot create vivid images of the delight one feels from spiritual pleasures, but the pleasures themselves are monumental... Only a person who has learned Torah for its own sake, can fathom the intense sweetness of spiritual achievement and fulfillment" (Aleinu L'Shabei'ach Shemos, p.118-120).

It is the Torah that gives one happiness, fulfillment, resilience and fortitude in each and every situation. In happy times, it is the Torah that enhances one's simcha. And in difficult times, it is the Torah that gives one the light and strength to persevere and find fulfillment, nonetheless.

As King David, the sweet singer of Israel, reminds us: תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נֶפֶשׁ עֲדוּת יְהוָה נֶאֱמָנָה מִחֻקֵּימַת פְּתִי - *The Torah of Hashem is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of Hashem is faithful, giving the simple one wisdom* (Tehillim 19:8).

To Feel and to Act

Rabbi Chaim Metzger

How did Bnei Yisrael react to the news that they would leave Egypt? One might assume that they simply heard the news and happily waltzed off into the desert after Moshe. Indeed, despite the fears and doubts Moshe expressed at the "Burning Bush" (Shemot 3) the elders and Bnei Yisrael immediately believed, bowing down to God. (4:31) But then Pharaoh refused to let them go, and increased their workload significantly to the point that the Jewish officers appointed to oversee

the slaves complained to Moshe for harming them, giving Pharaoh a sword with which to kill them. (5:21)

Moshe then questioned God, "Why have You done evil to this nation? Why have You sent me? Things are only getting worse and I have not saved Your nation." (5:2223)

Our parshah begins with Moshe relaying God's expanded message of hope and the future redemption to Bnei Yisrael, but they were unable to hear the message because of their lack of a chance to breathe from the hard

labour Pharaoh had forced upon them. (6:9) We don't hear another word from the Jews until Parshat Beshalach, when they complain to Moshe, "Are there not enough graves for us in Egypt that you took us out into the desert to kill us? Why did you take us out of Egypt?" (14:11) So how did the Jews react during the Ten Plagues? Did the Jews ever recover from their doubts?

While we don't see Israel's reactions, we do see several reactions on the Egyptian side.

First, we see Pharaoh – ever indecisive about whether he properly fears God and will free Bnei Yisrael, or doing everything he can to maintain control. He hardens his heart, refusing to face the facts which could change his worldview, the bethedging agnostic at his finest.

Next up are the Egyptian magicians and advisors to Pharaoh, who after being unable to duplicate the plague of lice admit that it is the 'finger' of God and that God is truly in control. (8:15)

By the time we reach the plague of hail we see the Egyptians divided into two groups: 1) those who fear the word of God and seek protection for their property (9:20) and 2) those who ignore the warning of God. (9:21)

Finally, we see Pharaoh's own servants turn to him before the impending plague of locusts, asking, "Until when do we have to be ensnared? Send them to serve Hashem, their God, or before you know it, all of Egypt will be destroyed." (10:7)

In truth, we can see a similar split among the Jews. Yehoshua and Yechezkel both described the Jews as worshipping idols in Egypt, to the end. (Yehoshua 24:14,

Yechezkel 20:38) On the other hand, the omission of any verbal opposition, and the biblical description of Jews cooperating with Moshe (Shemot 12:2728), suggests that the Jews did believe. Perhaps Bnei Yisrael was composed of many individual groups containing a wide range of reactions and perspectives. Some were certain of God's redemption, others vacillated due to doubts, and others were terrified of God and followed for fear of what could happen if they sinned.

But if that truly is the case, what made Bnei Yisrael worthy of being saved and becoming God's nation? What differentiated them from the Egyptians?

First, Bnei Yisrael are the descendants of ancestors who held a special connection to God, and with whom God made a covenant. (ibid. 6:3) Second, Bnei Yisrael had called out to God while they were slaves. (6:5) Third, God wished to send a message to the world with this Exodus. (Yechezkel 20:9) Lastly, despite the differing levels of belief amongst Bnei Yisrael, all of them joined together in the first Korban Pesach in Egypt. Each and every one slaughtered sheep representing Egypt's god (Shemot Rabbah 16:2), spread its blood on the doorposts of their homes, roasted it over a fire, and sat down to eat it on that very night, exactly as God had commanded them. (12:28)

We may not see a verbal reaction from the Jews from the beginning of Parshat Vaera until Parshat Beshalach, but the Jews, no matter their doubts, came together as one nation in service of God. This, despite all of the differences, is what defined Bnei Yisrael.

Cultivating Thanks Within Our Children

Rabbi Yosef Goldin

In this week's parsha, we begin the story of the 10 plagues that Hashem brings upon the Egyptians due to Pharaoh's refusal to let the Jewish people go free. The Torah relates that whereas for most of the plagues, Moshe was the one who initiated the start of the plague, for the first three plagues, his brother Aharon was actually the one who initiated the them. Rashi famously quotes the Midrash Shemos Rabbah that the reason Aharon initiated these plagues was because the river protected Moshe when he was placed there as a baby by his mother, and therefore it wasn't appropriate for him to strike the river to start the plagues of blood and frogs. In addition, the dirt

of the ground helped Moshe to bury the Egyptian whom he killed in last week's parsha, and therefore it wasn't appropriate for him to hit the ground in order to start the plague of lice. The implication seems to be that Moshe owed a sense of thanks, or Hakarat HaTov, to the river and the dirt, and therefore it wasn't fitting for him to be the one to smite them in order to bring about their respective plagues.

While at first glance, this seems like a nice idea- upon further reflection, there is an obvious question that arises from this Midrash. The river and dirt are both inanimate objects, who are neither bothered by a lack of thanks nor

appreciate any Hakarat HaTov that would be directed towards them. So why would Moshe be required to express thanks to objects that wouldn't notice?

The answer appears to be very simple- but also incredibly profound. Of course, Moshe's need to show thanks to the river and dirt was not for the benefit of those inanimate objects, as it didn't impact them in any way. Rather, Moshe's need to show thanks was for the benefit of Moshe himself- in order cultivate within him a sense of gratitude to anyone and anything that helped him throughout his life. After hearing about, and experiencing, the ways that the river and the dirt helped him, Moshe was meant to feel true appreciation for what occurred and gratitude towards all objects that were involved in helping him- to the extent that he simply couldn't get himself to do anything bad towards those objects. This ultimate goal of the Hakarat HaTov was not for giver, but ultimately for the receiver. In 2018, New York Times bestselling author A.J. Jacobs came up with a fascinating idea- he decided to go on a mission to thank every single person involved in producing his morning cup of coffee- from the workers at the coffee place to the construction workers who pave the road all the way to the farmers in South America who grew the coffee beans. In his resulting book *Thanks a Thousand*, he describes his journey, and according to his website, thereby "reveals secrets about how gratitude can make us all happier, more generous, and more connected." When asked why he began this journey, he explained that he wasn't doing it so that all those people could be thanked- while they appreciated the thanks in the moment, it didn't really have any lasting effect on them. Rather, he did it for himself. He realized that in life, there are so many things that happen that we should be thankful for, but we don't pay attention to them, as we instead focus on the parts of our day that are more challenging. By going on this journey, he began to realize all the various people that are involved in even the simplest aspects of his day- and all the things that have to go right in order for these things to happen. By focusing on this, it made him a much happier person. Jacobs learned this crucial lesson that Chazal already taught us generations ago.

The concept of Hodaah, of having gratitude and giving thanks, is part and parcel of who we are as Jews. As a nation we are called "Yehudim", named after Yaakov's son Yehuda, who was named such by Leah because "now I want to thank Hashem". There is a common idea in Judaism that a

person's name is an expression of their essence- as such, the fact that we are called Yehudim means part of our essence is to be someone who is grateful, who recognizes and expresses thanks for all that is done for him. As parents, one of our major responsibilities is to raise and educate our children, the next generation, with this overarching sense of hoda'ah.

On one level, as a community we are generally good in this regard. Our communities and schools often educate us from a young age to say "thank you" when someone gives us something or does something for us. I still remember a song that I learned in 2nd grade in YNJ that was about saying thank you- the chorus ending with the line "Everything that is done for us, even thanking the driver on the bus". We make sure that our kids say thank you to bus drivers, waiter- in sum, we make sure to educate our kids to be polite.

On the other hand, while getting our children to be polite and say thank you is certainly important, it is only half the job. We need to make sure that the "thank you" that our kids say is actually an expression of something – and not simply a half-hearted phrase that is said by rote. When we focus on our kids simply saying the words, we are focusing on the correct words being said to the giver, the person who gave them. However, as we have demonstrated, the real goal of Hoda'ah is the impact it has on the receiver, on the person who expresses the thanks. The ultimate goal is not simply to raise children that are polite- but to cultivate within our children a deep sense of gratitude for the things that are done for them, and the importance of recognizing and expressing those thanks. We need to help our children pay attention to the things that happen around them, and the work that is involved in all that is given to them, to be appreciative of it all, and to express that appreciation. Not simply because it is polite, but because by doing so they are tapping into their essence as Jews, and ultimately, it will make them happier people as well.

As a final point- this idea has important religious implications as well. By cultivating this sense of gratitude within our children and encouraging them to recognize in their daily lives the things that are done for them, we also open up a path for our children to develop a deeper connection to Hashem. As Hashem is the source of so much goodness within their lives- the more aware and sensitive they are to all that they receive, the greater

awareness they will have of all that Hashem does for them as well.

How do we develop and cultivate this awareness within our children? As with most other things, the best way to do so is by living this middah ourselves and modeling it for our children. The more that we work on ourselves, and strive to recognize the gifts that we receive from G-d and others in our daily lives, the more our children will learn this and hopefully develop the same sensitivities as well.

Rav Hutner, in his *Sefer Pachad Yitzchak* on Channukah, relays a beautiful idea- he points out that the Hebrew word for “thanks”, the word “hoda’ah”, actually has another meaning as well- “to admit”. Rav Hutner points out that this isn’t by chance- that there is a deep relationship between these two meanings. When a person says thank you to his friend, what he is really doing is admitting to his

friend he was lacking something, and that his friend was able to fill that void. As such, all forms of “thank you” really include within them an “admission” that we were lacking something, and we are thankful for that person for filling that lack.

Perhaps this is why it is hard for some people to say thank you- because they have trouble admitting that they are lacking or missing something- they think they have everything and don’t need help from anyone. But the beauty of cultivating thanks, within ourselves and our children, is that once we realize that we do depend on others for our existence and our life- be it Hashem or the people around us- then we can grow a greater appreciation and indebtedness to them, and become happier people along the way. Wishing everyone a Shabbat Shalom!!

Can We Question G-d and Get Away with It?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week’s parasha, parashat Va’eira, opens with G-d’s response to Moses’ complaint that things have only gotten worse for the People of Israel in Egypt since his (Moses’) intervention at G-d’s behest. The Al-mighty replies by assuring Moses that the redemption will come very soon.

Parashat Va’eira opens with the words, Exodus 6:2: *וַיֹּדְבֵר אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, אֲנִי הֵשֵׁם. And G-d spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the L-rd.”* Rashi says that G-d rebuked Moses for questioning His actions as stated in Exodus 5:22: *וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲדֹנָי, לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה, לָמָּה זֶה שָׁלַחְתָּנִי פָּרָאֹה לְדַבֵּר בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה, וְעָשִׂיתָ לְעַם הַזֶּה רָעָה, וְלֹא שָׁלַחְתָּנִי פָּרָאֹה לְדַבֵּר בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה, וְעָשִׂיתָ לְעַם הַזֶּה רָעָה. And Moses said: “My L-rd, why have You done evil to this people and why have You sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he did evil to this people. You did not rescue Your people.”*

The Talmud, in tractate Sanhedrin 111a, elaborates on the details of G-d’s reproof of Moses. The Talmud quotes G-d as saying to Moses: “Alas for those who are gone and are no more to be found. For how many times did I reveal Myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by the name of *קַל שְׂדַי* —Kayl Shadai, and they did not question My character nor say to Me, ‘What is Your name?’” The Talmud then provides an example: “I [G-d] said to Abraham, Genesis 13:17, ‘Arise and walk through the land in the length and breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee.’ Yet when he [Abraham] sought a place to bury Sarah he did not find

one, but had to purchase it for 400 silver shekels. And still, he did not question my character!” The Talmud relates that both Isaac and Jacob were similarly tested, yet they too did not question G-d. “And you, Moses,” the Talmud continues, “You say unto Me, ‘Neither have You delivered Your people at all!’ Therefore, you shall now see what I will do to Pharaoh. You will behold the war against Pharaoh, but not the war against the 31 kings. You will never enter the land of Israel for questioning My character.”

The Chassidic commentators on the Bible always have difficulty whenever G-d questions the sincerity of the Jewish People, or reprovcs them. The great Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who was known as the Ohev Yisrael, personified unquestioned love of Israel. He would always perform theological acrobatics in order to find a justification for anything negative uttered about a Jew or the Jewish nation. When once asked to explain Isaiah’s searing rebuke of the Jewish People: (Isaiah 1:2), “Children have I [G-d] reared and raised, and they have rebelled against Me!” Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev simply restructured the entire verse to read as a question: Children have I reared and raised, and they have rebelled against Me? Is it possible? Of course not! Completely out of the question! Impossible!

Similarly, the Chassidic commentators labor long and hard to explain G-d’s rebuke of Moses for questioning

Him. Rabbi Meir of Premishlan, explains away Rashi's interpretation, maintaining that G-d spoke to Moses not in rebuke, but rather in praise of his heightened sense of justice. You, Moses, were the defense attorney for the People of Israel. That is why you said to Me, Exodus 5:22, לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְמִי “Why have You done evil? You weren't afraid of Me. You did not recoil, because of your single-minded commitment to defend the People of Israel. You, Moses, are the bulwark of righteousness and justice.”

The Noam Elimelech, the famed Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum of Lizhensk, says, that in the merit of Moses, G-d's would-be strict judgment was turned into a judgment of mercy. As the opening verse of the parasha itself indicates, Exodus 6:2: וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, אֲנִי הֵשֵׁם.

According to tradition, the names of G-d reflect different aspects of G-d's powers. The name, אֱלֹהִים –Eloh'kim represents judgment. הֵשֵׁם –Hashem, the

Tetragrammaton, always represents mercy. You, Moses transformed G-d's message into a message of mercy.

The Chatam Sofer in his work, Torat Moshe, says that despite the fact that Moses knew that it was forbidden to speak harshly with G-d, in his selfless devotion to the People of Israel, Moses proceeded to risk his own future in order to save Israel. That act caused G-d to immediately well up with mercy.

Returning to the fundamental issue: “Can we question G-d and get away with it?” The answer depends on whether you are a Litvak or a Chassid. The strict interpretation holds Moses accountable, resulting in his inability to enter the Promised Land. The more liberal interpretation implies that G-d desires to be challenged, hoping to find a justification that would exonerate those guilty of unseemly acts.

As the Bible says, Proverbs 3:17: דְּרָכֶיהָ דֶּרֶךְ נֵעַם. *Its [the Torah's] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths peace.*