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Va'era 5781

The Ups and Downs of Life

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 6, 1973)

Our Sidra opens this morning with a revelation of God to Moses at the very eve of the great redemption from Egypt. Moses is told that the Patriarchs--Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--perceived God only through the Name **די-ש**, which implies promise; that is, they lived out their lives under the great promise by the Lord that some day their descendants would form a people who will go into exile and then be redeemed. However, they never attained to the experience of God in the form of the Tetragrammaton (the four-lettered Name of God) which implies fulfillment and vindication. Moses, however, was to receive the revelation of God under the guise of fulfillment (symbolized by the Tetragrammaton) and, therefore, to attain a much higher understanding of the divinity. For the Patriarchs, their perception of God was that of faith; for Moses, that of knowledge.

It is apparent from the plain text of the Scriptural account that Moses was superior to the Patriarchs in his religious conceptions and experience. And yet, in a surprising twist, the Rabbis drew diametrically opposite conclusions. The Midrash tells us: "אמר לו הקב"ה: חבל על דאבדן ולא משתכחין", the Lord said to Moses, "Oh, for those who are gone and cannot be replaced!"

They then contrast Moses unfavorably with the Patriarchs:

הרבה פעמים נגליתי אל אברהם יצחק ויעקב ולא הרהרו על מדותי ולא אמרו לי מה שמך ... ואתה אמרת לי מה שמך בתחילה, ועכשיו... והצל לא הצלח.

"Many times did I reveal myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and they never questioned Me or challenged Me; they never said to Me, 'what is Your Name?' And you, Moses, at the very beginning you questioned Me, saying: 'What is Your Name?' And now you revealed your impatience by challenging Me with the words, 'but You still have not saved the people.'"

The Patriarchs, who flourished in times of promise and never were able to see the fulfillment, lived during a difficult

period, and one that taxed their confidence in the Lord. Yet, no matter how difficult and severe and depressing the conditions were, they responded with hope and faith and serenity. But Moses was buffeted by the powerful winds of circumstance, harbingers of imminent redemption, the revolutionary turmoil that always precedes liberation, the ups and downs of life; good news alternating with bad, incipient happiness with foreboding disaster. Moses found the punishment of these vicissitudes unbearable. And so he submitted to his vexation and impatience and he complained.

The Biblical scholar, Professor Feivel Meltzer of Jerusalem, lists some of these severe ups and downs that afflicted our people during the Egyptian period. They came to Goshen and lived in prosperity--that was an Up. Then a new king or dynasty arose and began to persecute the Israelites, and that was a Down. The birth of Moses and the promise it held was an Up, but when he (as all other children) had to be thrown into the Nile, that was a Down. When Moses, in his basket, was saved by the daughter of Pharaoh and raised as a Prince in the palace, that was an Up. But when the same Moses, after identifying himself with his own people and attempting to help them, was forced to flee to the Desert of Midyan, that was a Down. Then with the revelation to Moses and the challenge he flung at Pharaoh, that was an Up. But the reaction of Pharaoh rejecting Moses and the Israelites, was a Down. Later, during the plagues, we find Pharaoh retreating, and a high point is reached, but then his heart retreating, and a high point is reached, but then his heart hardens, and that is a Down. And so the story goes. No wonder that Moses couldn't take it!

However, this agitation of Moses and Israel was absolutely necessary for them. You strengthen iron by tempering it with the extremes of hot and cold. So too, a people is prepared for the transition from dependency to independency, from slavery to freedom, from shame to dignity, by going through

the ups and downs of history. It will either make them or break them, but a change will certainly be effected. Hence, the gentle chastisement of Moses by God: *Oh for those who are gone*, for those irreplaceable Patriarchs who knew how to respond with faith to the fluctuations of life. Patriarchs were made of stronger mettle.

This is an insight which we must apply to our own lives as well, in the United States and the world. There is much to drive a man to despair in our times: mass massacres in Vietnam, horrible earth quakes in South America, senseless murder in the urban jungle we call our city--the whole catalogue of ills to which we are heir. But while all these are depressing, they must be construed as a challenge to us to help and to improve insofar as it is given for us to improve our situation; but never must it be an invitation to the paralysis of despair. Because if we submit to the downs, we are then victimized by the ups, and we turn irrationally euphoric when dramatic predictions are made of "peace at hand." We need, therefore, the quality that the Patriarchs embodied. Assuredly, the simplicity of those more placid and irenic ages will not return. But we must seek to recapture the hard-nosed and realistic optimism and self-confidence that our ancestors once knew and which sustained them in their individual ups and downs.

The same is true of Jewish life. We must not go overboard with Messianic fervor when we hear of paratroopers praying at the Wall, or Jews heretofore distant from Judaism returning. And we must not become too depressed by the disgraceful controversy concerning the Chief Rabbinate, one in which all parties are tainted. We must not become too euphoric when Israeli diplomacy wins certain support in Washington, and we must not plunge into the doldrums when we discover that four Israeli kibbutzniks betrayed their land as spies for a country which seeks to dismember Israel.

We must beware of the gyrations of Jewish life in our country as well. We must respond with concern and even alarm the "Jews for Jesus" movement, but never with panic. We are entitled to a certain satisfaction over the positive phenomenon on the campus, where young Jews are no longer anxious to "make it" with others, and rather seek to identify themselves as Jews--satisfaction, but not smugness. We must beware of the ups and downs. We must relearn how to deal graciously and soberly with good news, and how to confront bad news with courage and dignity.

But above all, the personal life of each of us can and

must be steered consciously and deliberately to avoid the irrational acts that often are the results of the inevitable changes of mood by which we periodically seized. For we are all of us subject to these fluctuations in our daily lives. A little good news sends us spiraling upwards, and the first note of disappointment plunges us downwards. Often, even a man who knows all the ins and outs cannot manage the ups and downs. So our Sages tell us that, with forethought, we can retain a semblance of sanity and spiritual steadfastness when we are battered by life's changing winds.

Naturally, I am not speaking of a manic situation in which the highs and lows of delirium and depression are of pathological psychic and organic origin. Such a person can hardly will himself into a different state, and it is cruel to expect him to do so. I am concerned not with mental disorder, but with the normal variations of sadness and happiness. Of course, there are objective situations which cause joy and grief, and Judaism expects us to bring our passions to these situations. Without passion, life is only superficial. Only an insensitive person does not react appropriately to good news and bad news. But in general, it is possible to attain equanimity. Judaism holds that we can mold our own characters, that we can learn not to act on the basis of temporary whims and caprices. It tells us to be happy at weddings--but there is one week of festivities, and then the first year that the novelty is still there. It tells us to mourn when bereaved--seven days, and thirty days, and then one year--but no more than that; afterwards, normalcy must be reattained.

Hasidism was born 200 years ago into a Jewish world which has been battered by ups and downs. There was a period of spiritual devastation that came about us as the result of political and economic spiritual deprivations. Our people were sorely depressed. Because they submitted to the downs, they were victimized by the ups that followed, namely, the pseudo-Messiah Sabbatai Zvi. Too many Jews throughout the world followed him in their sudden zeal and fervor--only to plunge again into collective grief when he turned out to be a mentally unbalanced man who himself converted to another faith. The devastation seemed to be complete, until Hasidism appeared on the scene.

Perhaps that is why hasidism taught the principle of *השתוות*, which might best be translated as "holy indifference." This does not imply apathy to life. It does not mean not to care for others. It does not mean to achieve the maturity and stability for which we aspire by being less involved in our own egos and in our own welfares.

השתוות is what makes a man feel that he is not going to allow his inner life to be overly affected by good news or bad news. Since God is everywhere, we must have quiet confidence in Him. Too often people are artificially buoyed up by a casual compliment and feel inwardly devastated by the slightest word of criticism. השתוות means: הכל שווה, it is all the same to me. Since God is everywhere, a compliment cannot be greater than that good news, nor can a criticism do very much to destroy my serenity.

This is how the Besht, founder of Hasidism, reinterpreted, in a characteristically quaint Hasidic way, the verse from Psalms: לגנדי תמיד, שויתי ה' לפני, which literally means: "I have placed the Lord before me at all times." The Besht interpretation is: שויתי ה', it is all שווה or the same to me, I shall remain unaffected internally by all the external conditions. The reasons for this? לגנדי תמיד, שויתי ה', because God is before me at all times, and since He is everywhere, I cannot be shaken in my self-confidence. A truly religious individual will keep his cool even when life blows hot and cold. He will keep an even keel even when circumstances go up and down.

So our tradition taught us that in moments of supreme joy, we must be sober and break the glass at the wedding; when in the throes of grief, we must think of hope, and therefore when returning from the cemetery to the house of mourning the first meal consists of an egg, which represents the cyclical nature of life, symbolizing the fact that birth is followed by death, and that by rebirth and immortality.

The tradition tells the man who is on top: don't let it go to your head; and to the man at the bottom don't let it affect your heart. It warns the man who is on the upswing and a success, that he should not be deluded by what might be called the psychology of "the right of eminent domain," namely, the feeling that his eminence gives him the right to his domain. And it reminds the man who had suffered defeat that he is created in the image of God and hence must never despair. To the successful man in the heights, of life, it issues a warning against excessive self-confidence: אל תתיאש, מן הפורענות, don't give up or despair from losing, suffering

Teaching Our Children to Dream

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Moshe's attempt to convince the Jews of their impending redemption launched powerfully: "And the nation trusted, and they heard that G-d had recalled the Children of Israel and that He had seen their

defeat, retreat. And to the man who is suffering such retreat and defeat, it says, simply: אל תתיאש, don't give up.

The ideal state of man, according to Maimonides, is neither extreme: לא יהא אדם בעל שחוק ומהתלות ולא עצב ויאונן. One should not indulge in jesting and mockery, not be melancholy and mournful. What then? אלא שמח. He should be cheerful!

What an easy prescription for the doctor of the Sultan to write! But what pharmacist can fill this prescription?

The answer is that each of us is that pharmacist, each of us can achieve this ideal of spiritual and psychological equanimity which comes to us from the Patriarchs. For Judaism asks of us not apathy and placidity, but also not narcotic highs and psychedelic ecstasy. Rather, the way to שמחה, to cheerfulness, is: שמחה של מצוה. That means, the quiet joy that comes from preoccupation with mitzvah, with doing something for others, or creative work, or spiritual growth, or constructive contributions.

Whoever is not busy enough with mitzvah, will never be happy. Show me a man or woman who has time on his hands, and I will show you a man or a woman ready to receive grief in his heart.

It is the mitzvah which brings us to שמחה. It is real achievement--each at his own level--that gives us not pointless fun, not superficial kicks, but stabilizing and profound שמחה that will keep us growing higher and teach us to avoid the momentary allure of unreal ups and the doomsday but equally unreal dangers of devastating downs.

This is what the Rabbis meant when God said to Moses *Oh for those who are gone and cannot be replaced*. What a pity that they are gone and irreplaceable! But it is also a challenge to us. Each of us can replace them in our own lives by learning from them the wisdom and the insights that they have bequeathed to us. When we will have replaced them in this sense, it will be less of a pity, for they will not really be lost to us and to our children after us.

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suffering, and they bowed. (Shemot 4:31)" But then Moshe failed to convince Pharaoh, who reacted abusively toward the Jews. The nation then turned on Moshe. Hashem sent Moshe a new message of redemption for the Jews – but this

time, they did not listen. “And they did not listen to Moshe, because of short spirits and hard labour.” (ibid. 6:9)

We know what “hard labour” is, but what does the term “short spirits” mean? Many commentators suggest that the Jews did not even hear Moshe, due to these “short spirits”:

- Rashi (ad loc.) blames their pain: “Anyone who is in pain, his spirit and breath are short, and he cannot extend his breathing.”
- Ibn Ezra (ad loc. in extended commentary) writes that the issue was impatience: “Their spirit was short due to the length of the exile and the hard labour that had been newly increased for them.”
- Ramban (ad loc.) contends that the people resisted Moshe’s message due to their struggle, “They did not incline an ear to his words due to their short spirit, like one whose spirit is short due to his struggle.”
- According to Rabbi Meir Leibush Weiser (Malbim, ad loc.), the issue was that the Jews lacked resilience, the ability “to assert spiritual control over their emotions, and thereby to endure sorrow, pain and suffering.”

Therefore, “Moshe’s words did not enter their ears.”

Rashi’s students recorded a different approach, though, suggesting that the Jews heard, but did not believe Moshe. In explaining why we have three haftarah readings of punishment before Tishah b’Av, but then we have many more messages of consolation – seven – following Tishah b’Av, they explained:

This is like the way of comforters, who console little by little. One who would declare too much consolation to the ruined would be like someone who says to someone who begs at doors, “Tomorrow you will be king.” He would not believe it. It is as it is said, “And they didn’t listen to Moshe, because of short spirits and labour, etc.” (Machzor Vitry 262; and see Tosafot Megilah 31b R”C)

Machzor Vitry goes on to explain how each haftarah after Tishah b’Av builds a message of consolation incrementally. But Moshe did not do this; Moshe declared,

The Message and Not The Speech

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on January 26, 2017)

This week’s Parsha continues the theme from last week’s Parsha. Moshe is intimidated and afraid. He doesn’t want to go on his mission because he is an “*aral s’fasayim*.” He has a speaking problem. And that would make it very difficult for him until Hashem sets

in G-d’s Name, “*I will take you out from under the strain of Egypt, and I will rescue you from their labour, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments. And I will take you to Me as a nation, and I will be your G-d, and you will know that I am Hashem your G-d, who has taken you out from under the strain of Egypt. And I will bring you to the land, for which I have raised My hand to give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and I will give it to you as an inheritance; I am G-d.*” (Shemot 6:6-8) This was too much; regardless of the trust the Jews had expressed earlier, they were not prepared for this powerful message of hope.

These rabbinic explanations transcend the particular context of Divine promises to a struggling nation. These messages (which we could support here from psychology texts if there were space) should resonate with any parent who wants to convey messages of encouragement to children.

- First: we must make sure our children are ready to hear us. If they are under stress due to academics, social pressure or personal anxiety, they won’t absorb our well-meaning words of praise and empowerment. We aren’t even getting in the door.
- Second: we must be realistic. Telling children, “You can become whoever you want to become,” or that we believe they can achieve an A when they have never exceeded a B-, could be a case of offering what Machzor Vitry called, “too much consolation to the ruined.” We need to be appropriate in our encouragement.
- And third: we must be consistent. Like the haftarot following Tishah b’Av, seven moderate, spaced-out messages will be more acceptable than a single pep talk, however energetic.

The commentators we have cited did not blame the Jews for failing to listen; the message was too strong, too sudden, and too out-of-sync with their experience. May we learn the lessons of this passage, and thoughtfully and appropriately inspire our children to dream and to achieve.

up the whole system with Aharon that works for Moshe. Asks the Rashbam: We are not talking about “stam” coincidences here. It is clearly all planned out. Divine plan. Yetzias Mitzrayim. Look at all the *nisim* and *niflaos* that go on around here! Whether Hashem could have made

Moshe speak better or speak worse would have been a relatively small task, compared to the “*Eser Makos*” and “*Krias Yam Suf*.” Moshe was the greatest Navi of all! He presided over Yetzias Mitzrayim, Matan Torah, etc. Why would he have a speech defect? And, why couldn’t Hashem fix Moshe’s speech defect, or have him be born without it?

The Rashbam here goes as far as saying something exceedingly ‘radical,’ which the later Rishonim don’t like at all. He answers that Moshe Rabeinu did not actually have a speech defect. It just means that he did not speak good literary Egyptian. Or know how to talk in a proper, courtly fashion. Rashbam posits that Moshe was actually “*sholem b’gufo*” and that there was nothing wrong with him at all, except for his lack of knowledge of the “*shtus*” of nice court-speak. Ok—That resolves the philosophical problem, but it’s admittedly not the *pshat*. The *pshat* is that he indeed had a speech defect — there was something wrong with him. So, why would that be?

The Ramban in last week’s Parsha has two explanations. The Ramban suggests that maybe Moshe should not have had the speech defect. Hashem certainly wanted to heal Moshe, but He was simply waiting for Moshe to ask ‘nicely’ — to daven. Moshe, however, for his part, did not daven. He kept his speech defect because he did not want to go on this mission. So, it ended up being a part of a bedieved Divine plan. But, we might still think there was something *lechatchila* with Moshe’s speech deficiency itself.

So the Ramban has another *pshat* in last week’s Parsha. He suggests that maybe it was necessary for a type of “*pirsumei nisa*.” — We all learn this Medrash in elementary school. Pharaoh was going to kill him when he saw that little Moshe was playing with his crown. And because they suspected that Moshe would grow up to save Klal Yisroel, they devised a test: will he take the gold or the coals? And the Malach came and moved Moshe’s hand to take the coals, which burned his mouth in the process. Perhaps then, Hashem left this speech defect to remind him of the “*hatzalah*” that Moshe had in his youth, to show how in his life, Hashem was “*mashgiach*” on him from the beginning to the end.

Still, even according to this answer, it wasn’t fundamentally necessary for Moshe’s mission.

However, Malbim and (much earlier) Drashas HaRan, maintain that Moshe’s speech deficiency was *l’gamrei lechatchila*. It wasn’t just *bedieved* to remember some old story. It was essential to his mission. Why? Because Moshe was the Navi who came and proclaimed the truth of Hashem

and gave us the Torah. He would teach us the “*yesodos*” of *Emuna*. So, what’s the problem? The problem is that some people are very talented. They are such good speakers, possessing such marvelous, charismatic personalities, that they can convince anyone of anything. Give them half an hour, and they can persuade the Pope to do a Bris Milah. If Moshe would be so talented, so good *b’derech hateva*, so capable, then everyone would say: Why did the Jews accept the Torah? Why do Jews believe in G-d? Why did Pharaoh let the Jews go? Because Moshe sweet-talked them into it! If Moshe had a natural ability, people would credit him and not Hashem! The Ran says that Hashem *davka* made Moshe the worst speaker ever. He *davka* gave Moshe a speech impediment, so that everyone would say: Ah! Why did the Jews accept the Torah? It wasn’t because Moshe convinced them. He was a ‘terrible’ speaker. It must have been because the Torah is genuine, and they certainly did this for Hashem. It must have been because they saw the “*giluy Shechina*.” And that He was the only G-d and the only power in the world! And, similarly, why did Pharaoh have the Jews leave Mitzrayim? It wasn’t because Moshe was a good orator, like Abraham Lincoln, who spoke so well and got them to free the slaves. No! Moshe was a terrible speaker! The Jews left Mitzrayim because Hashem left them no choice. He interfered in nature and did miracles. He created the nation of Klal Yisroel. And therefore, the Ran says that it was fundamental and *lechatchila* that Moshe himself had to be disabled so that we would know “*ledorei doros*” that it wasn’t Moshe’s abilities that made everything happen. Instead, everything happened due to Hashem’s infinite might. It wasn’t Moshe who convinced us to keep the Torah. Hashem himself showed us that He was the only one in the Heavens above and the Earth below and that this Torah was His Divine will.

I think that this idea is meaningful, besides for the *chizuk* of Emunah. It is a crucial lesson in leadership. On the one hand, nowadays, we have a great deal of Rabbinic training: The Rabbi needs to know how to talk nicely. The Rabbi needs to learn how to present things and how to spin them. He needs to speak the people’s language, to dress impressively, and to use technology, etc., etc. However, fundamentally, it is not a Rabbinic personality that’s important. What’s important is not who is giving the message and how impressive and how smooth they are. Fundamentally, what’s important is the message. If it’s a sincere message, then ultimately, the Truth wins because

it's the Truth. It has power because the Truth of the Torah is the real "ratzon Hashem." Everything else is nice and cute. But ultimately, we have to remember this when we are learning and spreading Torah. People want to learn the Torah because it's the Truth and because it's "dvar

Hashem" — and not because of how nicely you can say it over. Not because of how cool or impressive we are — that's all 'window dressing.' The main thing is the substance that *Emes* is *Emes*. And no matter who says it, in the end, the *Emes* comes out. And *Emes* wins the day.

Breaking Down the False Image of Self

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

The scenes of destruction and chaos throughout Egypt taking place in the Torah portion of Vaera dominate much of the narrative. However, throughout the entire sequence of events, we find critical conversations taking place between Moshe and Pharaoh. These back-and-forth moments are in many ways of greater importance than the actual physical phenomenon engulfing Egypt. An example can be found in the conversation that takes place at the end of the plague of frogs.

As the plague of frogs is unleashed, the Torah notes that Pharaoh's magicians are able to duplicate the results. At this point, Pharaoh turns to Moshe and Aharon (Shemot 8:4):

"Thereupon, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said, 'Entreat the Lord that He remove the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let out the people [of Israel] so that they may sacrifice to the Lord.'"

Moshe interprets Pharaoh's request as a taunt of sorts (ibid 5):

"And Moses said to Pharaoh, 'Boast [of your superiority] over me. For when shall I entreat for you, for your servants, and for your people, to destroy the frogs from you and from your houses, [that] they should remain only in the Nile?'"

When given the chance to stop the plague, Pharaoh opts to keep the frogs around for just a bit longer (ibid 6):

"And he [Pharaoh] said, 'For tomorrow.' And he [Moses] said, 'As you say, in order that you should know that there is none like the Lord, our God.'"

Many commentators jump on this demonstration of cruelty on the part of Pharaoh. Rather than attempting to end the plague at that moment, Pharaoh chooses the following day as the stopping point. Why?

There are two approaches offered by Ramban. In the first, he explains that Pharaoh assumed that natural forces had brought about the frogs. His mindset was as follows:

"Moshe knew [through his knowledge of these forces that] the time of their departing had arrived, and that is why Moshe is saying to me 'glorify yourself over me', thinking I will tell him

to excise them immediately'"

Due to this assumption, Pharaoh responded by asking for an extra day, which would demonstrate that Moshe's powers were nonexistent.

Ramban offers his own interpretation, beginning with Pharaoh's interpretation of Moshe's offer of bringing the plague to a close:

"Pharaoh thought he was requesting time before [ending the plague], therefore he gave him a short [period of] time, and said 'tomorrow'. Moshe answered, 'as you say', for [although you misunderstood my question], since you did not request for [the frogs] to depart immediately, they will not depart until tomorrow'."

Both explanations are attempting to clarify what Pharaoh was thinking when he decided to push off the end of the plague. Why is this so important to understand?

Before attempting to delve deeper into Pharaoh's mind, it is critical to see how the arc of the plagues reflected an evolution of Pharaoh from his self-conception as man-god to recognizing the truth of God. For Pharaoh to come to a clear idea about God, a process of breaking down his current outlook had to take place. In other words, the truth of God could not be "forced" upon Pharaoh. That said, within each plague we see another presumption destroyed and another step forward by Pharaoh.

In this ideological evolution, Pharaoh could not even at first consider a concept of a Creator. Our Sages point to various instances where it is clear Pharaoh saw himself as a deity, and this was the first mentality that required evisceration. Moshe presented a threat to this vision, but not because Moshe was representing God. Pharaoh had no mechanism at this stage to accept a notion of God. Instead, Pharaoh first views Moshe as someone who would replace him.

Ramban sets up this outlook with the first interpretation. Witnessing his magicians duplicating the plague, Pharaoh concluded the onset of frogs as some

type of aberrant yet natural event. It was possible that Moshe had a greater understanding of the natural world than Pharaoh and was able to divine both the initiation and termination of the plague. Thus, Pharaoh suspected that Moshe was asking him for the time of cessation as a bluff. Of course, anyone would want the plague to end immediately; yet Pharaoh would not fall into the trap, thereby elevating Moshe to a higher stature than Pharaoh. Exposing Moshe as a fraud would help cement his stature as the true deity. It is evident at this point that Pharaoh placed his belief in his own divinity over anything else.

Ramban suggests a second interpretation, where Pharaoh misreads Moshe's offer. Why did Pharaoh come to his erroneous conclusion? Like the first approach, Pharaoh is threatened by Moshe and his ability to "summon" the plague. His primary objective was to trip up Moshe. He assumed it would take a significant amount of time to clean up the mess of the plague, so to speak. However, Pharaoh never would consider Moshe having the power to make the frogs disappear in an instant; this would mean Moshe had true supernatural power. Rather, Pharaoh

wanted to demonstrate that he was giving Moshe time to rid the country of the frogs, but not nearly enough time to succeed had this been a natural event. When Moshe would inevitably fail, lacking the requisite time needed to get rid of all the frogs, the people of Egypt would see Moshe as a failure, and Pharaoh would retain his elevated status. Ramban sees Pharaoh's maneuvering here at an attempt to buttress his image as a deity among the Egyptian populace. The crux of the debate between the two approaches lies in whether Pharaoh was considering his view of himself, or of his image to the Egyptian people as a whole.

The second plague was another step forward for Pharaoh in coming to realize the truth of God. Once the plague came to an end, Pharaoh began to contemplate his misguided and incorrect view of himself. To initiate the recognition of God, one must begin developing a more realistic view of the self. For Pharaoh to take the necessary steps forward, he had to destroy the self-propelled image of himself as a deity. While we may not see ourselves as deities, a heightened sense of self importance can act as a stumbling block in our ability to perceive God.

Blurring the Lines Between Humans and Animals

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

A little over a year ago a person consumed a bat and that meal changed the way we view our world. Watching the corona virus crossing over to the human realm from the natural world has forced us all to ponder the relationship between human beings and the natural world we inhabit. For the past few centuries, Nature seemed like little more than "background music" to the great march of human culture and science. Freed from the unforgiving influences of Nature, humanity advanced and progressed- often at dizzying speed. We harvested Nature for her resources just as we convinced ourselves that human ingenuity could outpace Nature. The 'vaccine revolution' of the past two centuries even allowed us to bring the microbial world to its heels; or so we thought until Nature shot back! How does this buckshot of Nature affect our views of the natural world.

The 10 makkot weren't just punishments for the Egyptians for their persecution or a "hammer shot" to crush Egyptian resolve and pave the way for the liberation of Jewish slaves. The 10 makkot were educational experiences lessoning Egyptian, Jew and, ultimately, the

entire world about the basics of religion. Obviously, the larger lesson surrounded God's ability to intervene in, and disrupt Nature. Aside from this primary lesson, the makkot also showcased many important messages about our relationship with Nature. It was primarily the 'middle makkot' of arov, dever and shechin which addressed our relationship with the broader world.

As he attempts to exploit the potential of Nature, Man struggles with threats from the animal kingdom. The second Makkah of 'tzefardei'a' already highlighted the dangers of sharing Nature with the animal kingdom: according to several positions these weren't amphibious frogs but, actually, were ferocious crocodiles. Egyptians were dependent upon the vitality of the Nile for their livelihood and national success. The Nile's fertility had catapulted Egypt to international prominence and had immunized them against the ravaging famines of sefer Breishit. However, rivers also host dangerous creatures and the Nile is no different. Under normal conditions God allows humans to harvest the benefits of rivers such as the Nile in safe and secure fashion. The makkah of tzefardei'a

upset this balance, as hordes of crocodiles swarmed onto the dry land from the Nile. This Nile invasion reminded humans that our ability to harness Nature is fraught with danger, and taught humans to appreciate the steadying hand of God in preserving this delicate ‘sharing’ of Nature.

The makkah of arov however, was different from tzefardei’a: at this point the jungle invaded the city as hordes of vicious beasts trampled the human habitat. Arov reminded humanity of the delicate balance of the “frontier” the boundary where the human habitat brushes up against the animal kingdom. As Man is the pinnacle of creation, God desires that we carve protected human space from Nature. However, when humans behave immorally, they abdicate their lofty status and forfeit their right to secure boundaries from the jungle.

Dever, for its part, provided an additional message about humans and animals. Egyptians, along with many ancients, worshipped their livestock. Animals were worshipped for their mighty features such as strength, agility, cunning and speed – faculties which far surpass human abilities. Even Ya’akov was aware of these qualities when he blessed Yehuda with the strength of a lion, Dan with the cunning of a snake etc. However, worshipping animals and coveting their animal features can also blur the differences between humans and animals; worshipping animal traits can animalize human beings and empty them of human traits such as moral will or conscience. Dever, through the contrast between the death of cattle and the sparing of humans, highlighted the dignity of human life and the expectations which accompany that station.

Maintaining this barrier during dever was itself an act of God. Humans are dependent upon their livestock for food, industry, transportation and military use. However, like humans, animals carry bacteria and viruses which are vital to their survival but dangerous to ours. Generally, God preserves these delicate “equilibriums” and upholds the microbial boundaries between animal germs and human microorganisms - allowing humans to live safely alongside their domesticated animals without risk of infection from animal diseases. The makkah of dever highlighted this fine balance; from a medical standpoint the contagion which exterminated hundreds of thousands of animals should have quickly spread to the humans living alongside their animals. Despite this vulnerability, God intentionally spared humans, to highlight the moral superiority and ethical conduct which he expects of humans. In part, this is why the makkah was called ‘dever’ which can also be read as ‘davar’ or speech.

Humans, as opposed to animals, are endowed with cognitive speech and are expected to utilize their will and intellect to conduct moral lives. Additionally, this is why this makkah in particular is described as the “hand of God” implying Divine precision in killing livestock while sparing humans from infection. By unleashing a pandemic which should have logically spread to humans, God highlighted the dignity of human life and the higher expectations he possesses for humans. We are not animals and are not meant to worship animal traits; if we animalize human experience we may incite the dissolution of boundaries between ourselves and the animal kingdom.

Arov blurred the physical boundary of humanity while dever reinforced the invisible microbial boundary. It seems as if, last December, these delicate boundaries between humans and animals were erased. At the least, this pandemic should help us better appreciate the Divine role in maintaining these boundaries and balances.

Unlike arov and dever, which stressed the interaction between animals and humans, the makkah of “shechin” was exclusively centered on the human community. A mysterious disease, launched by contact with “oven soot”, was quickly transmitted leading to frantic quarantining. The Torah emphasizes that the Egyptian magicians could not “stand” in the presence of Moshe- because they had to be isolated to prevent mass infection. The Egyptians were facing major contagion and social distancing was insufficient- full lockdown was required.

This contagion showcases the fragility of human society- independent of our interaction with Nature. Despite the hardships of previous makkot, the Egyptians were never isolated from each other’s company. Shechin launches a process which ultimately leads to the total collapse of Egyptian society: during barad Egyptians will shelter in their homes from heavenly hail, during choshech they will become socially paralyzed in blanketed darkness, and, ultimately, they will hide in their homes from the angel of death during the night of bechorot.

Humans are not meant to live in isolation; we thrive in communal settings – be they familial, commercial, ethnic, religious or political. All these were quickly shut by “oven soot” the byproduct of human creativity and manufacture. We are victims of our own success. The past few decades have witnessed major changes in travel and without question our traveling lifestyles have unleashed economic benefits and cultural opportunities. However, without mass international travel it is unlikely that the corona virus would

have spread this quickly, if at all. Once again our “communal life” has stalled, in part, because we overreached.

As we slowly climb out of this pandemic we have much to think about. In particular, we have been reminded

A People of Distinction

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Va'eira, the process of the miraculous redemption from Egypt begins to unfold. Beginning with the arbah leshonos geula - four terms that assure us of G-d's promise of redemption - and culminating with the plague of barad (hail), the parsha delineates the destruction of Egypt. And G-d told Moshe to tell the Bnei Yisrael: וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם, And I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵעֲבֹדָתָם, and I will save you from their work; וְנִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm; וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם, and I will take you to Me as a people (Shemos 6:6-7).

As for the fifth lashon of geula, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, and I will bring you to the Land (6:8), we still await the final promise and ultimate redemption, may it be immediate and in our days. When Pharaoh does not allow the Jews to march to freedom of his own volition, G-d begins to unleash His great wonders and signs against Mitzrayim, in the form of the Eser Makkos - the Ten Plagues that wreaked havoc and brought chaos upon the land, and people, of Egypt.

In this week's parsha, we learn of the first seven plagues: blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts, pestilence, boils and hail. In introducing the plague of arov, wild beasts, the pasuk says: וְשִׁמְתִי פְדָת, בֵּין עַמִּי וּבֵין עַמֶּךָ; לְמַחֵר יִהְיֶה הָאֵת הַזֶּה, and I will make a division between My people and your people; this sign will come about tomorrow (8:19).

R' Soloveitchik zt'l teaches, “וְשִׁמְתִי פְדָת, בֵּין עַמִּי וּבֵין עַמֶּךָ, and I will make a division between My people and your people. In the havdala prayer at the close of the Shabbos, we bless G-d Who has separated between the holy and profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the other days of creation. When we analyze these examples of havdalah, or separation, more closely, we notice a fundamental difference between them.

“The havdalah between light and darkness is clear for all to perceive. Indeed, even animals and plants respond to these stimuli; with the arrival of sunset, flowers close their blossoms, and when the sun rises, the blossoms open

of the delicate balance which God maintains between humans and Nature. We also sense the fragility of human communal life and how ironically, it is impacted by human advance. Much to think about over the next few months.

to face it. The havdalah of light and darkness is a havdalah that is seen or sensed by all. The havdalah between holy and profane is much different. The eye cannot perceive this havdalah. A person needs to have special intuition, to see with his heart, as this separation can only be sensed. After alternately mentioning the clearest of havdalos, dark and light, and the most hidden of havdalos, between the holy and the profane, the author of the prayer then poses a third havdalah: between Israel and the nations.

“The havdalah between Israel and the nations is sometimes identical with the dichotomy between light and darkness, and at other times with the dichotomy between sacred and profane. When Jews keep the commandments, when they live their lives as a holy nation, the contrast between Israel and the nations becomes evident to all. When the Jew abandons G-d, however, no longer is there obvious evidence of havdalah. Yet as mired in sin as the Jew may be, deep in the Jewish soul there remains something holy and mysterious, which can neither be erased nor destroyed.

“In Egypt, the Israelites lived in an era where both the Egyptians and the Israelites worshipped idols. One could barely perceive a contrast between them. Yet the Master of the Universe indeed separated between them. He discerned holiness in the soul which was profane and full of sin, and therefore saved His people. The very word ‘passover’ expresses the idea of havdalah, when superficially there seems to be no reason to make such a separation” (Chumash Masores HaRav, Shemos, p.67).

To Hashem, our kedusha - even if hidden deep within - is always present and precious and always burning within. Hence, the makkos, which wreaked havoc and destruction upon Pharaoh and Egypt, would distinguish between the Israelites and the Egyptians, as G-d placed a division between our people and theirs.

“The Jewish High Holidays were drawing near, and fear in the Janowska Concentration Camp mounted. In Janowska, there was a Jewish kapo by the name of Schneeweiss; he was sadistic and cruel towards his fellow

Jews, and if the Jews wanted to ‘observe’ the holidays, Schneeweiss would have to be dealt with.

“A few prisoners approached the Bluzhever Rebbe, R’ Yisrael Spira zt’l, and asked him to approach the kapo, and request that they be excused from work on Yom Kippur (Y”K) ... With a heavy heart, the Bluzhever Rebbe approached. ‘Tonight is Kol Nidrei. You are a Jew like us. There is a small group of Jews who want to observe the holy day; can you help us?’ To his surprise, the kapo replied, ‘Rabbi, I cannot do anything for you tonight, as I’m not in charge of the night brigade. But tomorrow, I will put you and your friends to work cleaning the officers’ quarters without polish or water, so that it will not be against Jewish law. I will supervise.’

“True to his word, the next day, the rebbe and the others were brought to the S.S. officers’ quarters and put to work with dry rags. While they worked, they chanted the Y”K tefillos through tears. At noon, two Nazis suddenly burst into the room with trays of food and demanded of the starving inmates: eat or be shot. Nobody moved. The lead

Nazi reiterated the command. Still nobody moved. The Nazi called in the sadistic kapo, Schneeweiss, from the next room and ordered: Make them eat, or you will be killed along with them!

“Schneeweiss stood up defiantly and said, ‘Today is Y”K, a day holy to Jews and we may not eat.’ Incredulous, the Nazi asked the kapo to repeat himself. Proudly and defiantly, Schneeweiss repeated that it was Y”K and Jews did not eat on this day. The German pointed his revolver at Schneeweiss, who did not even blink. A single shot ran out and Schneeweiss fell dead.

Much later, the Bluzhever Rebbe would recount this story, and say, ‘It was only then that I understood the meaning of the Sages’ words: Even the sinners in Israel are full of good deeds as a pomegranate is filled with seeds” (Heroes of Spirit, p.160-162).

Ha’mavdil bein kodesh la’chol, bein ohr la’choshech, bein Yisrael l’anim ... May our distinction always be apparent and elevated, as we live our lives with holiness, meaning, purpose and direction.

A Lesson in True Power

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

Every year, Jews retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Discussing in intricate detail the many miracles utilized over the lengthy process, one becomes convinced of the commentaries’ contention that these punishments were not merely means to facilitate leaving Egypt; the process itself was important. As is evident throughout, the plagues were meant to teach many theological lessons such as that there is a G-d (ex. Shemot 7:5, 7:17, 10:2), that G-d is unique (ex. Shemot 8:5-6, 9:14-16), and that G-d is aware and involved in the world. (ex. Shemot 8:18, 9:29) [For an extensive summary of the issue, see [alhatorah.org](https://bit.ly/2RwdHHZ) at <https://bit.ly/2RwdHHZ>]

The commentaries divide as to whether the lessons were aimed primarily at the Jews or the Egyptians, so it seems that both were part of the intended audience. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Shemot 32:12) writes, Moshe compellingly argued that G-d should reverse His plan to destroy the Jews after the Eigel, because of what the Egyptians would say. From this, he contends, one sees that the purpose of the Exodus was equally the education of the Egyptians and the Jews, and thus any actions that would

undermine that goal could shape G-d’s response.

Rabbi Hirsch, though, introduces a unique theory as to what G-d was teaching here. Among other things, he notes that G-d was teaching that G-d cares about even the most oppressed – and cares for him as for a child. Many have noted that the Torah seems to indicate that the experience of slavery was meant to sensitize the Jews to feel the pain of those who are less fortunate or oppressed. Hence, the Torah invokes the memory of Egypt when warning Jews to take care of strangers, widows, and orphans. Rav Hirsch, however, adds: the process of the Exodus drives home that G-d Himself cares about these people. Thus, one can argue, the Exodus teaches that caring for them is *imitatio dei*, imitating G-d, and for Jews, a way of “paying it forward.”

One could take this further. Taking care of the less fortunate is the ultimate expression of G-d’s power. The Torah writes as follows: “Yet it was to your fathers that the Lord was drawn in His love for them, so that He chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all peoples - as is now the case. Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. For the Lord

your G-d is G-d supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome G-d, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Devarim 10:15-19, JPS translation)

Ramban (ibid 16, second and preferred explanation) writes that it is because G-d is all-powerful that He need not take bribes, and thus can “afford” to take care of the poor and downtrodden, without worrying about what the powerful and well-connected may want. And it is this feature of G-d’s awesomeness that G-d invokes when describing the responsibility of the Jewish people in this world, which He couples with a reminder of the Jewish experience in Egypt.

Our Sages chose this description of G-d from

Deep Breaths

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

One of the first and most central interventions to help manage difficult emotions is deep breathing. When we feel intense emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or anger, our bodies tend to react physiologically by taking shorter and shallower breaths. By counteracting those quick and narrow breaths with a deeper breath, we increase the supply of oxygen to our brains, stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, and signaling to our bodies that we can calm down. As strange as this might sound, deep breathing often requires training and practice. Many people take deep breaths with their upper chest, which can actually increase breathing rate and cause hyperventilation. An effective deep breath is known as diaphragmatic or belly breathing because it is done by focusing the breath below the ribcage, with the stomach moving, rather than the chest.

Toward the end of Parshat Shemot, we are informed that after Bnei Yisrael saw the signs that Moshe performed and were informed that G-d took note of their hardships, they were convinced and believed in the redemption to come (Shemot 4:30-31). Yet, in the beginning of Parshat Va'eira when Moshe elaborates on the message of redemption, Bnei Yisrael do not listen “*mi-kotzer ruach u-mei-avodah kasha*” – “from shortness of breath and from the hard work” (Shemot 6:8). Many commentators understand

Deuteronomy 10, *ha-kel ha-gadol, ha-gibor ve-hanora*, to begin the daily Amidah. Perhaps, by invoking this characterization of G-d, our Sages wanted us to remember what G-d does with that strength, so that we would commit to following in His ways. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes that “Prayer must always be related to a prayerful life which is consecrated to the realization of the divine imperative and, as such, it is not a separate entity, but the sublime prologue to Halakhic action.” (Lonely Man of Faith, p. 63) Thus, every day our Sages call on us to reflect on what true power is. The many plagues in Egypt were G-d’s way of convincing the world that to be powerful is to be able to help those who need it without fear of repercussions. Each day, we remind ourselves of this quality of G-d, in hopes that we may learn the lessons of the Exodus and follow His path.

these to be two distinct reasons for not listening (see Ohr HaChaim): it was difficult to pay attention because of all the physical labor (*avoda kasha*), but there was an additional psychological component of being short of breath (*kotzer ruach*) that contributed to the inability to listen. What was this psychological impediment?

If we survey the commentators, we can identify three distinct emotions that may have inhibited their ability to listen. The Midrash (Pesikta Zutarta) suggests that Bnei Yisrael were angry and that led them to subvert their original correct approach which was to believe in the redemption. While the Midrash does not state explicitly what they were angry about, perhaps it was because Bnei Yisrael were promised redemption and then nothing subsequently changed. Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk suggests that they couldn’t process the message of hope because they were depressed. This is alluded to as well in the commentary of Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi who suggests that Bnei Yisrael were not psychologically prepared or receptive to messages of comfort because they were devoid of any hope. Rabbeinu Bechayei goes so far as to suggest that they were fed up with life and lost the will to live. A third group of commentators focus on fear and anxiety as hindering the message of hope. For instance, Ramban suggests that Bnei Yisrael were afraid that Paroah

or the officers would kill them. Maharal adds that besides the actual physical difficulty of the labor, they were also worried about the fact that the work was so difficult.

Regardless of whether one of the approaches is correct or if there is truth to all three, it is fascinating that they are all rooted in the term *kotzer ruach*. The metaphor used to encapsulate emotional distress—whether anger, depression, or anxiety—is shortness of breath. Without

critiquing our ancestors' reaction in Egypt, perhaps we can learn a message for our own lower-level “*avoda kasha*” experiences. When we are confronted with difficulties and react with the shortness of breath of an unhealthy emotion, let us take a step back and take some deep breaths. If we can manage our anger, depression, or anxiety, perhaps we will have enough headspace to listen to the messages of hope and redemption.

G-d Hardens Pharaoh's Heart: Reconciling Omniscience with Free Will

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Va'eira, we encounter one of the fundamental problems of theology, the conflict between G-d's omniscience and human free will, or as it is articulated in Ethics of the Fathers, 3:15, *הכל צפוי, והרשות נתונה*, *G-d is All-knowing, yet each person has free will*.

Even before the actual struggle with Pharaoh begins, long before the Al-mighty visits the 10 plagues upon Egypt, G-d tells Moses, in Exodus 7:3, *וַאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה*, “and I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.” How can that be? Does this not imply that Pharaoh has no free will?

The truth is that, at least during the first five plagues, scripture tells us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. It was only after the sixth plague, the plague of boils, that we find, Exodus 9:12, the fulfillment of the Divine promise: *וַיַּחֲזֶק הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה, וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה*, then the L-rd hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he [Pharaoh] would not listen to them, as the L-rd had spoken to Moses.

In their attempts to resolve this challenging issue, the rabbis offer a host of explanations.

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, known universally as Maimonides suggests that G-d is the ultimate cause of everything, and that saying that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart, is scripture's way of expressing that G-d is the “First Cause and Prime Mover!” Shadal, Shmuel David Luzzatto suggests that this is scripture's way of describing, not that G-d is the “Ultimate Cause,” but rather, a way of expressing Pharaoh's own stubbornness. Umberto Cassuto proffers that this is not scripture's way, but rather the way of the ancient Hebrews, to attribute every phenomenon to G-d.

Employing a different approach, Rabbi Joseph Albo suggests that G-d wanted to test the sincerity of Pharaoh's repentance, to determine that it was freely motivated. G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh imagined that the plagues were accidental rather than providential.

Ovadia ben Yosef S'forno offers a unique interpretation by saying that G-d had to harden Pharaoh's heart, because otherwise Pharaoh's actions would have been motivated by suffering rather than by pure repentance.

None of these explanations, however ingenious, are entirely satisfying. Nevertheless, it behooves us to attempt to further explore the great quandary of G-d's omniscience and the human ability to have free will. One of the solutions offered that has long impressed me, was another one cited by Rabbi Yosef Albo, who attributes it to his teacher, the great philosopher, Chasdai Ibn Crescas. Rabbi Albo, in the name of Crescas, suggests that every person has a destiny that is obviously known to G-d, because of G-d's omniscience. So, for instance, person “X” has destiny “Y,” to live 60-70 years. However, suggests Albo, while a person cannot change his or her destiny, a person can change himself or herself, by performing mitzvot and *ma'asim tovim*, doing good deeds. Through these positive actions, person “X” can change and become person “X prime,” and destiny “Y” consequently becomes destiny “Y prime,” which may be a longer life of perhaps 75-80 years.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, we never know when our destiny will change or how far person “X” has to be transformed in order to gain a new destiny. That, of course, is part of the Divine secret and the Al-mighty's inscrutable Divine plan. So, while G-d is omniscient, and we can change ourselves, we can never definitively know if our destiny has changed.

The problem with this approach is that a G-d Who knows the future, knows how far we are going to change. He will therefore also know our new destiny. So how do people have true free will?

There is another approach, a Chasidic approach, which may be more fulfilling. It is less didactic and less scientific, but, perhaps, more convincing.

Kabbalistic and Chasidic philosophy speak of the notion of tzimtzum, which means contraction, reduction or limitation. Kabbalists and Chasidim maintain that G-d, Who is omniscient, of His own volition, has the ability to reduce Himself, limit Himself, restrict Himself, and restrict His omniscience in order to give human beings a gift—the gift of free will. So, while G-d certainly has the ability to know our destiny, He chooses not to, in order to give the human beings this gift of free will.

Pharaoh certainly had free will. But, as a result of tzimtzum, G-d chose not to know what Pharaoh's destiny

will be. But, because he hardened his heart of his own volition five times, G-d in turn, hardened Pharaoh's heart five times, to punish him for each time that the Egyptian monarch hardened his own heart.

Freedom of choice is surely one of the greatest gifts of G-d to humankind. But, in order to give us that gift, G-d had to reduce Himself—an expression of ultimate Divine love.

Let us then commit ourselves to use that gift of free will for the ultimate Divine purpose of perfecting this world under the rule of the Al-mighty.

Seeing the Yad Hashem in Things Great and Small

Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai

The power of the ten plagues cannot be overstated. They were each emphatic demonstrations of Hashem's Hand in the world and His ability and willingness to intervene in nature and history on behalf of His people. The Torah tells us as much, וידעו מצרים כי אני ה' — and Egypt shall know that I am God. It's a phrase that's repeated and paraphrased throughout the story. And considering that many of these very same Egyptians died as a result of these plagues and many more drowning at Yam Suf, it's clear that Hashem's lesson was not primarily for them. Rather, it was for the Jews to see how Hashem intervened on their behalf, at the Egyptians' expense.

During the first few makkot, Pharaoh is not very impressed. He doesn't recognize their miraculous power and assumes that they were brought about by sorcery. In fact, he challenges his own sorcerers to match Moshe and Aharon's feat. Pharaoh's sorcerers turn their own staffs into snakes, much as Moshe and Aharon had done. They also manage to turn some water into blood and in so doing, satiating Pharaoh's desire to discredit Moshe and Aharon. Both Pharaoh and his sorcerers are seemingly oblivious to the fact that Moshe and Aharon converted the entire Nile system into blood that permeated trees and even rocks—a feat far outpacing and superseding anything the sorcerers accomplished. Pharaoh doesn't notice the difference because he wasn't really interested in accomplishing the goal, just trying—using anything at his disposal—to refuse to recognize Hashem's Hand in the world.

But when it came to the third plague, lice, things didn't work out quite as Pharaoh planned. When he summoned the sorcerers to discredit Moshe and Aharon by copying their feat, the sorcerers are somewhat taken aback at their

inability to do so. They finally admit that אצבע אלקים היא—this indeed must be the Hand of God. Without any fanfare or much discussion at all, Pharaoh doesn't respond in anyway other than continuing in his defiance.

Many of the mefarshim are bothered as to why Pharaoh asked the sorcerers to repeat the same feat as Moshe and Aharon. Wouldn't it have been more impressive if they could have actually reversed the plague instead of actually adding to it? Various explanations are offered.

Malbim reads the entire story somewhat differently. He explains that Pharaoh was simply interested in discrediting Moshe and Aharon. To do so, it was sufficient for the sorcerers to accomplish the same feat—which they successfully accomplished for the plagues of blood and frogs. But when the frogs didn't go away, Pharaoh turns to Moshe and begs him to do something about it. Moshe chides Pharaoh and asks him to set a specific time for the frogs to disappear, which Moshe successfully accomplishes. Unsurprisingly, nothing about Pharaoh's demeanor changes; he continues in his defiance.

What isn't mentioned, is the sorcerers' reaction to the frogs disappearing. They realized that Pharaoh found it more impressive to reverse the plague than to simply increase it. And so, when it came to the lice, the Torah describes how they unsuccessfully tried להוציא את הכינים ולא יכולו—to bring out the lice, which they could not. Rashi explains that they were trying to “bring out” new lice, meaning create new lice from nothing, just as Moshe and Aharon had done. Malbim disagrees and explains that the sorcerers tried to “bring out” the already existing lice, meaning getting rid of the lice that Moshe and Aharon had brought about.

In fact, Malbim explains that the sorcerers were

somewhat relieved that this was their current charge. They already knew of several natural (and perhaps some not so natural) tricks to get rid of lice and hoped that their tried and true methods would succeed. Coming to Pharaoh confidently, they were rebuffed once again. These were no ordinary lice, but something brought about by Hashem that would not respond to their tricks.

The plagues were indeed impressive, overpowering events, meant to confront a defiant Egypt and reassure

Blood's Blight

Mrs. Shira Smiles (Adapted by Channie Koplowitz Stein)

While the introduction to the exodus and redemption of Bnei Yisroel from Egypt began in Parshat Shemot, the actual process of redemption begins in Parshat Va'eirah with the first seven of the ten plagues. Each of the plagues has tremendous symbolic significance, for Hashem's stated purpose is not only to redeem Bnei Yisroel, but also teach both Mitzrayim and Bnei Yisroel to know Hashem, and in the process to enrich Bnei Yisroel. This process begins with the very first plague, Blood. When Aharon, in Moshe's stead, hit the Nile with the staff, the Nile and all the waters in all of Egypt were transformed into blood. Only the waters of Bnei Yisroel remained water.

Why was it necessary to begin this process by striking the Nile and, as an important corollary, why transform the water specifically to blood? Further, we can certainly understand that Hashem wanted Bnei Yisroel to know unequivocally that Hashem was the One True God, but why do the Egyptians also need to be taught this, especially since most will die either through the plagues or when they drowned in the sea? And yet Pharaoh himself, instead of taking action, goes into his house and doesn't call on Moshe to remove the plague as he does with the other plagues.

The medrash paints an interesting picture for us concerning this plague. The medrash tells us that if a Jew and an Egyptian were taking water from the same bowl or even drinking water from the same cup, the Jew would get water while the Egyptian would continue to get blood. Only by paying the Jew for water would the Egyptian again gain access to water. And only when Hashem deemed that the agreed upon price was sufficient to cover the suffering that particular Egyptian caused would Hashem transform the blood to water. Thus Bnei Yisroel got rich from the

the Jewish people that despite what may be happening, Hashem is really in charge and He will redeem His people. But in addition, the process is chock full of these seemingly minor details, where Hashem's presence is felt on a more micro level. The Torah is teaching us that it's not just on the historic national plane that Hashem operates and intervenes, but even the seemingly insignificant and small details are all part of His plan.

Egyptians.

In order to accomplish Hashem's stated goals, it was important to start by destroying the belief in the primary god of Egypt, the Nile, notes Rabbi Mintzberg in Ben Melech. Rabbi Kluger develops this idea more fully in Bnei Bechori Yisroel. The Nile, writes Rabbi Kluger, was the backbone of the entire Egyptian culture. Since the Nile irrigated their land regularly, the Egyptians felt themselves to be completely self sufficient. They had no need to pray. They felt in total control of their destiny, and Pharaoh thought of himself as the god who created the Nile.

Hashem wants a connection with mankind. In fact, if we go back to the story of creation, although plants were created in potential, they did not sprout and grow until Adam was created and could pray to Hashem for rain. It is Hashem Who brings abundance, whether through the Nile or through rain. When Moshe Rabbenu was leading Bnei Yisroel to the Land, he told them that this land is not like Mitzrayim. In Eretz Yisroel, you will need to rely on Hakodosh Boruch Hu and pray to Him for sustenance. In this respect, the Nile represented the antithesis of tefillah. Bnei Yisroel were so steeped in the culture of Egypt that the message that they were not in control but that Hashem was had to be taught to them. Each of the plagues was meant to drive this point home, as Hashem said, "Bezot teidah/Through this you will know..."

The plagues were meant to act both as a plague for the Egyptians/*venogaf Hashem bemitzrayim* while still being a means of healing for Bnei Yisroel/*verafo* (Isaiah 19:22), writes Rav Moshe Shapiro in *Mima'amakim*. Rav Shapiro explains based on the mystical sources, that the ten plagues represented a recreation of the world, each plague representing one of the utterances of creation. Each plague,

then, was meant to bring the Egyptians to a recognition of the Creator represented by this particular utterance of creation. Since the Egyptians refused to accept Hashem, the original utterances became plagues for them.

In contrast, continues Rav Shapiro, for Bnei Yisroel who were destined to accept those other Ten Utterances of the Torah that also paralleled the creation and reflected the recreation of the world under a new paradigm, these plagues would become blessings from He Who created both plagues and blessings.

Therefore, it was necessary to strike first at the god of Egypt, the Nile, and at the super god, Pharaoh, who fashioned himself as the creator of the Nile, writes Rabbi Mordechai Druck. Hashem proved to Pharaoh that he controlled nothing, although, because his palace was unaffected by the plague, he felt he was still in charge of his home. Therefore, when Pharaoh turned and entered his house, he felt no compassion for his suffering countrymen and refused to pray for them.

Pharaoh refused to recognize God even earlier, continues the Dorash Mordechai. Pharaoh had trained animals to attack anyone who approached him in the palace, yet they did not attack Moshe and Aharon as they approached the throne. Even after six plagues, when Moshe and Aharon warned the Egyptians about the coming hail, those who “feared God” brought their livestock into the shelter of their homes, a precaution Pharaoh refused to take. Pharaoh witnesses the evidence of Hashem’s existence and immanence in the world, but he refuses to see.

This self inflicted blindness is not limited to ancient times, continues Rabbi Druck. In the last Arab uprising against Israel over 800 rockets were launched against the State of Israel. Miraculously, no Israelis were killed. Those who “feared Hashem” recognized Hashem’s hand in guiding the rockets toward open fields or empty playgrounds; those who refused to recognize Hashem attributed the failure of these rockets to human error in their launching or just plain luck. Do we see God’s hand directing events both big and small? Do we turn to Him in prayer, or do we turn to the false security of our homes, government, or jobs? Do you believe in the “nature” of the universe and its cycles? If we do not turn to Hashem, are we any better than Pharaoh?

We look at things from a human perspective, writes Rabbi Scheinerman in *Ohel Moshe*. In the world as we perceive it, it is impossible for two contradictory items to

exist in the same reality. Nature does not permit blood and water to coexist in the same container. Yet both can exist together in the supernatural reality of the Creator. In God’s reality both coexist, both the human perspective sees only his personal reality. The Egyptian saw blood; the Jew saw water. Hashem created not only the one unified world, but an individual, unique world for each of us. If we both see the sun, it is because it is shining in both our worlds. The same sea can drown the Egyptians while transporting Bnei Yisroel across. While in man’s reality, two opposites cannot exist simultaneously, in God’s world, they can and do. That they cannot is a product of the western mentality. Therefore, God can give His personal oversight/hashgacha pratis to each of us in individual worlds that overlap, for Hashem is Hashem Elokhecha/your (singular) personal God, adds Rabbi Wolbe.

Rabbi Wolbe uses examples from nature to show us how different realities can coexist in one world. Within the same tree, birds build their nests in the top branches, foxes dig out dens in the trunk, and insects bore for sap. Just as the needs of each were met within the same entity, so could a Jew and an Egyptian obtain different liquids from the same bowl, for Hashem created the world for each individual. When we recognize Hashem’s personal involvement in each of my needs, that Hashem created [my] world specifically for me, we begin to feel tremendous gratitude to our Creator.

Our first belief must be in the existence of Hashem. But we must also believe that Hashem is our personal God. This thought leads us to realize that indeed the world was created for me, that Hashem gave me my unique combination of strengths and weaknesses so that I can impact the world, that I have a mission only I can accomplish. I must believe in myself as well as in Hakodosh Boruch Hu, albeit in different ways, writes Reb Tzadok. We must realize our own importance. As Rabbi Leibowitz explains Hashgacha Protis/Hashem’s involvement in our personal lives gives meaning to our lives and provides a path to introspection and spiritual growth, as everything that happens to us, both big and small, has been orchestrated specifically for our personal benefit.

What is our mission? Since no two people are alike, neither with identical looks nor talents, each of us must work with what Hashem has given us to perfect our world. As Rav Naftali Horowitz writes in *You*, by making us each different, Hashem created a world where we learn to live with others, to be patient and compassionate, and perfect

a world Hashem has purposely left incomplete so that we could experience the joy of accomplishment.

Now we understand Hashem's afflicting the Nile as the first plague, but why use the medium of blood? The Hefkayon shel Torah, Rav Benzion Peror, approaches this discussion on two levels, First, Hashem was repaying the Egyptians measure for measure for treating Jewish blood lightly, for "blood is the life source." The medrash relates that Pharaoh himself bathed in Jewish blood. But damim translates not just as bloods, but also as money. So, in order to avenge the spilled Jewish dam/blood, the Egyptians had to pay damim/money to atone for the blood. Therefore, every Egyptian forced to pay for his water according to how much blood he extracted from the Jews, adds Rabbi Schwadron.

Since there is a relationship between money and blood, and since Hashem is extremely exacting in His interactions with humans, Pharaoh was not punished with blood in his own house, writes Rabbi Druck citing the Meshech Chochmah. After all, Pharaoh must have incurred some expenses while Moshe was being raised in the palace. By not having to pay to exchange the dam/blood to water with damim/money, Pharaoh was now being repaid for those expenditures.

Although blood is the highlight of the first plague, blood is still significant in the final plague, the Death of the Firstborn, writes Rabbi Kluger. As we read every year in the Haggadah, "Bedamayich chaya, bedamayich chaya/ Through your blood you shall live, through your blood you shall live." We were saved from death in that plague through the merit of our observance of two "bloods," the most obvious one being the blood of the sheep we painted on our doorposts signaling Hashem to pass over our homes, and also the blood of circumcision to ratify our covenant and connection with Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Both of these mitzvot involve self sacrifice, a willingness to subsume our passions and desires, our life force, to His will.

Rabbi Kluger continues and explains that the blood of the Pesach sacrifice on our doorposts symbolized our intellectual faith, while the blood of circumcision symbolized our desire to elevate our physical and

emotional capacities of Hashem's service.

The Tolna Rebbe adds yet another dimension to the plague of blood. The Torah tells us that the fish in the Nile died and created a stench in all of Egypt. Why was this significant? Because fish represent unlimited copulation, unbridled sexual passion. Having been steeped in the depraved culture of Mitzrayim for so many years, Bnei Yisroel was drawn to this behavior, but the death of the fish signified the death, or at least the major weakening, of this particular depravity, one they later cited in the desert as having missed: "We remember the fish we freely ate in Mitzrayim, [unencumbered by the Torah laws of sexual purity]."

We see that this first plague represented all three major transgression; idol worship, murder, and sexual immorality. With this first plague, continues the Tolna Rebbe, the Egyptians would begin their transition to a belief in God and Bnei Yisroel would sever their connection to the culture of the Egyptians. Bnei Yisroel were already drinking the water of kindness rather than cruelty and were separated from the immoral culture and bloodthirstiness of Egypt. It is for this reason, that our redemption began with blood, that only at the Pesach Seder is there an emphasis on the wine being red wine for all the rituals of the Seder.

What a contrast between a Jewish leader and the Egyptian leader [and so many leaders who base their leadership on flexing and retaining power]. Pharaoh goes into his private home, sees he has water, and turns a blind eye to the suffering of his citizens. In contrast, Moshe goes out specifically to experience and help in the pain of his brethren, points out Rav Yisroel Meir Druck. This is an underlying theme not only of the plagues but of all Jewish history: A Jew feels the pain of his fellow Jew as if it is his own pain.

This first plague, while bringing knowledge of and faith in Hashem to the forefront, also teaches us that each of us has a personal relationship with Hashem that attests to the value of every individual while still infusing us with care and love for each other. It incorporates Creation with Recreation at Sinai, and with the final Recreation, may it be soon in our day.